

The Master Story of Scripture: The Preservation of God's Endangered Promises

I must admit that it sounds a little weird, but one of the small pleasures of my life as a teenager was to rest on our veranda in Australia. There I would lounge in the sun reading *Halley's Bible Handbook*. For a time, aside from the Bible, it came close to being my favorite book. I loved the sections on church history; but tucked away toward the middle of the book was a section called, "The Messianic Strain of the Old Testament." In this section were eight finely-printed pages that purported to be references to predictions embedded in the Old Testament of the coming of the Messiah.

Now, as a child of the Restoration Tradition, I was not about to take someone else's word as the absolute truth on this important matter. So I took my Bible out and carefully checked all these references on my own. There were some like Isaiah 53 that were very compelling. But I must say that when I examined most of these passages given: in their OT context they made a lot of sense; but when I turned to the purported New Testament analogs, I found considerable difficulties with them. The OT passages just did not seem to apply.

Little was I to know that I had walked into a longstanding theological issue that has beset the church ever since its earliest years. How are we to connect what emerged in the life of Jesus with the scriptures of Israel?

There is no doubt that the claim is made in the New Testament that what came to light in Jesus' life was in keeping with the scriptures. In one of his most famous passages Paul talks about receiving reliable tradition that "Christ died for our sins *according to the scriptures* and that he was buried and raised on the third day *according to the scriptures*."

But what scriptures? Paul does not give any specificity here. When I was at Vanderbilt there was a graduate student doing a Ph.D. dissertation. He was attempting to show that Paul was alluding to Hosea 6:2 as the basis for the scripture reference to the resurrection. Others have looked for texts in the Psalms. But the direct connections are not that easy to nail down. We have often ridiculed our Jewish friends for not seeing what ought to have been, we claim, perfectly obvious. It has to be obvious that Jesus was the Messiah because it was predicted that the Messiah would be raised from the dead. But was it so easy? As early as the second century the Christian intellectual Justin Martyr, in a famous *Apology*, tried this approach with Trypho – a Jew. But, by and large it was not so obvious, and it didn't convince most of the Jews. When you have to write doctoral dissertations on this subject you know that it is not as straightforward as some people make it out to be. What did the New Testament writers mean when they said these things happened 'according to the scriptures?'

The Challenge of the Enlightenment

Being in an academic context no doubt you have come across the intellectual movement we refer to as the Enlightenment. It is usually dated from 1689-1804 (the death of Kant). During this time the Western world was bathed in a tremendous flood of skepticism concerning the reliability of the records of ancient history. For these skeptics even the historical foundations of Christianity were under assault and often reckoned to be nothing more than myths. Some even questioned whether Jesus existed.

We now stand on the other side of the Enlightenment. Some of this skepticism has receded. But we cannot go back to the centuries before it. The Enlightenment and subsequent modernity changed the study of the Bible in the West.

Recently I was in our Sunday evening home Bible study group. We were studying 2 Cor 5:10, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ.” A lady spoke up, “You know I have always believed there would be a final judgment. But I am not sure about my grown children. I don’t think they believe that!” That is precisely the impact of the Enlightenment and modernity. We are called to represent the gospel intelligently today to those “grown children.” Modernity brought to us something called the Historical-Critical method. This seeks to complement reading the Bible for spiritual benefit with a more rational approach to the text. These two methods (devotional and academic) sometimes are in tension; but I contend that such things as searching for the original historical setting of a text, noting the type of literature studied, and trying to find the purposes for which a biblical book was written are not necessarily a stumbling block to a vital faith. In some cases, in the hands of unbelievers, it can be destructive. But, as I said, we are on the other side of the Enlightenment; and for better or for worse, this is the way that most educated Western people approach a text today.

