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# Salvation History

### **God yearns to save**

No attempt is made in this book to defend the Bible as the sole revelation of God's word to humans. There are many other good books about the Bible, its history and trustworthiness. It is beyond the scope of these studies to explore such questions, though interested readers will find a wealth of helpful literature and other media on these subjects. It is therefore taken as accepted, for the purposes of this particular study of 'salvation history' that the biblical account of Christ's Nativity is accurate and reveals to us all we need to know about this momentous event. What follows below is, of necessity, a broad brush account of God's dealings with humankind as He unveiled His plan of salvation.<sup>1</sup>

The Bible explains that from the beginning mankind rebelled against God's right, as Creator, to be God. Whilst this rebellion was not God's plan, He definitely foresaw the effect it would have upon all humankind and determined on a plan of salvation—salvation from the grip and consequences of sin. But this would not be cheap salvation, where God winks at our wrongdoing and makes everything all right in the end. God shouldered the responsibility for Man's guilt as Jesus shouldered the cross on the road to Calvary. God progressively prepared mankind for this hugely expensive – indeed, priceless – salvation, through the two

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thousand years that preceded Christ. Rather than place His Son into the world straight after the Fall (described in Genesis chapter 3), God took great care to prepare humankind for this definite and final act of salvation. God prepared the human race through the calling of His chosen people, the Hebrews. To demonstrate that His priceless remedy for sin is something that could not be achieved independently by mankind, even with the knowledge of God's Law, He sent His own Son to pay the penalty for sin, *once and for all*. In the words of the apostle Paul: "...he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgement, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him" (Hebrews 9:26-28).

The main thrust of the Bible's message to mankind is God's immense love for His rebellious creation, who in fact deserve nothing but His judgement. Why does God love us? Because God is love (John 4:16). When the Bible says that God is love, it is saying much more than God loves, or that He is loving, or that he is lovely. It means that love is the motivation behind all that God does. Love is not just a facet of God, it is His whole nature. He is love at the core of His very being. This is not however sentimental love, a sort of amiable weakness or a good natured indulgence. If it was this sort of love it would be cheap love. Our limited understanding of God's love (and it can only be limited understanding, this side of eternity) needs to be built on God's revelation of Himself in the Scriptures, not by projecting our own ideas about love onto Him.

What does the Bible teach us about God's love? First, it is *uninfluenced*. Nothing in us can give rise to it or extinguish it. The love that we humans have for each other is influenced, or drawn out of us by something in the object of our love. God's love is not like that. His love is free, uncaused and spontaneous. In Deuteronomy 7:7-8, where God reaffirms to the Hebrews that He has chosen them to be His special people, we read, "The Lord

did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you ..... that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery....” There is no reason behind God’s love for His people —He loves because He will love. This cannot be explained. Indeed to do be able to do so would require that God loves us for something outside of Himself, or something within us. No, He loves because He is love.

Second, His love is *eternal*. Being Himself eternal, and being Himself love, it follows that His love is eternal. God loved us before the earth was created, and has set His heart upon us from all eternity. This is a truth set out clearly in Ephesians 1:4-5: “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will....” Now this is an amazing thought for a child of God! And the only fitting response to this awesome statement is to return that love, if only we can stop ourselves exclaiming, “You surely can’t mean me!”

Third, His love is *holy*. This means it is not subject to whim or sentiment, but is governed by principle. In Romans 5:21 we read, “...just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” At first sight this is difficult to understand, but it means that God’s love never conflicts with His holiness. On the one hand sin demonstrates its ‘reign’ in death —which might be described as a theological, as well as a biological, fact of life. God recognises this fact of life and has made provision for His most wonderful gift of *grace* —His free, unmerited favour and forgiveness that is bestowed upon people who truly turn to Him in faith and repentance. God’s *grace* is demonstrated and proved by the opposite of death —spiritual life through the Lord Jesus. This is why God is not content for us to remain in our sinful state, He aims that we shall be holy, just as He is holy. He loves us too much to let us go on sinning. His love is holy, pure and unmixed

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with human sentimentality. God refuses to compromise with sin—even in His own people.

