

# Salvation History Summary

The Bible tells the story of God's plan to save human beings from sin and bring them to eternal life. The history of that saving plan as told through the Scriptures is called salvation history. Some people divide the Bible's account of salvation history into eight major periods. Here is a brief description of those periods.

## Primeval History

The Bible begins with figurative (also called symbolic or mythic) accounts about how God created everything that exists. These are sometimes called "primeval" stories, meaning they are stories of things that happened before recorded history. The Creation accounts reveal that God's creation was good, ordered, and harmonious, without sin or human death. The story of Adam and Eve's disobedience teaches us that the sin of our first parents injured their relationship with God and with each other. This Original Sin is passed on to all human beings and makes it difficult for us to choose the good and to choose God. The stories of Cain and Abel, Noah and the Flood, and the Tower of Babel teach us that sin spreads and that without God's help, sin leads to death and destruction. But despite the death and destruction, God has mercy on his creatures and begins a process of intervention to save us.

## Patriarchs (and Matriarchs)

The stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs tell how God begins to form a special relationship with a chosen race of people. Most of humanity does not recognize the one true God. So he makes a special promise, called a Covenant, with a man named Abraham and his wife, Sarah. God promises that their descendants will be numerous and that they will inherit a Promised Land. Abraham and Sarah have several crises in which it appears that God's Covenant will go unfulfilled: famine, war, Sarah's barrenness, even an attempt to sacrifice their own son, Isaac. But each time God steps in to ensure that things turn out okay.

The stories of Abraham and Sarah's children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren repeat a pattern of crisis and God's faithfulness. Their son Isaac has difficulty finding a suitable wife. There is sibling rivalry between Jacob and Esau that nearly leads to violence. Jacob's older sons sell their youngest brother, Joseph, into slavery. But God leads Joseph to become Pharaoh's right-hand man. In an amazing story of reconciliation and forgiveness, Joseph welcomes back his father and brothers, providing them food and a place to live during another famine. Jacob's sons become the patriarchs—the founding fathers—of the Twelve Tribes of Israel.

In the cultural sense, a patriarch is the male leader of a tribal group and is responsible for their survival. The patriarch is a benevolent father figure, exercising unquestioned and absolute decision making in the tribe. The matriarch is his (primary) wife, who leads and has decision-making authority over the women in the tribe. In the religious or ecclesial sense, the patriarchs are the original ancestors of the Jewish faith—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's twelve sons—who were chosen by God to lead his Chosen People.



## Egypt and the Exodus

The third period of salvation history concerns the liberation of Jacob's descendants—now called Israelites—from slavery in Egypt. At the beginning of the Book of Exodus, we discover that the Israelites are in slavery in Egypt. God hears their cries and calls Moses to lead the people out of slavery. But Pharaoh, the Egyptian leader who is also seen by his people as a god, has a hard heart. In a contest of wills between “gods,” Yahweh proves his might over Pharaoh by sending terrible plagues upon the Egyptians. The Israelites' escape from Egypt and journey to the Holy Land is called the Exodus.

On the way to the Promised Land, the Israelites stop at Mount Sinai. There the key event in Jewish salvation history occurs. In a dramatic theophany (appearance of God), God extends the Covenant he made with Abraham to all the Israelites. He gives Moses the Law, summarized in the Ten Commandments, which the people must obey as a sign of their commitment to the Covenant.

During the Exodus the people frequently complain and lose their faith in God. As a consequence they must wander in the desert for forty years, and only their children will be able to enter the Promised Land (with two exceptions, Joshua and Caleb).

## Settling the Promised Land

The fourth period of salvation history concerns the Israelites' conquest of the Promised Land. Moses dies before the Israelites enter the Promised Land. God calls Moses' right-hand man, Joshua (“Jesus” is another form of his name), to lead the people into the land, much of which is inhabited by other people. The Israelites must fight to gain control of the land. When they trust God, they are successful in their battles; when they do not trust God, they fail. Eventually they gain control of the land, and Joshua divides the land between the twelve tribes.

New invaders try to capture the land. At this time the Israelites have no king, because God is their ruler. A pattern develops: (1) the Israelites forget about God and are unfaithful to the Covenant; (2) they suffer at the hands of invaders; (3) they cry out to God for help; (4) God calls special leaders and warriors, called judges, to help deliver justice and defend the land against the invaders; (5) life is good for a while until the Israelites lapse into unfaithfulness and the cycle begins again. Deborah, Gideon, and Samson are some of the more famous judges. Unfortunately, with each cycle the violence gets worse and the judges are less holy. The Book of Judges ends with a horrible rape that leads to a civil war in which the whole tribe of Benjamin is slaughtered except for six hundred men.

## Kingdoms of Judah and Israel

The next period of salvation history is typically referred to as the monarchy. Eventually the Israelites want their own king. God reluctantly answers their plea. He has Samuel—the last of the judges—anooint Saul as the first king of Israel. At the same time, Samuel warns the people of the dangers of kings and empires. Saul has many problems and is eventually killed in battle. David follows Saul as the second king. David is a mighty warrior and unites all the tribes into one kingdom. After David's death, one of his sons, Solomon, builds a temple at Jerusalem, the capital city. Despite their many positive accomplishments, both David and Solomon are guilty of many sins in building their empire, succumbing to the temptations of violence, sex, and power.

After Solomon's death there is disagreement among the tribes, and the kingdom splits in two. Israel is the name of the northern kingdom, and Judah is the name of the southern kingdom. Many of the kings



of Israel and Judah worship foreign gods and allow injustice in the kingdom. So God calls prophets to tell the people to obey their Covenant with God. Prophets like Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah call the people to stop worshipping idols, to practice justice, to worship God with integrity, and to care for people in need. The sayings of the “writing prophets” are collected and become part of the Jewish Scriptures.

