

Primeval Skyline

- creation stories and the Genesis narratives

AT THE FRONTIERS

The 'wave of history'

We are living at the very frontiers of existence. No one has ever lived this moment before! We stand with the future open before us, un-lived, full of promise and possibility. Yet behind us lies over 4000 years of history through which God has been moving, leading people and unfolding divine purposes, bringing us right up to this present moment.

We are like someone standing upon a surfboard being driven forward towards a distant shore by a towering wave that has traveled thousands of miles across the sea, swelling up from the heart of the ocean itself. While we stand at a unique moment in the history of the church there lies behind us an ocean of revelation and experience born out of God's dealings with his people upon which we can draw. The wind of God's spirit is cresting it into a wave that can carry us into his 'end time' purposes.

Patterns of history

History has been described as 'the story of people in time'. It presents us with numerous problems and questions, not least of which is, 'Does history have any pattern and purpose?'

People have viewed history in many different ways here are just some of them:

- **The Eastern View:** - this sees history, and in fact the universe, as subject to an ever-changing cycle or rhythm, like that of the seasons. Nothing is new, nothing is certain, nothing is permanent, and the outlook is essentially pessimistic.
- **The Optimistic View:** - this sees history as the story of steady human progress both in 'morality' and 'technology'. It emphasises materialism and in fact gave birth to the modern study of sociology.
- **The Romantic View:** - this sees history as simply an account of different cultures expressing themselves; it refuses to see any idea of 'development' or 'progress'.
- **The Marxist View:** - this sees history as the process which is created by people as they struggle and labour with 'matter' in order to satisfy their basic needs.

But there is another view ...

HEBREWS AND HISTORY

The Bible view

This places history into the hand of God, free from 'chance' and mere 'human struggle'. It is a straight line (or perhaps a spiral), which begins at a particular point - Creation, and continues under God's sovereign control until it reaches its ultimate goal - 'the last things'. History becomes the medium in which 'salvation' is worked out, and that is why we refer to the story of God's dealings with humanity as 'salvation history'.



What is Salvation History?

Christians look at the whole flow of world history from a very particular perspective. We believe this great ocean of events has both its 'origin' and its 'end' in God, and in fact has no meaning apart from this. We believe its goal is 'salvation' [wholeness], and that this is the key that ties all the parts together and gives history its dynamic thrust.

Salvation history has three main elements:

□ It is the story of the God who acts

God not only created the world but also 'speaks' and 'acts' within it. By this we see his living relationship with creation and human persons in particular, so we can be certain he is shaping its end to his specific design and specifications. History in fact becomes a revelation of God's character to those with eyes to see and ears to hear.

God's acts in history are displays of his 'judgment' which give his people confidence that he will fulfill his promised salvation. These acts of God are 'prophetic'. It has been said that the godly person is like somebody riding on a train with their back to the engine: they are confident about the way forward because they can see the whole panorama of the journey they have already traveled spreading out before them. God's acts in the past make us certain of the future.

□ It is the story of the people of God

Salvation history focuses particularly upon the people who have responded to the call of God. They always appear to stand in contrast to what appears to be the main forces shaping the history of their day, and yet at every point history is marked by their presence. Their obedience brings blessing, their disobedience correction.

The story of the people of God is what gives history its continuity, and our own lives are linked inseparably from theirs. We inherit and are enriched by their investment of faith, courage and fruitfulness. Their testimony inspires us to zeal. Salvation history, as it tells the story of the people of God, is a single unified strand that cuts through the artificial barriers of 'Hebrew History', 'New Testament' and 'Church History'.

□ It is the story of the purposes of God

Strangely, salvation history is always more concerned with the future than the past. Because it reveals God's character in his dealing with people it is a clear guide to the 'end time'. Because we see God in the patterns of the past we are able to see him in the shape of the future.

Why study Salvation History?

There are three main reasons why we should give time, effort and reflection to the study of salvation history:

□ **It teaches radical values**

It takes us back to our 'roots'. It makes the 'building blocks' of the purposes of God very clear. It is foundational. When we 'remember' then we 'understand'. It helps us to interpret our present condition and the future more clearly.

□ **It reveals precedents**

It is full of examples from which we can learn and gain understanding about both our present and the future. It is a paradox that at the point at which we stand history is both unique and yet familiar. No one has ever stood where we stand, nor had our opportunities, nevertheless the issues we face have recurred time and again in one form or another. We must learn from their lessons. The examples of history are expressions of the grace of God.

