
Historical Summaries of Biblical History

by W. Gordon Robinson

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“IT is on the whole more convenient to keep history and theology apart”, wrote H. G. Wells in his once popular *Short History of the World*, which is now almost totally forgotten. That was a point of view which would have been rejected with horror by the writers and thinkers of both Old and New Testaments. To them, history and theology were intertwined. They could not possibly have subscribed to the view which Boswell ascribed to Johnson that history “is no better than an almanack, a mere chronological series of remarkable events”, still less to Gibbon’s cynical dismissal of history as “little more than the register of the crimes and follies and misfortunes of mankind”. Henry Ford’s reputed *mot* that “History is bunk” would have been utterly alien to them. Ford is said to have corrected himself and to have explained, “I did not say it *was* bunk. It was bunk to *me*. I did not need it very bad”. Perhaps he meant that he could personally discern no pattern in it, like H. A. L. Fisher in the preface to his *History of Europe*: “Men wiser and more learned than I have discerned in history a plot, a rhythm, a predestined pattern. These harmonies are concealed from me. I can see only one emergency following another”. The biblical approach is vastly different. It is echoed much more nearly by the words of Macaulay that “the task of the historian is to extract the philosophy of history, to direct our judgment of events and men, to trace the connection of causes and effects, and to draw from the occurrences of former times general lessons of moral and political wisdom.”

The Bible takes it as axiomatic that God controls history, reveals himself in history, and directs it towards a final goal. God’s judgments and his saving power are clearly seen in the unfolding progress of events which culminate in The Event, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and his living presence with his people. In terms which have become fashionable in theological thinking today, history to the

Jew and the Christian is not merely *Geschichte* (the relating and the relationships of events) but *Heilsgeschichte* (salvation history, the recounting of God's dealings with mankind).

In many parts of both Testaments, in the Apocrypha, in the Qumran literature, in Josephus and in some of the early post-biblical writers summaries of the history of God's people are to be found. They appear in various literary forms, in speeches, poems and hymns, in prayers and so on, all of them, whether comprehensive or brief, sounding the note of the unfolding of history as showing the character of God and his dealings with people. An examination of these summaries makes a fascinating and significant exercise.

I. THE HISTORICAL SUMMARIES

(a) *The Old Testament*

The Pentateuch:

Deuteronomy 32: This great song of Moses summarizes the greatness and power of the God of Israel who gave the nations their inheritance and initiated a special relationship with Israel whom he adopted, protects, guides and upholds. But Israel's disloyalty is a constant challenge to God's purposes and shows itself in spite of God's protection and his support against oppressors.

The historical books:

Joshua 24: Joshua speaks to the assembly at Shechem and through him the God of Israel reviews the history of the nation from Abraham to the conquest of Canaan. God had led and upheld his people and given them a land for which they had not laboured. Now he challenges them to accept his rule only; as they promise to serve and obey God they enter that day into covenant with him.

Judges: Strictly speaking the Book of Judges does not contain any short summary of Israel's history but is important for the framework into which the stories of the judges are fitted. History is presented in recurring cycles: Israel apostasizes and God allows them to be oppressed, then they cry to him, he raises up a deliverer who overthrows the oppressor so that the land has rest until once again Israel does evil in the sight of the Lord and the cycle is repeated. The pattern is clearly seen in Judges 2: 11-23 and the control and guidance of God is never lost sight of.

I Samuel 12: 6-15: Samuel addresses Israel now that he is old. Already in 8: 1-22 (at Ramah) and in 10: 17-24 (at Mizpah) he had reminded them how God had brought them out of Egypt but they had abandoned and rejected him. Now Samuel traces his people's history from Moses and Aaron and the deliverance from Egypt, through the years of the possession of Canaan until the time when they had asked for a king. God's leadership and Israel's forgetfulness

of him and their idolatry are the constant themes; their history challenges them to faithfulness.

Nehemiah 9: 5-38: Ezra in his prayer at the reading of the Law acknowledges God's uniqueness and majesty and then recalls the great events in the nation's history from the call of Abraham onwards. Israel's rebelliousness and God's infinite patience and love are the keynotes. "Thou hast dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly." The words of Ezra result in the making of a firm covenant.