Several kings in Judah—particularly Hezekiah and Josiah—attempt religious reform and strive to end the worship of indigenous gods and goddesses, tearing down the high places and sacred groves where they are worshipped. It is likely that a significant portion of the Jewish Scriptures—the books Deuteronomy through Second Kings—are initially collected, written, and edited during their reigns.

## Exile and Return

Despite the prophets’ warnings, the people of Israel and Judah continue to turn away from God’s Covenant with them. So God lets their kingdoms be conquered and their rulers overthrown. The Assyrians conquer Israel in 721 BC. The Babylonians conquer Judah in 587 BC. Many of the people are taken into captivity, so this period of salvation history is called the Exile. Prophets like Ezekiel and Second Isaiah comfort the Israelites with the promise that God is still with them. These great prophets also hint at the future coming of a just, gentle, and suffering servant-king who will lead the people back to God.

The Exile is a key event in Jewish salvation history. During and after the Exile, the Israelites rewrite much of their sacred Scriptures. They now believe that their special relationship with God is not centered on being a nation with a king. Their identity is primarily a religious identity centered on following the Mosaic Law, with an emphasis in the offering of ritual sacrifice at the Temple.

Fifty years pass in exile. Then a new Persian king allows the people—now called Judeans, or Jews—to return to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple. The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell how the people saw God’s hand at work during the struggles and successes they experienced in this process.

When Alexander the Great comes along, the Greeks come to rule over Israel. One of the Greek governors tries to establish Greek culture and religion in Israel and put statues of Greek gods in the Temple. In response around 150 BC a Jewish family, the Hasmoneans (also called the Maccabees), lead a successful revolt against the Greeks to restore Jewish independence. During this troubled time, the common people hope for a messiah, or savior, to make them great again. New Jewish groups—the Essenes, the Pharisees, the Sadducees—arise during this time. Each group emphasizes a different approach to faithfully living the Jewish faith.

## Life of Jesus Christ

God never abandons his Chosen People, even though so often they do not keep their part of the Covenant. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John tell of how, when the time is right, God sends his only Son, Jesus Christ, into the world. This is the ultimate event in salvation history. Jesus Christ, the Word Made Flesh, the Second Person of the Trinity, is the complete and final revelation of God’s saving plan.

When Jesus is born, the Romans rule Israel. Some of the Jews are hoping for a mighty warrior and king like David, who will drive the Romans out. Instead, Jesus shows a different way. He preaches love, justice, and forgiveness. He heals and works miracles as signs of God’s power.

Jesus’ followers, called disciples, come to see that he is the Messiah, the Savior. Simon Peter is designated by Jesus to become the leader of twelve of Jesus’ closest male disciples, who become known as the Twelve Apostles. Mary Magdalene seems to be a leader among a group of women disciples who



follow Jesus and support his ministry. Jesus shows his disciples that salvation comes through faith and a change of heart, not through violence and political power.

When Jesus is killed by the Romans—at the urging of the Jewish leaders—his followers think all is lost. Instead after three days God raises Jesus from the dead! Christ's Resurrection affirms that Jesus is the Son of God, affirms that everything he taught is true, and affirms that through Christ sin and death are conquered forever. All the baptized who put their faith in Jesus Christ will share in his Resurrection. God's original plan for creation is now brought full circle as we anticipate the fullness of the Kingdom of God in which perfect goodness, harmony, love, and joy will be present for all eternity.

## Early Christian Church

The final period of salvation history concerns the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the growth of the Church after Jesus' Ascension. After his Resurrection, Jesus instructs his closest followers, the Apostles, to go and spread the Good News of salvation to all people. After Jesus ascends to Heaven, Peter and the other Apostles receive the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit gives them the courage to tell others about Jesus Christ. They start by first preaching to other Jews. Sometimes the Apostles are persecuted by Jewish leaders who see them as blasphemers to the true Jewish faith.

Paul—one of those persecutors—has a vision of Jesus and becomes a follower of the Way (a name for early Christianity). God reveals to Paul that Christ came for all people. Paul begins preaching to non-Jews, who are called Gentiles. Wherever he and his missionary partners travel, they start new Christian communities. Many other believers, both women and men, are part of this missionary work—people like Barnabas, Timothy, Phoebe, Junia, Priscilla, and Aquila. These early missionaries write many letters of instruction, correction, and encouragement to Christian communities and Christian leaders. Soon Christianity spreads throughout the whole Roman Empire, even to Rome itself.

## Some Important People in Salvation History

### Primeval History

- Adam and Eve
- Cain and Abel
- Noah

### Patriarchs

- Abraham and Sarah
- Isaac and Rebekah
- Jacob, Leah, and Rachel
- Joseph and his brothers
- Egypt and the Exodus
- Moses
- Pharaoh
- Miriam and Aaron



## Settling the Promised Land

- Joshua
- Deborah
- Gideon
- Samson
- Ruth

## Kingdoms of Judah and Israel

- Samuel
- King Saul
- King David
- King Solomon
- King Hezekiah
- King Josiah
- Elijah and Elisha
- Amos
- Hosea
- Isaiah
- Jeremiah

## Exile and Return

- Ezekiel
- Ezra and Nehemiah
- Esther
- The Maccabees

## Life of Jesus Christ

- Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ
- Mary of Nazareth
- John the Baptist
- Peter
- Mary Magdalene

## Early Christian Church

- Peter
- Paul
- Barnabas
- Timothy
- Priscilla and Aquila