Because of His uninfluenced, eternal, holy love, God yearns to save the people He has created, especially as we have been created for relationship with Him and will never find true peace until we have found that relationship. Before time began, Scripture tells us, His plan of salvation was worked out. It originated in His grace. God made a covenant of grace with Abraham, promising that through his descendants all the families of earth will be blessed. The Old Testament is to a large extent the account of God's gracious dealings with Abraham's descendants. In spite of their continual rejection of Him, God never cast them off. The historical Incarnation of the Lord Jesus was the fulfilment of His covenant (see Luke 1:68-75 in this regard).

### **A plan of salvation**

Christ is found throughout the Old Testament. Jesus said, "The Scriptures testify about me" (John 5:39). Walking with two disciples after the resurrection, he rebuked them for their unbelief and ignorance of Scripture: "And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Luke 24:27). Later, speaking to a wider group of followers He stated, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44).

Christ made it plain, therefore, that the Scriptures bore witness to Him in a general way, but also that in the Law, the Prophets and The Writings there were prophecies concerning Him *and that all these things had to be fulfilled*. The basic relationship between the Old and New Testaments, according to the Lord Jesus, was between promise in the Old and fulfilment in the New. The first words spoken by Jesus in his public ministry, recorded in Mark 1:15, were with regard to fulfilment: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." Jesus stated quite plainly to his disciples that the centuries of waiting

were now over: “Blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it” (Matt 13:16-17).

### **Christ in the Law**

The ‘Law’ is contained in the first five books of the Bible, properly called the Pentateuch. These books contain foundation prophecies about God’s salvation through Christ. So, God promised that Eve’s offspring would ‘crush’ the serpent’s head (Gen 3:15), a reference normally taken to mean Christ’s victory over the devil, won on the cross at Calvary. God promised that through Abraham’s descendants, all the peoples of the world will be blessed (Gen 22:18), a reference usually understood as the global spread of Christianity. Jacob, as he blessed his sons, unwittingly prophesied in Gen 49:10 that Christ would rule as King forever —this being the interpretation normally given to the sceptre not departing from Judah, but receiving the obedience of the nations.

In Deuteronomy 18:15 and 18, Moses prophesied that God would raise up a prophet like himself from the Jewish people, to whom they must listen. Moses would put his words in the mouth of this prophet, who will tell them everything that Moses commands Him. Christians see this as fulfilled literally in Luke 9:28-33. In this context, Deuteronomy 18:19 seems, then, to be a very stark warning to the Jewish nation about its rejection of the Lord Jesus.

There are also more subtle, indirect prophecies about Jesus, contained in the Law. One of the most striking is that of the Tabernacle, the place of worship which God commanded the Israelites to construct and in which would be His presence during the wanderings in the wilderness (Exodus 25 to 27). In various facets of the ancient Tabernacle, such as the altar, the laver of water, the light, the showbread, the incense and the holy of holies, Christians see a direct allusion to Jesus Christ. If an allusion could be made to only one or two such aspects of the Tabernacle as being pointers to Jesus, we might correctly be accused of wishful

thinking, but the strong connection of every such aspect appears to be much more than mere coincidence.<sup>2</sup>

### **Christ in the Prophets**

The books known as ‘the Prophets’ contain *history* (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings and Chronicles, which are sometimes known as the ‘former prophets’) as well as *direct messages* from God to His people given at specific points in time (e.g. Ezekiel, Daniel, Amos, Jonah, etc). These latter are sometimes referred to as the ‘major’ and ‘minor’ prophets. Israel began as a theocracy ruled directly by God through Moses, then through Joshua and finally through the Judges, a number of men were chosen by God to lead Israel at different times. Israel, however, craved to be ruled by kings and, despite His warnings, continued to press this request upon God. The rule of kings, as God had warned, led to much hardship for the Hebrew nation. Through this unhappy experience, however, God was showing the Israelites the limitations of human government in order to clarify their understanding of the perfection of the future Messiah and to increase their desire for Him to be sent.

God had already made a covenant with King David, in 2 Samuel 7:8-17, to ‘build him a house’ and through his descendants, to ‘establish his throne’ forever. So the prophets began to point towards what this ‘Son of David’ would be. He would perfectly embody the ideals of kingship which the kings of Israel, including David, so imperfectly foreshadowed. In the Messiah’s kingdom justice would replace oppression and peace would replace war. There would be no limit to the extent or duration of this future kingship, which would extend to the ends of the earth and last forever. These characteristics of the future kingdom are brought together in Isaiah’s famous prophecy (Isa 9: 6,7) which Christians readily identify with Jesus:

For to us a child is born,  
to us a son is given,  
and the government will be on his shoulders.  
And he will be called

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Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
Of the increase of his government and peace  
there will be no end.  
He will reign on David's throne  
and over his kingdom,  
establishing and upholding it  
with justice and righteousness  
from that time on and forever.