The prophetical books:

Isaiah 63: 7-64:11: These chapters which include prayer and intercession contain a historical retrospect which recalls God's mighty acts and his steadfast love, his sharing of their afflictions (63: 9) and their rebellion. This historical review ends at a time when Jerusalem is desolate and a wilderness and when "our holy and beautiful house where our fathers praised thee has been burned with fire" (64: 10-11) which would apparently bring the national history down to the days when the returning exiles from Babylon found the Temple in ruins. Whatever the date, the important features to notice are the emphasis on the Exodus as a historical event of the greatest importance to Israel, the emphasis on the God of Israel as Father, Saviour and Guide of his people, and the way in which contemporary events are seen in the light of previous history and as a call to confidence in God's ability to continue to save and restore.

Jeremiah 2: In this early prophecy after his call, Jeremiah is told by God to proclaim in Jerusalem "Thus saith the Lord". He embarks on a summary of history (as God sees it) from the days of the deliverance from Egypt. But Israel has constantly been unfaithful, idolatrous, rebellious and enslaved, persistent in its disloyalty to God, in its lusting after false gods and in its forsaking of God by turning for help to other nations. There is a disheartened sadness in this chapter and a notable absence of the appeal from God to his people which is prominent in other summaries.

Ezekiel 20: 1-44: The history of Israel is reviewed allegorically in 16 in which her conduct since the entry into Canaan is likened to that of a faithless wife turned harlot (in a footnote God promises to remember his covenant and restore Israel). There is a comparable allegory in 23 in which the adultery of Israel reflects her toying with the worship of foreign gods and relying for help upon foreign nations rather than upon the true God. More important for our purpose than these two chapters is what we find in chapter 20. When certain of the elders come to enquire of the Lord, Ezekiel speaks of the nation's past history and then of its future. God chose Israel, led them out of Egypt and through the wilderness, exercised forbearance when they rebelled and offered sacrifices on every high hill. The past

is unfolded in terms of Israel's infidelity and God's forbearance and both are seen in the light of God's free choice of his people expressed in the covenant.

Daniel 7-12: The four successive kingdoms which oppressed the Jews are portrayed in the figures of the four beasts and then, even more cryptically, a review of history is brought down to the time of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, his desecration of the Temple, and the restoration of pure worship after the Maccabean revolt. Through all its rich and sometimes baffling imagery God is seen planning and guiding history and his people are encouraged by his care in the past to be confident against the coming of the fifth kingdom—the kingdom of God. The attitude of the writer is seen in essence in Daniel's prayer in 9: 3-19.

The Psalms:

Psalm 78: This psalm presents a very full review of Israel's history from the Exodus to David with the themes of election, and persistent sinning and rebellion provoking the wrath of God yet not thwarting his guidance.

Psalms 105 and 106: Both these psalms hymn the mighty acts of God, his keeping of his covenant promise and the rebellious rejection and disregard of the covenant by Israel. The former, however, concentrates on an exultant expression of thankfulness to which God's chosen people is called; the latter begins with thankfulness and then confesses in detail the many acts of rebellion in history from the days in Egypt to the days in Canaan before closing with gratitude that God has remembered his covenant.

Psalm 135: In this psalm of praise to God for electing his people, vv. 5-7 proclaim his control of nature and 8-12 contain a brief summary of his control of history as evidenced in what had happened to his people from Egypt until they entered their heritage in Canaan.

Psalm 136: Verses 10-22 echo and expand 135: 8-12. Creation and history both demonstrate God's steadfast love and evoke repeated thanksgiving that "his steadfast love endures for ever."

Psalms 95-100: This group of psalms with the theme "The LORD reigneth" was evidently used liturgically. As in Psalms 135 and 136, God's power is seen in nature and in history; in 95 and particularly in 99 God is acknowledged as exalted over all peoples and in his relations with his own people an avenger of their wrongdoings but also a forgiving God to them.

(b) The Apocrypha

Judith 5: 5-21: A speech put into the mouth of Achior the Ammonite at a council of war in Holofernes' Assyrian camp. This review

of Jewish history is attributed to a non-Jew (though he later became a proselyte); it is set in a book which, as the Jerusalem Bible says, "shows a bland indifference to history and geography"; it purports to warn the Assyrians that Israel is invulnerable except when rarely they offend God; it lacks the high seriousness and insight of the Old Testament.

The Wisdom of Solomon 10-19: An extended review from Adam onwards concentrating in detail on the period of Israel in Egypt and with the conclusion in 19: 22, "O Lord, thou didst magnify thy people, and thou didst glorify them and not lightly regard them; standing by their side in every time and place."

