

Overview of Salvation History

Primeval History

The Bible starts with some imaginative stories that tell how God made everything, along with the first humans, Adam and Eve. God's Creation was good, but evil crept into the world. After several generations, God decided to flood the world. But God saved Noah, his family, and specimens of land animals on an ark (boat) in order to give humans a chance to start over.

Patriarchs and Matriarchs (1850-1750 BC)

Abraham and Sarah arrived in Canaan, the land God had promised them. They were old, but God gave them a son, Isaac, who had two sons with his wife Rebecca. The younger was Jacob, whom God named Israel. Israel had twelve sons, but his favorite was Joseph. Joseph's jealous brothers sold him as a slave in Egypt, but God helped him to prosper. When Joseph's brothers visited Egypt, Joseph recognized them and told them to come live with him.

Egypt and Exodus (1750-1290 BC)

Israel's descendants (sometimes called Hebrews, Israelites, the Tribes of Israel, or the Children of Israel) became a small nation. But a new Egyptian dynasty came to power and made the Hebrews slaves. Eventually, God told Moses to bring them out of Egypt. To convince Pharaoh to let his cheap labor go, God sent a series of plagues, including the killing of all firstborn sons. The Hebrews were saved by putting the blood of a lamb over their doors. After the Hebrews left, Pharaoh sent his army to bring them back, trapping them at the Red Sea. God made the waters separate so the Hebrew people could escape; then God made the waters fall back, drowning the pursuing army. The Passover meal celebrates this victory.

Settling the Promised Land (1290-1020 BC)

While the Hebrew people were on their way back to Canaan, God made a covenant (an agreement) with them at Mount Sinai. God gave them laws, including the Ten Commandments. God told them to build a tabernacle (worship tent) and the ark of the Covenant (a box symbolizing God's presence). After a generation, the Hebrew people invaded Canaan under the leadership of Joshua. The land was divided into territories, roughly corresponding to the twelve Tribes of Israel. For over two hundred years, the Hebrews fought for the land; there was no central power, so God would occasionally raise up local leaders called judges.

The Kingdom United (1020-922 BC)

God allowed Samuel, the last of the judges, to make Saul the first king. Samuel poured oil on Saul's head, "anointing" him for leadership. The Hebrew word for an "anointed person" is *messiah* (the Greek word is *christ*). The next king was David, the greatest human king the little nation of Israel would ever have. God promised that David's house would be established forever. Next was David's son Solomon the Wise, who built a great palace and the first Temple in Jerusalem. But during Solomon's son's reign, the kingdom divided into two.

The Kingdom Divided (922-587 BC)

The northern kingdom was called Israel, and it went through several dynasties. The southern kingdom was Judah, and the Davidic dynasty stayed in power. Sadly, most of the kings were not faithful to God. So God would send prophets like Elijah to speak the word of God and call the people to faithfulness. When the northern kingdom fell to Assyria, it ceased to exist. Babylon in turn defeated Assyria and then later crushed Judah; Jerusalem and the Temple were utterly destroyed. Many Jews (inhabitants of Judah) were sent into exile in Babylon.

The Exile and the Return (587-5 BC)

Stories about heroes like Daniel kept the faith alive for Jews who were in exile. When Persia defeated Babylon, they let the Jews return home. By 515 BC, the Temple had been rebuilt. Eventually, the Greeks controlled the region and became brutally disrespectful, so Judas Maccabeus led a successful revolt. For a time, Israel was free, until Rome conquered the region in 63 BC. Weary from dark centuries of domination, the Jews began to hope for a new King, a Messiah (Christ), a Son of David, who would restore glory to Israel. In time millions would recognize a baby lying in a manger as the Christ—a light shining in the darkness.

The Life of Jesus, the Christ (5 BC-AD 30)

The angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, a young virgin, and told her she was going to have a baby—Jesus. The child would be conceived by the Holy Spirit and called the Son of God. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, with only a manger for a bed; we celebrate his birth on Christmas. Wise Men guided by a star brought gifts to Jesus; we celebrate this on Epiphany. Jesus grew up in Nazareth in Galilee.

Meanwhile, John the Baptist was baptizing people in the Jordan River when he recognized Jesus as “the Lamb of God.” Jesus began teaching, often using stories called parables; he soon had a large following of disciples. Jesus preached the Gospel—Good News—with words that were both challenging and promising: we are to love God and our neighbor; this is God’s greatest commandment. Even though we sin, God loves us—unconditionally—and offers us forgiveness; this is God’s promise. Jesus performed many miracles, which were signs of the coming of the Reign of God. Some believed, and their faith was strengthened; others rejected Jesus.

The Death and Resurrection of Jesus, the Christ (AD 30)

Many of the Jewish leaders were upset because Jesus talked like he was above Jewish law, claimed to be the Christ, and even claimed to be God. So the authorities planned to kill him. Shortly before he was arrested, Jesus rode into Jerusalem like a king, while crowds honored him with palm branches (Palm Sunday). Later that week (Holy Thursday), Jesus ate a Passover meal with his disciples; this would be their Last Supper (and the first Eucharist). The next day (Good Friday), Jesus was crucified (brutal execution on a cross) under the authority of the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. Early Sunday morning (Easter), some women came to visit his tomb and were told that Jesus had come back to life; several times after his Resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples. Forty days later (Ascension Day), Jesus was lifted up into heaven.

The Early Christian Church (AD 30-70)

Fifty days after Jesus’ Resurrection on Pentecost (the name of a Jewish feast day), the Holy Spirit came to the disciples and they started preaching in many languages. Thousands believed! Some refer to it as the birth of the Church. Stephen was the first martyr. Paul saw a vision of Jesus and became the first Christian missionary. Peter also had a startling vision—God told him salvation was for the Jews and the Gentiles (non-Jews). Days of persecution were ahead; Rome became increasingly intolerant and destroyed the Temple in AD 70. But Christianity kept spreading and growing. Jesus’ mission of spreading the Good News of salvation continues through the Church today.