Whilst the prophets foretold His glory, they also foretold His suffering:

He was pierced for our transgressions,  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,  
and by his wounds we are healed.  
We all, like sheep, have gone astray,  
each of us has turned to his own way;  
and the Lord has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.

In this prophecy from Isaiah 53:5-6, Christians see the crucifixion of Jesus foreshadowed. Indeed Isaiah 52:13-15, followed by Isaiah 53:1-12, is the clearest prophecy of the suffering and rejection of Christ.

### **Christ in the Writings**

The Writings (amongst which are the books that we call the Psalms and the Proverbs) point towards Jesus Christ in a number of places. Various Psalms are seen to prefigure Christ's deity, His humanity, His sufferings and His glory. The allusion in Psalm 8:6, for example, to the 'son of man' made 'a little lower than the heavenly beings', and made 'ruler over the works of your [God's] hands', is applied by the apostle Paul to Christ in his letter to the Hebrews (Heb 2:6-8). Jesus Himself quoted Psalm 22:1 from the

cross as he personally experienced and fulfilled the terrible God-forsakenness of which the Psalmist wrote. In His earlier debates with the Pharisees, Jesus had quoted David's words in Psalm 110:1, "The Lord says to my Lord: Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet" as He challenged the Pharisees to explain how the Messiah could be both David's Lord and David's son (Matt 22:44; Mark 12:36; Luke 20:43).

The whole theme of wisdom in the book of Proverbs can be seen as an allusion to the coming Messiah, so that in Proverbs chapter 2 we read (verse 1), "My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you (verse 5) then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God." Christians see this reference to God's *words* as being a reference to God's Word made flesh (John 1:1) who made His dwelling among us.

Before leaving this area of messianic prophecy, it is worth noting that Alfred Edersheim, a Jewish believer in the Lord Jesus of the late nineteenth century, and a noted biblical scholar of his time, drew up a list of 456 messianic prophecies from the Old Testament, which were supported by 558 separate quotations from rabbinic writings which confirmed them as truly messianic prophecies. And this was after deleting quite a number of prophecies which the rabbis of old considered to be messianic but which Christians reject in this class. Edersheim's book *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* is still available and the full list of messianic prophecies is found in Appendix 9 to his book.<sup>3</sup> This is a fascinating study in its own right.

### **Saviour**

This title of Jesus, amongst so many titles found in the pages of the New Testament, is one of the most profound. Jesus entered a world where salvation was the deepest desire in the hearts of ordinary men and women. This was a time of immense cruelty of man to man, and particularly of leaders to their people. There can seldom have been a time of such political insecurity. It was a time of tyrannical rulers who could do what they liked, and do it to anyone. The crimes of Herod "the Great" were so enormous that

the slaughter of the babies in Bethlehem (in Herod's vain attempt to kill the infant Jesus) was scarcely seen as abnormal. In the Jewish historian Josephus' works, written a few years after the time of Christ, the slaughter of the little boys is not even mentioned, which some have taken to mean that it never happened, but more probably was simply an indication that this sort of behaviour towards ordinary people was not unusual.

This was an age of informers, where no one, especially in the courts of the kings and emperors, could live in security. The ancient 'gods' were on their way out. "It was not," writes William Barclay, "a case of men becoming so depraved that they abandoned their gods; it was a case of the gods becoming so depraved that they were abandoned by men."<sup>24</sup> The old gods were going and there was nothing to take their place except the worship of rulers, who were as depraved as their 'gods'. It was a time of superstition, when demons were seen to be everywhere waiting to injure men—indeed the number of references to Jesus casting out demons suggests this may indeed have been so. It was a time of astralism, men believing that their fate was sealed by the stars under which they were born. This in turn led to fatalism and hopelessness, a return to which we are perhaps seeing at the beginning of the third millennium. There was a consciousness of moral failure and moral helplessness—men knew they were sinners but knew no cure for sin. Small wonder, then, that they were searching for a saviour. The very title 'saviour' was prevalent at the time—any king, or even pretender to a throne, who could bring a measure of peace and security, was often called a 'saviour'.