The Wisdom of Jesus ben-Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) 44-50: In the form of praise of ancestors this offers us a very full history as a Jew of the second century B.C. saw it. The conspectus covers Enoch and Noah down to the days of Nehemiah with an appendix in chapter 50 on Simon II, the high priest about 220-195. God's control of both nature and history are seen in 42: 15-43: 33, followed by 44-50, and particular attention is given to the theme of continuous national defection from Jeroboam onwards (except for David, Hezekiah and Josiah) and to the successive covenants made by God with Noah, Abraham, Aaron, Phinehas and David.

Baruch 1: 15-3: 8: Allegedly written by Baruch in Babylon to the exiles from Jerusalem, this section with its echoes of Deuteronomy, Jeremiah and Daniel (cf. 2: 11-19 and Daniel 9: 3-19) is in the setting of prayer and was used liturgically. Its salient points are in its stress on Moses and the deliverance from Egypt, the prophets, the Exile and the promised return, and the promise to Abraham and the everlasting covenant.

I Maccabees 2: 51-70: The farewell speech of Mattathias to his sons gives examples in the nation's history of good deeds earning reward from Abraham to Daniel. Their deeds are not only an example; following them brings honour and renown. Though it is not specifically stated, dependence upon the Law and the covenant is implied.

III Maccabees 6: 4-8 (in the Greek, not in the Vulgate): The prayer of Eleazar reminds God of what he did to Pharaoh, Sennacherib, the three in the fiery furnace and Daniel, and Jonah, and calls on him as the protector of all things to deliver Israel from the hand of the enemy.

(c) *The New Testament*

The Gospels:

At a casual glance the gospels do not seem to contain any summaries of Jewish history but it would be a mistake to suppose that these are entirely missing. The genealogies of Jesus in Matthew 1 and Luke 3 may be taken as examples of a synopsis of history as focussed

in its leading characters from Abraham and from Adam respectively but these are relatively unimportant for our purpose compared with the words and deeds of Jesus. His references to the great personages of the Old Testament include Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, Elijah, Isaiah and Jonah—taken together they show the awareness of Jesus of the unfolding of the nation's story. That awareness is seen clearly in his reference in Matthew 23: 35-36 (cf. Luke 11: 51) to the righteous blood shed upon earth from Abel to Zechariah, that is from the beginning of the Hebrew Bible (Genesis) to its last book (our II Chronicles), and also when as the Risen Lord he took the same complete Hebrew Bible (Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms) to interpret "in all the scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24: 27 and 44). The account of the Transfiguration tells of Jesus in conversation with Moses and Elijah (the lawgiver and the representative prophet standing for a sample of Israel's history) and Luke in his account adds that they were talking together of the "exodus" which Jesus was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. As in his final chapter, it is Luke who has underlined the significance of the fulfilment of all the preceding history in Jesus himself.

It is when we turn to the parable of the vineyard tenants that we have a clear picture of the view which Jesus took of God's plans and dealings with his people (Matthew 21: 33-43 par. Mark 12: 1-11 par. Luke 20: 9-18). Here, as in so much of the Old Testament, is seen the forbearance of God and the rebellious disobedience of his people with the significant addition that history reaches its culmination in the coming of the owner's son and in the death of the Son.

The Speeches in Acts:

In his second volume Luke continued to emphasize that the divine plan in history, and in particular in the history of Israel, culminated in Jesus Christ, and this is reflected in his reports of the speeches of the first followers of Jesus after the resurrection and ascension.

The speeches of Peter in chapters 2, 3, 4 and 10, while they do not spell out the details of the history, are filled with a lively sense of the deliberate intention of God. To this all the prophets from Samuel bear witness; this was seen in history which God brought to its climax in Christ.

The speech of Stephen shortly before his death (Acts 7) is a most comprehensive appraisal of the meaning of Jewish history. From Abraham it moves through Isaac and the patriarchs to Moses and Aaron, Joshua, David and Solomon. That those who were inimical to Stephen listened through such a long speech indicates their acceptance of the Old Testament theme that God reveals himself in history.

They may have been prepared also to agree that "our fathers would not be obedient". But Stephen brought what to them was something new not only in his attack on the Law and the Temple but in his identification of his hearers and their generation with the faithlessness of Israel ("You always resist the Holy Spirit") and his assertion that God's purpose in history found its goal in the coming of the Righteous One whom they betrayed and murdered but who is now "standing at the right hand of God."