My point is that when many do this they end up (like I did as I was reading Halley’s Bible Handbook). I couldn’t quite see that the OT was somehow a template for the life and destiny of Jesus. It seemed to be about other things. So what does it mean to say that the Christ-event or “the gospel” had its origin ‘according to the scriptures?’ Can we show a direct connection between the God who was acting with the people of Israel in the Old Testament and what this same God did in the coming of Christ and establishment of the church? I believe that the answer to this question is a positive yes! But it must be done not by conceiving of the Old Testament as a kind of Nostradamus where the exact events in Jesus’ day were somehow construed as mysteriously predicted hundreds of years before they happened. Rather I am proposing that we should understand fulfillment in another sense. We should consider the fulfillment of scripture in the sense that God was acting in history in keeping with the wider story of his design to bring to completion his purposes for his entire creation.

The Measuring Rod of Truth

So what then does the phrase “according to the scriptures” mean? Put in its simplest form I want to suggest that in Paul’s world he refers the death and resurrection of Christ, not to some predetermined code embedded in the text where God literally predicted this would take place, but rather to a vital fulfillment in the making good of God’s O.T. promises to redeem the creation. Indeed, one could say the death and resurrection of Jesus was a crucial milestone in bringing to fulfillment his promises. Often frustrated and endangered, these were promises to make this creation work right. ‘According to the scriptures’ thus refers to the master story of God’s creation and redemption.

Perhaps an illustration may be helpful at this point. I have always liked some of the things that the second century theologian Irenaeus said about these matters. Of course he lived in a different milieu than we, but he wrestled with the same age-old problem of interpreting the scriptures correctly and separating truth from error. Irenaeus was impressed by the fact that the well-educated people of the time had memorized the poems of Homer so well in the order that Homer placed them in his epic that if someone would recite the lines in a different arrangement they could tell. They even believed that by taking the verses out of their received Homeric order and putting them into a different arrangement they had another story. Thus they would not

hesitate to call the cantor of Homer to account for any changes. To them it just wasn't the same! The whole *skopos* (goal) of the enterprise of reciting Homer had become distorted. Likewise, Irenaeus said, the same principle applied to the gnostic heretics of his day. They had the scriptures; but like a craftsman putting together pieces of glass to make a mosaic, without the proper focus (hermeneutical principle) to interpret the word they ended up creating an image of a fox or a dog. Whereas, on the other hand, the one who put the story of the scriptures together properly with the right key of the interconnections, ends up with a picture of Christ as Lord. The difference, of course, is found in reading the text with the proper focus and with the correct measuring rod. That measuring rod, or right key, I would claim, is to understand the scriptures as a narrative account on how God will bring to fulfillment the redemption of his creation; not – as often it is read in schools today – as the residual literary legacy of the people of Israel in the centuries before Christ, but God's *Master Story* of his plan to reclaim creation.

God's Promise to Redeem the Creation

Although the Bible focuses on a special people (Israel) it is worthwhile to note in its beginning it does not speak of an elect people separate from all others to carry out this task. The first figure in the Bible is Adam, not Abraham. Adam is a collective word. It can refer to an individual person but also to humankind in general. This is an important theological point. As Genesis 1 shows, the creator gave major pre-eminence to the human (all of us) in the order of his creation.

The Bible also ends with a concern for all humans. In the book of Revelation the Bible (at least in our English translations) ends with the nations coming into the city of God with its gates open to all who would come to give recognition to his glory (Rev 21:22-22:2). So at the beginning and end of the Bible God welcomes all humankind. They play a special role in the created order. But, like any great story, there is conflict and development in this story between its beginning and end. And, at the heart of this conflict is the drama of God calling a special people, sustaining them through thick and thin to be the vehicle to fulfill his promise to make the creation work right. It is the drama of that story that brings coherence and unity to what we call the scriptures. For this talk I have chosen as the subtitle of that narrative "The Preservation of God's Endangered Promises" to underscore the central strand that holds the narrative of this marvelous O.T. story together; and what an exciting story it really is.