□ **It gives warnings**

It contains 'dark lessons' which show us what happens if we disobey the voice of God. We neglect our roots at our peril. We must review the numerous examples of God's judgment humbly. If we do not learn the lessons of our ancestors ours will be an even greater judgment.

OVERTURE TO SALVATION

Beginnings with an end in view

Genesis is the 'book of beginnings and origins'. This theme colours every part of it. However, the first eleven chapters form a prologue, not simply to Genesis, but to the Bible as a whole. In a very real sense these chapters are nearer to the New Testament than the Hebrew Bible. They are very much like the stirring harmonies of an overture that shapes the beginning of a mighty symphony. In it all the main themes are presented, themes that are to be developed later in the main body of the work and brought to a climax in the finale. There is a clear symmetry between the scenes, images and ideas of these chapters and the book of Revelation, the 'book of ends and fulfillment'.

Against the landscape of eternity

The story is told in simple language, clear and uncluttered, full of pictures and colour. And yet, the words are so majestic and sublime that they echo in the mind like great organ chords, exploding in ideas we can hardly comprehend (not unlike the prologue to John's Gospel). We are introduced to the great drama of salvation against a backcloth of cosmic dimensions; the perspective is perfect.

A message for modern people

These early chapters of Genesis have come under severe attack from scientific theory, with the result that Christians have tended to spend most of their energies defending their integrity. All this has diverted attention from the central message of these chapters, which is in fact the clearest and most contemporary statement on the nature and condition of

humanity that has ever been put into writing; and through which the purposes of God are clear for all to see.

Themes and truths

The first eleven chapters of Genesis present us with all the major themes that shape the great unfolding story of salvation history.

□ God - Creator and Sovereign

The central focus is on the person and personality of God expressed in words and acts:

- Creation - 'out of nothing';
- Creation - 'by divine word' - the perfect expression of thought;
- Creation - 'it is good' - the perfect reflection of divine thought;
- Biblical understanding of creation leaves no room for: polytheism, dualism, deism, and eternity of matter, matter as evil, astrology and nihilism;
- God brings creation into being (by controlled process), sustains it (unfolding revelation, judgment when bounds are overstepped), and bringing it into fullness.

□ Man and Woman - Image and agent of God

The crown of creation, beings to demonstrate God's character and to have a relationship, and fulfill divine purposes:

- The 'image of God' is both male and female - 1:27
- 'A living being' is a mixture of both heaven and earth - 2:7
- We are different from the animal world - 2:20
- We can communicate with God - 3:8
- We are responsible before God - 2:16-17
- We are creative like God - 4:21-22
- We have dominion upon the earth - 1:28
- 'Be fruitful...fill the earth and subdue it' - 1:28

□ Rebellion

Freedom to choose rejects obedience and pursues fulfillment apart from God and initiates a tragedy:

- The Test - 'tree of knowledge', 'to be as God' - 2:9ff 3:5
- Cain - 'laid in wait for his brother' (eyed) - 4:8
- Sin before the Flood - 'only evil continually' - 6:5
- Babel (Babylon) - biblical symbol of the human passion for greatness- 'let us make a name for ourselves' - 11:4 cf. 3:5
- People wanting independence from God

□ Judgment

Human self ambition brings its own consequences, and damages the promise and the potential of truly being the image of God:

- The 'curse' spoils the beautiful gifts of childbirth and manual work by increasing their 'labour' - 3:14
- Cain becomes a 'fugitive' and a 'wanderer' - not simply a 'nomad' but entirely 'rootless' - 4:12
- The flood - total judgment, the ultimate fruit that human rebellion brings - 6:14-ff
- God scatters the people of Babel across the face of the earth by a confusion of tongues; because of their pride and their refusal to fill the earth with cultural diversity - 11:9

□ **Promise and Hope**

From its origin, and in spite of tragedy, the uniqueness of God's plan and character radiate through the stories:

- The Sabbath - God 'finished' and 'rested' are balanced in meaning - 2:2
- It is rest and peace but full of activity - Jn 5:17
- It has an infinite perspective (no 'evening and morning'), it is the stuff eternity is made of
- It is 'blessed' and 'hallowed', unique in its nature - 2:3
- It is a gift from God to be enjoyed; 'a day' is but the first installment. In Jesus everyday is a Sabbath (Heb 3:7ff; Ezk 47:12; Rev 2:7,22:2,14) - 2:9
- Promise to Eve - 'your seed shall bruise its head' - 3:15
- 'The mark of Cain' – it is the same word as 'the mark of the covenant', a mark of God's love and protection not punishment (like a slave brand). Hebrew of 'Cain' is similar to the Arabic, 'slave of God'

□ **Salvation**

God's purpose to redeem creation from the grip of sin and rebellion through acts of salvation is illustrated particularly in the events of the flood:

- 'The Ark' (6:14-16 et al) is a most powerful picture of salvation;
- It illustrates the biblical concept of 'remnant' - a small righteous group saved through God's judgment in order that he might fulfill his ultimate purposes;
- It illustrates God's profound 'love' in salvation;
- It illustrates the biblical concept of the 'covenant' - the binding of God and people together;
- The 'rainbow' is not simply 'an arch in the sky'; the Hebrew is the word used for a 'war bow'. It is saying 'God has hung his war bow in the clouds as a perpetual reminder of his promise'. His instrument of judgment becomes a symbol of his mercy and sustaining love. Note that a rainbow is the product of 'light' (picture of God's love) reflected on 'water' (agent of God's judgment).

CRESCENT AND CRUCIBLE

The call and the world

As God begins the deliberate task of calling into being a people who are called by his name, he begins with one individual. Abraham was as much part of his world as we are of ours, a world of trade and commerce, of differing religious ideas through which people sought for spiritual security, and as we shall see, a world of considerable social and political confusion.

The world of which we speak was, on today's terms, the Middle East. An area often referred to as 'the Fertile Crescent'; stretching in something of a half-moon shape from Egypt, through Canaan and Syria, up into Mesopotamia. It was bounded on one side by the Mediterranean Sea and on the other by the Arabian Desert.

Social and political change

□ Sumerians, Akkadians and Elamites

During the thousand years between 3000-2000 BC the Mesopotamian plain, between its two great rivers the Tigris and Euphrates, was the scene of a struggle for political power. The original settlers, the Sumerians, were slowly infiltrated and dominated by the Akkadians. Though the Sumerians were to regain power, it was only to fall prey once more, this time to a people called the Elamites who stormed down from their mountain homeland in modern day Iraq.

□ Amorites

Into this confusion another element was added. Just before 2000 BC a semi-nomadic people, the Amorites, poured out of the Arabian Desert into lower Mesopotamia establishing an important dynasty. They are often mentioned in the Bible and scattered throughout the world of their day. Their greatest king was Hammurabi (c 1728-1680 BC), an important lawgiver. It is interesting to compare his laws with those of Moses. The city of Mari was one of their centers and documents discovered there reveal interesting customs many of which are reflected in the lives of the Patriarchs.

□ Hurrians

About the same time another northern tribe, the Hurrians (or Horites), moved down to settle around the Tigris in cities like Nuzi. Documents unearthed by archaeologists reveal customs such as adoption and household gods; throw light upon a number of biblical passages. The Hurrians also scattered throughout the world of their day.

□ Hittites

Beyond the western mountains of Asia Minor (Turkey) was the homeland of a vigorous nation called the Hittites. From time to time their population overflowed into Mesopotamia, Syria and Canaan, making them particularly influential anytime between 2000-1700 BC. It was from the Hittites that Abraham brought the cave in which to bury Sarah.

□ Egyptians

In complete contrast to this scene of social and political ferment stood Egypt, insulated from the changes by the desert that shielded the Nile along which her people developed their distinctive way of life. Vulnerable only from her delta, which at this time was easily protected, the years 2000 -1000 BC brought Egypt a 'golden age of culture'. Art, medicine, mathematics, canal building, fortification, mineral mining etc, all flourished. Her religion was mysterious and occult, and in politics she was far-reaching and powerful.

Questions

1. What do we mean by the phrase 'Salvation History' as it is used in this unit?

2. What unique contribution does Genesis 1-11 make to scripture as a whole?
3. How significant do you think the social-political 'crucible' of the Middle East at the beginning of 2nd Century BC was in setting the scene for the biblical story?

Reading and Resources

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