Several of the speeches of Paul in Acts have only incidental references to the history of his people (see the speeches to pagans at Lystra and Athens, to the elders of Ephesus, to the Jews in Jerusalem and to Agrippa—in chapters 14, 17, 20, 22, 26 respectively). His last recorded speech to Jews at Rome (28: 23-28) argues in general terms from Moses and the prophets about "the salvation of God". But the most distinctive speech is that to the Jews at Pisidian Antioch in 13: 17-43. Here is a detailed review from Moses to David and thence to the fulfilment of the promise to David in the coming of Jesus the Saviour. Here are the themes of election, deliverance, the trustworthiness of God's promises and here a forceful and persuasive account of the place of Jesus the Son, his rejection and murder, and his authentication by God in the miracle of the resurrection.

The Pauline Letters:

Paul was deeply aware of Israel's history and privileges ("theirs is the splendour of the divine presence, theirs the covenants, the law, the temple worship, and the promises"—Romans 9: 4, N.E.B.). Paul's review of his people's story and of God's dealings with them is seen almost exclusively in Romans; after 2: 1-16 (the continued stubborn refusal of the Jews to be faithful to God even though they knew his will through the Law and circumcision) and his looking back to Abraham in 4: 1-25 (cf. Galatians 3-4) Paul expatiates at length in chapters 9-11 on Israel's history and privileges and the admission of the Gentiles into God's purposes. Abraham, Rebecca, Moses, Isaiah, Elijah, David are all passed in review. Israel has persisted in unbelief and unfaithfulness but all this cannot thwart God's plan of salvation.

To the Hebrews:

In singling out the heroes of faith in chapter 11 the writer gives a most wide-ranging conspectus and even then confesses that time had failed him to tell the full story. From Abel to the time of the Maccabees God's call has evoked a faithful response. But this is not all. History is an ongoing process "looking to Jesus"; the faithfulness of the past heroes cannot achieve its completion without the fidelity of all those who succeed them.

(d) The Qumran Scrolls

The first part of the document usually known as the Damascus Rule or Damascus Document is entitled The Exhortation and has much to say concerning "the covenant of the forefathers". This is central to the summary of history from the time of Noah until the time of David; the document then quotes from Isaiah (as it has already quoted from that prophetic book) and from other parts of the Old Testament. Murmurings, unfaithfulness, forsaking of the covenant caused God to hide his face but when Israel perceived its iniquity God raised a Teacher of Righteousness to make known to latter generations what God had done and would yet do.

(e) Josephus

In his account of the Jewish War, Flavius Josephus who, after taking a leading part among his own people against the Romans, had become Titus's interpreter at the siege of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, describes a speech which he himself made to try to persuade the Jews of the folly of resistance against Rome. The speech, given in the *Jewish War*, v. 9. 3-4, tells how "on finding his direct advice disregarded, he passed to the history of their nation". He traced that history from Abraham to the time of Herod son of Antipater (Herod the Great) and drew the lesson that only impiety supports this war; to fight is to incur inevitable disaster. God has always avenged the Jews when they were wronged but now they cannot expect God to be their ally. God could and would have punished Rome had the Jews been worthy of freedom. But now, said Josephus, "I cannot but think that God has withdrawn from the holy places and taken his stand on the side of those against whom you are now in arms."

(f) Early post-biblical writers

We may take as our examples two writings which belong to the first century and early Christianity.

The Epistle of Barnabas, although accepted in some quarters as Scripture, treats the Old Testament story allegorically and shows no concern for the actual record or its literal meaning. History itself is seen not as the record of events and their interpretation in terms of God's purposes but as a foreshadowing of Christ. The Jews, their history, the lessons they learned from that history, and the development of God's revelation in it, are lost in fantastic interpretations.

The First Letter of Clement to the Corinthians is on a different level. In urging his readers to follow the examples of the great characters of the Old Testament he goes beyond the canon to include "the blessed Judith" but more significantly he uses the Pauline letters and Hebrews, equating them with the Old Testament scripture,

and the example of the martyrs of the Neronian persecution. Thus the histories of Israel and of the Christian Church are taken together and used to apply their lessons to the Corinthian situation.

II. THE LITERARY FORMS OF THE HISTORICAL SUMMARIES

All these historical summaries are set out in many different literary forms. These do not give us any clue to the date of their composition (unlike the claims by Gunkel in his classification of the Psalms or by the form critics in the "units" of the Gospels). What they do is to show us how widely a profound consideration of salvation history was accepted by Jews and Christians from quite early times, and that the recognition of God's dealings with his world and his people demanded and received the widest expression. Look now at the variety of literary forms.