Early in the drama we come to Genesis 12:1-3 – a key text in the Bible. Here we are told that Abram (raised in Mesopotamia) is called to leave country, clan, and father's house (family). If Abram has enough trust in God to do this he is promised he will be the ancestor of a great nation destined to receive land given by God. In the previous chapter in Genesis 11 God frustrates the people of Babel who in 11:4 seek "to make a name for themselves." In Gen 12:2-3 God promises that he will make Abram's name great and all peoples will be blessed through his special people.

But how could this be? How could this promise be fulfilled? When Abram arrived in the promised land he was 75 and Sarah was old. Abram traverses the land and pitches a tent. He never fully possesses the land – only enough for a burial plot. Right at the outset we learn a lesson that is just as true today. God works in his own time. As we all know, the whole saga of Abraham culminates in Gen 22 with his testing through the demand to offer Isaac, Sara's first born, the bearer of God's promise, as a sacrifice. Right from the earliest years the promise of God is endangered.

As we move through the first part of the Bible it is amazing to see on what fragile grounds this promise to Abraham rests. One of my teachers at New Haven was Brevard Childs. In one of his commentaries he reflects on how different the story of the fulfillment of God's promises may have been if a crocodile would have snapped up Moses while he was cradled in the papyrus reeds of the Nile. In so many places God's promises are held by a single fragile thread. Somehow all of this is a reminder that his promises are still here. God directs, sustains, and, although sometimes seemingly absent, in his own time will fulfill them.

In the ancient NE all of the great ancient states filled their national sagas with stories of great military conquests and exploits of power in defeating their enemies. The initial chapter of Israel's saga ends with their captivity in Egypt in degradation and slavery. Yet somehow they are together. The promise remains. Clearly Israel's story is not something that depends on natural descent of the patriarch or in lines similar to the way we trace our own ancestry. It is much more. It is the work of God guiding his special people who respond with faith in his promises. Otherwise it could never be sustained.

Israel's Experience with the Promise

With the Exodus, Conquest and eventual monarchy under David the fulfillment of the promises to Abraham appeared realizable. But what occurred with the conquests of David is only a snapshot of a wider picture of the story of Israel over many centuries. Most biblical scholars now generally accept the proposition that the Law and the Prophets (especially the Law) began to finally coalesce in the form in which we now have it during the Exile or shortly thereafter. At this time the understanding of the fulfillment of God's promises was a matter that was much more problematic. The nation of Israel had been reduced to the little province of Judah. Its hallowed capital Jerusalem lay in ruins. The royal family who traced their lineage to David and who had been the beneficiaries of unqualified promises were under house arrest in Babylon. Listen to what was said earlier by The Holy One about the family of David as recorded by the Psalmist:

I will not violate my covenant, or alter the word that went forth from my lips. Once for all I have sworn by my holiness; I will not lie to David. His line shall endure forever; his throne was long as the sun before me. Like the moon it shall be established forever; it shall stand firm while the skies endure (Ps. 89:34-37).

But now, in the sixth century before Christ, that hardly was the reality. What were the people of God to make of the promises that they would be a blessing to the whole world?

It is fascinating to look at how the scriptures discuss the monarchial period of Israel's history. Time does not allow us to go into great detail about this; but a few general observations are in order.

Have you noticed how the period of the monarchy is treated in the Old Testament? It was no golden period. It is as though the whole period was reckoned to be a time of perpetual turmoil marked by continual uprisings and contentions. Even the great David, who had raised the inheritance of the Abrahamic promises to the status of acceptable nationhood, after the incident with Bathsheba, died a diminished figure. In his final years he had to put down two rebellions (Absalom and Sheba) from his own people who had contested his effectiveness.