God, in the Old Testament, is often identified as Saviour, as a short list of references will illustrate: Isa 45:15, 21; Deut 32:15; 1 Sam 10:19; Psalm 24:5; 27:9; 65:5; 79:9; 85:4-9; Micah 7:7; Hab 3:18. The Old Testament points towards a state of salvation when God will enter His Kingdom and reign. Having seen the desire for salvation in the predominantly pagan world into which Jesus was born, we see the word 'saviour' in the New Testament also applied to God:

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- In Mary's song: "My spirit rejoices in God my Saviour" (Luke 1:47).
- Paul is an apostle by command of God our Saviour (1 Tim 1:1).
- God our Saviour desires all men to be saved (1 Tim 2:3).
- The living God is the Saviour of all men, especially those who believe (1 Tim 4:10).
- Paul's preaching has been entrusted to him by the command of God our Saviour (Titus 1:3).
- Everything is to be done in such a way as to adorn the teaching of God our Saviour (Titus 2:10).
- In Christ there appeared the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour (Titus 3:4).
- In Jude the object of praise is the only God our Saviour (see Jude 25).

Now this is an important truth to grasp: in working out God's plan of salvation, there is no tension between the stern wrath of God and the love of Jesus. It was not a case of Jesus doing something to alter the attitude of God to men, to convert the wrath of God into the love of God, or to persuade God to stay His hand, outstretched to punish. God is the Saviour God; Jesus did not live and die to change the attitude of God to men, rather he lived and died to show what that attitude is.

The Lord Jesus, also, is titled Saviour in the New Testament. The message of the angel Gabriel was that He was to be called Jesus, the Greek form of Joshua, which means 'Jehovah is salvation'. Jesus was given this name, said Gabriel, 'because He will save his people from their sins' (Matt 1:21). The Epistle to the Hebrews states plainly that Jesus, "is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them" (Heb 7:25). True, the title Saviour is used sparingly in the Gospels, in Matthew and Mark the title is not given; in Luke it is used only once, in the announcement of the angels to the shepherds: "Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to

you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger” (Luke 2:12). In John’s Gospel the title is, again, used only once. In John 4:42 the Samaritan villagers say to the woman who had spoken with Jesus, “We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Saviour of the world.”

Readers who are interested in a full survey of the title ‘Saviour’ as applied to the Lord Jesus are recommended to obtain the book *Jesus As They Saw Him* by William Barclay (and referenced in an earlier note). It looks in detail at forty-two titles applied to Jesus and how these titles would have been understood in Jesus’ own day. Regarding the Lord’s role as Saviour, Barclay writes: “No matter from what angle it may be approached the basic and essential idea is the idea of *rescue*, rescue from a situation in which a man is quite unable to rescue himself. It is *rescue from the past*. Through the work of Jesus Christ the penalty which man’s sin deserves no longer hangs threateningly over him. The estrangement between man and God need no longer exist. The power and slavery of past sin are broken and man is no longer shackled by the chains which his own sin forged. *It is rescue for the future*. Through Jesus Christ, the living and ever-present Christ, man is no longer a slave to his own sin. He can break the habits which have been his fetters, and conquer the sins which conquered him. He is no longer frustrated and defeated; he has found the way to victorious living. He is no longer the victim of temptation; he is victorious over temptation. Salvation deals not only with a man’s past; it makes him a new man and gives him a new future. It is not merely negative escape; it is positive victory. Jesus is indeed the Saviour for whom men were desperately searching, and for whom the world was waiting, and whom the world still needs.”<sup>5</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Appendix 4, *Biblical Sources* and Appendix 5, *Reliability of the Biblical Sources* provide some background notes to the Bible.

<sup>2</sup> A full treatment of this fascinating subject is beyond the scope of

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this book. Interested readers are recommended to obtain *Christ in the Tabernacle* by A. B. Simpson (Christian Publications, 1985) or a similar study.

<sup>3</sup> Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1993).

<sup>4</sup> William Barclay, *Jesus As They Saw Him* (SCM Press Ltd, 1962).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p. 227.