(a) *Speeches*

It is tempting to divide the speeches into those by God himself and those by his prophets or servants. There is a very real sense in which "Thus saith the LORD" is not the hallmark of the prophets only; all sacred Scripture is God speaking. But for convenience we may use this broad division.

Speeches by God himself: These are found most notably in Jeremiah 2 and Ezekiel 20. A lengthy portion of Israel's history had passed and God was making clear what was always implicit, that he had chosen his people and sustained them and had been repaid by shameful rebellion.

Speeches of farewell: Four of these are outstanding—by Moses (Deuteronomy 32), by Joshua (Joshua 24), by Samuel (I Samuel 12) and by Mattathias (I Maccabees 2). It is obvious that speeches of farewell are a most suitable form for didactic reviews; the emphasis, however, varies but always contains the notes of God's faithfulness, Israel's apostasy and God's challenge to amendment.

Speeches of polemic or apologetic: Those of Stephen in Acts 7 and of Josephus in *Jewish War* v are delivered in a situation of extreme danger to the speaker and this underlines the earnestness of the approach and the sharpness of the application of the lessons of history.

Speeches in proclamation of the gospel: The two examples come from Paul (in Acts 13 and 28, the one detailed, the other allusive). Both are addressed to Jews who were aware of the use of the lessons of their own history. Gentile Christians had to learn that they were the New Israel and the inheritors and the continuation of all the history of the Old Israel.

(b) *Prayers*

A temptation to which all who pray are prone is that of unnecessarily informing God of what he knows already and knew long

before we did! Nevertheless prayer which rehearses the mighty acts of God is justified, as we are reminded in Isaiah 62: 6-7; it is an act of gratitude and thanksgiving to "recount the Lord's acts of unfailing love . . . all that the Lord has done for us and his great goodness to the house of Israel, all that he has done for them in his tenderness and by his many acts of love" (Isaiah 63: 7, N.E.B.). This recounting in prayer is seen in Isaiah 63-64, in Ezra's prayer (Nehemiah 9) and in the prayer of Eleazar in III Maccabees 6.

(c) *Poems and hymns*

Several psalms, as we have seen, and especially 78, 105 and 106 are devoted to reviews of the history of Israel and possibly were used at festivals (see below). To these poetical uses of history we add the long poems of the Wisdom of Solomon 10-19 and of the Wisdom of ben-Sirach, Ecclesiasticus 44-50.

(d) *Festival recitals*

Many of the psalms carry superscriptions and instructions which indicate when and why they were written and how they are to be performed. Scholarship this century has tended to concentrate rather on a classification of their literary types and attempts to identify many of them with cultic occasions. It is suggested that among these psalms which incorporate historical reviews, Psalms 47, 93 and 95-100 may have been used at the New Year festival in Autumn, that Psalm 78 may have been attached to a service for the renewal of the Covenant, and that Psalms 105 and 106 (as also perhaps 107 which clearly reflects God's gracious acts in history though without specific references) may be part of a cultic act in which history was interpreted to the worshippers.

(e) *Allegory*

The allegorizing of history is seen in Ezekiel 16 and 23 and in the Epistle of Barnabas (to a minor extent Paul and the author of Hebrews engage in limited allegorizing). The complete allegorization of sacred history empties the historical of real content and whittles away the essential truth that God works in and through the actual events of history and that the coming of Christ is firmly set in the process of history itself.

(f) *Genealogies*

There were some rabbinic genealogies "which issue in mere speculation and cannot make known God's plan for us" (I Timothy 1: 4, N.E.B.) and are "unprofitable and pointless" (Titus 3: 9, N.E.B.). Christians were warned against these. The plain and factual genealogies of the early chapters of Genesis and of I Chronicles 1-9 are a kind of shorthand of history, and point its lessons insofar as

they refer to persons whose story is told elsewhere in more detail. The Gospel genealogies of Matthew and Luke are much more important as showing the thread that runs through all salvation-history and comes to full fruition in "great David's greater Son."