What strikes me about our present collection of the Law and the Prophets is how much we find in this narrative about the failure of the monarchy of Israel to bring to fulfillment the

divine promises. Indeed, there is much more here that seems designed to show why Israel was absorbed by a foreign state and to explain why the leaders of Judah were taken into exile. Reflecting on the whole story of Israel's journey, Ezekiel 20 refers to it as a problem with persistent idolatry: a profanation of Yahweh's name. It is intriguing that there remains in Israel's story such a considerable strand dealing with the refusal of the people to accept the kingship. You remember the famous fable of Jotham in Judges 9:7-15 where he speaks of the trees of the forest all refusing to take a position of leadership. Finally, they capitulate and choose the bramble as their leader. Is this only a prediction of what would happen in Israel and Judah when they chose a king? It could be more. In light of the final ordering of the Law and the Prophets, it is a retrospective on what the Europeans call the union of throne and altar. It tells us that their experience with an earthly monarchy would end in ceaseless wars, apostasy, and ultimate ignominy for them. It would only be later (in the N.T.) that we could see that this experience with an earthly kingship anticipated its opposite. Still under a Son of David it was the opposite of what the earthly monarchy turned out to be.

We may add to this experience with an earthly monarchy a focus on the tradition of the 'murmurings' of Israel in the wilderness. Here the anger of the Lord toward his people is approved after the spies enter the land of Canaan and report on the size of the people and their fortifications leading them cowardly to beg to return to Egypt (Numbers 13-14). All of this leaves the impression that the people of God often were sorely lacking in faith and stability and deserved what happened in the exile. When it is all said and done, one may even ask, "Did Yahweh choose the wrong nation?"

Yet, this sorry conclusion is only a pen-ultimate one. In one of his books Gerhard Lohfink reflects on the book of Hosea – one of the great prophets of this period. Lohfink observes that the bulk of the book of Hosea is a series of oracles where God is so angry with Israel that he seeks a divorce. The people of Israel will bear his wrath and his punishment. But just when it appears they will be utterly dismissed and obliterated, like a bolt of thunder out of the blue, the pouring out of divine wrath collapses and the future is transformed into love.

In Hosea 11:8-9 we are told:

How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? ... My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger. I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come to destroy.

This talk of judgment before the emergence of love is no facile comment that presumes in the end God will rescue us anyway; or as the skeptic opines, "God will save us – after all it is his trade!" On the contrary, most of Judah perishes. The punishment of Jerusalem and its inhabitants is horrendous. And yet, after all the destruction that takes place there is hope and, above all, love.

At the end of 2 Kings the Davidic empire is devastated. The Babylonians seize the last remnants of the Davidites. 2 Kings 25:27 tells us that Jehoiachin, the king of Judah, is hauled off into Babylon. But it also tells us something else. The Babylonian king, for some unknown reason graciously frees Jehoiachin from prison, treats him kindly and even allows him a place at his table. What is this text telling us? I think it is saying in the darkest hour the light is still burning. God still sustains his promise that a different monarch will reign over Judah. Endangered as our situation may be, God has not given up on us.

From Exile to Messiah

And so the remnant remains. The promises of God are not forgotten. In God's time we are told that Israel and even the Gentiles will see a new thing and will come to acknowledge Yahweh is king (Isa 2:2-5; 66:18-20; Zech 8:22-23).

Some of the language of the prophets is extraordinary. It is so startling that it can only be likened to a new creation after the flood.

For a brief moment I forsook you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you says the Lord your Redeemer. For this is like the days of Noah to me as I swore that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you and will not rebuke you. (Isa 54:7-9).

It will be a new Exodus (Isa 51:9-11); indeed a new Eden (Isa 51:3); the covenant with the family of David will be renewed (Isa 55:3).

But the days, the years and even centuries go by. One foreign nation after another rules over Jerusalem. Will these promises ever be fulfilled? They are sorely tested. One may well say that they are endangered.

Recalling what the rabbis said about this situation, Lohfink recalls a story they used to tell. Given the pain and terror of this world, "Why did God create it? What was his purpose? One rabbi said it was for David. Because in the form of the psalms we find the perfect model for his praise; another said, God created the world for Moses because in the yoke of the Law God will be acknowledged in action! Finally, another rabbi responded, "Not for David or Moses did God create the world? He did it for the Messiah! Praise and human achievement is not enough. What the world needs is transformation." Only then will the promises be fulfilled.

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