

The Cycle of Redemption

The cycle of redemption, also called the Deuteronomic cycle, is a pattern of covenant, sin, and deliverance that occurs again and again in salvation history. The pattern can be summarized like this:

1. The pattern begins with a time of faithfulness to the Covenant that results in peace among the people.
2. Over time the people forget or ignore the Covenant; they fall into idolatry, injustice, and false worship. As a result, the people experience negative consequences such as disease, war, and other problems.
3. The people cry out to God for deliverance.
4. God delivers the people from their problems, usually through a judge, king, or prophet.
5. The people return to following the Covenant, and peace and God's healing return to the people.

The final authors of the Old Testament historical books, writing in the sixth century BC and later, recognized this theological pattern in their history. They brought this pattern out in their writing and editing. The books that most clearly show this are the books that we call the Deuteronomic history, which are the Books of Deuteronomy through Second Kings. This is why this cycle is also called the Deuteronomic cycle. A textbook example of this is the short account of the first judge, Othniel, which you can find in Judges 3:7–11. The following outline parallels his story to the cycle of redemption.

Account of Othniel	Cycle of Redemption Pattern
[The cycle begins at the end of the Book of Joshua when the people have committed to the Covenant and are at peace.]	1. The pattern begins with a time of faithfulness to the Covenant that results in peace among the people.
⁷ Because the Israelites had offended the LORD by forgetting the LORD, their God, and serving the Baals and the Asherahs, ⁸ the anger of the LORD flared up against them, and he allowed them to fall into the power of Cushan-rishathaim, king of Aram Naharaim, whom they served for eight years.	2. Over time the people forget or ignore the Covenant; they fall into idolatry, injustice, and false worship. As a result, the people experience negative consequences such as disease, war, and other problems.
But when the Israelites cried out to the LORD,	3. The people cry out to God for deliverance.
he raised up for them a savior, Othniel, son of Caleb's younger brother Kenaz, who rescued them. ¹⁰ The spirit of the LORD came upon him, and he judged Israel. When he went out to war, the LORD delivered Cushan-risha-thaim, king of Aram, into his power, so that he made him subject.	4. God delivers the people from their problems, usually through a judge, king, or prophet.
¹¹ The land then was at rest for forty years, until Othniel, son of Kenaz, died.	5. The people return to following the Covenant, and peace and God's healing return to the people.



Further Examples

The Bronze Serpent

Numbers 21:4–9

Even before the Deuteronomic history, hints of the cycle of redemption are found in the account of the Exodus. For example, the people grumble about the lack of food and water (step 3), and God responds by sending gifts of manna, quail, and water (step 4). Similarly, the story of the golden calf (see Exodus, chapter 32) echoes this cycle, although in this case it is God who punishes the people, and Moses, not the people, begs for mercy on their behalf.

The story of the bronze serpent is close to a classic example of the redemption cycle (see Numbers 21:4–9). In this story God has given the Israelites several victories over their enemies (step 1). But rather than show their lack of faith and gratitude by crying out against Moses (step 2), God punishes their lack of faith with poisonous serpents. The people repent of their sin and Moses prays to God for them (step 3). God directs Moses to create a bronze serpent that heals whomever looks upon it (step 4). We see the cycle in the people's lack of faith, punishing consequences, a cry for deliverance, and God's saving response.

The Judges

Judges, Chapters 3–16

We have already looked at the account of the first judge, Othniel. But the accounts of the remaining eleven judges in the Book of Judges generally follow the same cycle of redemption. Pick any of their stories and you should be able to identify it.

Another pattern in Judges is the beginning of a larger cycle of redemption that continues into the time of the monarchy. We will see that the later judges—Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson, in particular—were themselves less than exemplary in their faithfulness to the Covenant (step 2). Gideon made a golden idol, Jephthah made an unnecessary and disastrous oath, and Samson was anything but a model of covenant living. This lack of covenant-faithful leadership precedes the horrible crime against the Levite's concubine and the resulting civil war that ends the Book of Judges (see chapters 17–21).

The Kings

Although it is less obvious than in the accounts of the judges, the overall story of the kings of Israel follow this same redemptive cycle on a larger scale. We've already seen how the later judges begin to show signs of step 2 of the cycle. After a stinging defeat and the loss of the Ark of the Covenant to the Philistines, we see step 3 of the cycle as the Israelites cry out to the priest-prophet Samuel for God's deliverance by asking that Samuel appoint a king over them (see 1 Samuel, chapter 8). At God's direction, Samuel grants their request, with grave misgivings.

Then begins what could be seen as repeated attempts at step 4 of the cycle as God calls forth a succession of kings to lead the people. And by and large, the kings are a disappointment, at least to the authors of the Books of Samuel and Kings. The first king, Saul, lacks faith in God and is replaced by David. David is a king after God's heart, but he breaks Covenant Law in his adulterous affair with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband. Solomon is wise, but his many political marriages to foreign wives lead him to allow the worship of foreign gods and goddesses. After Solomon's death the kingdom is



split into two smaller kingdoms, Israel and Judah. The kings of Israel and Judah are by and large unfaithful to the Covenant, although there are a few shining exceptions (Hezekiah and Josiah, for example). The end result is a return to step 2 of the cycle of redemption as both kingdoms fall to foreign invaders, and large segments of the population are killed or taken into captivity. While in captivity in Babylon, the Israelites again cry out to God (step 3). This time step 4 of the cycle comes about through a foreign king, Cyrus of Persia, who conquers Babylon and lets the Israelites return to Jerusalem to rebuild. This leads to step 5, a time of peace and healing for the Israelites, now called the Jews.

This is a much abbreviated history of the monarchy that doesn't do justice to the diverse and nuanced accounts of faithfulness during this time, especially on the part of the prophets. The point is that the same cycle of redemption that we saw in a more concise form in the story of Othniel is also present in the overall story of Israel's monarchy when we look at the big picture presented in the Deuteronomic history of the kings.

Even after this the cycle of redemption in Israelite history continues (see the Books of the Maccabees) until God sends his own Son, Jesus Christ, as the final and ultimate redeemer. Individual and communal cycles of redemption are still present in our lives, but now there is only one Redeemer who brings his peace and healing to us all.