III. THE LESSONS OF THE HISTORICAL SUMMARIES

The historians of Israel and those who summarized that history in their speeches, prayers, liturgical recitals and the like stressed the great fundamental themes which run like threads through both the Old and New Testaments. As we have seen, they were presenting salvation history rather than secular history and seeing the story of Israel, both Old and New, as manifesting the ways of God with his own people and with all peoples. So the great truths which they discerned are reiterated in the Jewish Scriptures and filled out with the fulness of the revelation in Christ in the Christian Scriptures. These themes may be conveniently summarized thus:

(a) *Election*

That God had chosen his people from the time of Abraham and Jacob/Israel is a constant factor. It is summarized in the words of Deuteronomy 7: 6-8, "The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his own possession, out of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth", and this choice was not grounded in the importance of Israel but in God's love and his keeping of his promises. The people of Israel had little or no difficulty in accepting this truth. What they found more difficult is seen in some, not all, of the summaries and is epitomized in the words which precede the above quotation, "You are a people holy to the LORD your God". It was not easy to grasp what God reminded them: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; *therefore* I will punish you for all your iniquities" (Amos 3: 2)—peculiar privilege involves special responsibility. It was no more easy to accept the truth (which was seen only at a late stage) that the chosen people had a responsibility to other nations.

All this comes to its fulness in the New Testament and is seen there in the historical summaries. Jesus himself presses the point of election ("You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit", John 15: 16). The New Testament goes on to assert continuity with the Old and this is clear in the Pauline description of Christians as those who are "called saints" (Romans 1: 7, etc.) and in Peter's Old Testament description of Christians as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people", with its echo of Hosea 2: 23 in I Peter 2: 9-10.

(b) *Covenant*

It was axiomatic that God had entered into a solemn and unbreakable relationship with his people and this was expressed in

his repeated covenants (with Noah, Abraham, at Sinai and with David). This covenant relationship looms large in almost all the historical summaries; it is recognized as having been initiated by God ("I will be your God and you shall be my people", Jeremiah 7: 23; 31: 33); it is acknowledged that Israel has all too often been unfaithful to the covenant.

Speaking in very dark days in Israel's history Jeremiah foretold a new covenant (Jeremiah 31: 31-34) and this was taken up in the New Testament. Jesus spoke of the new covenant in his blood (1 Corinthians 11: 25, etc.) and Paul declared that the unlifted veil over the old covenant is taken away through Christ (II Corinthians 3: 14-15). The New Covenant brings forgiveness, newness of life and participation in the Kingdom of God.

(c) Exodus and Deliverance

God delivers, God leads, God forbears are truths seen supremely in the great deliverance from bondage in Egypt and from exile in Babylon. The exodus from Egypt, led and guided by God, became the pattern and exemplar of all God's dealings with his people (and of their rebelliousness and unfaithfulness). As such it appears consistently and repetitively in almost all the historical summaries. It then becomes part of the New Testament from the time when, as Luke records, the transfigured Jesus was seen talking with Moses and Elijah about "the exodus which he was about to accomplish" (Luke 9: 31). It is the conviction of the New Testament writers and of those who reviewed the progress of history that just as God in the time of Abraham, of Moses and of the return from Exile in Babylon had led his people out from slavery, now in one who was greater than Abraham the pioneer and Moses the lawgiver, greater than God's servants the prophets because he was God's Son, he was leading his people from bondage and slavery to sin into newness and fullness of life.

(d) God's claim to the loyalty and holiness of his people

It was implicit in Israel's reading of history that God has the right to make demands of his people and that these are moral demands. The holy God demands a holy response. By keeping the covenant Israel would become out of all peoples the special possession of God and his holy nation (Exodus 19: 5-6, N.E.B.). "You shall be holy; for I the LORD your God am holy" (Leviticus 19: 2). Hence the horror of national leaders, prophets, historians, psalmists and the summarizers of history at the nation's all too frequent lapses into rebellious disloyalty and their insistence that election, covenant and the past deliverances effected by God carried with them God's right to make demands. This was an inevitable consequence, as Amos's "therefore" showed (Amos 3: 2).

The emphasis on the rightful demands of God is carried forward by the New Testament. Jesus impressed on his followers that the perfection of God (which issued in his graciousness, generosity and sheer goodness) set the standard of perfection for God's people (Matthew 5: 48). The same point is made in other parts of the New Testament and is summed up notably in I Peter 1: 13-15.

The peak moments of Jewish history taught all these lessons and Christians accepted this interpretation of history and saw its vindication and consummation in the supreme peak of history, the coming of Jesus Christ, his life, death, resurrection and risen power, and finally in the moment beyond time when all things are put in subjection to Christ and to his Father and God is all in all (I Corinthians 15: 20-28).

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