



# THE SALVATION OF BELIEVING ISRAELITES PRIOR TO THE INCARNATION OF CHRIST

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*Editor's note: The views of the author are not in all cases those of JOTGES. However there is much excellent and original material in this article. Dr. Dyer gives us much to think about.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The title of Walter Kaiser's book *Toward Rediscovering the Old Testament* shows that there is a tendency to neglect the first three fourths of the Bible.<sup>1</sup> Kaiser's book appeared back in 1987. The propensity to give greater attention to the last fourth of the Bible is still with us today. A contributing factor is undoubtedly a misunderstanding concerning the salvation of believing Israelites prior to Christ coming in the flesh. Demonstrating the unity of salvation before and after the incarnation facilitates a better appreciation for and usefulness of the Old Testament.

There has always been only one way of salvation. Both covenant theologians and dispensationalists agree on this point. Both explain that throughout the history of mankind salvation has been by grace through faith. There is, of course, disagreement on specific points.<sup>2</sup> In this article I will argue that believers before the incarnation of Christ heard the same gospel, looked to the same Savior, were members of the same Church, and enjoyed the same blessings of salvation that believers do today.

<sup>1</sup>Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987.

<sup>2</sup>See for example, Fred H. Klooster, "The Biblical Method of Salvation: A Case for Continuity" and Allen P. Ross, "The Biblical Method of Salvation:

## II. THEY HEARD THE SAME GOSPEL

The gospel existed before Jesus' birth. Revelation 14:6 contains the expression "the everlasting gospel." Some argue that the absence of the article in the Greek means that John is not referring to *the* gospel, but to *a* gospel. Paul, however, refers to the gospel without the article in Romans 1:1. Some have also argued that the content of the everlasting gospel is given in 14:7 where men are commanded to fear, give glory to, and worship God because the hour of His judgment has come. It would seem better, however, as Ladd does, to understand that the angel

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had the everlasting gospel of which the content of v 7 is a part.<sup>3</sup> Two other texts support the idea that the gospel in Rev 14:6 is eternal in the fullest sense of the term. Revelation 13:8 presents Christ as the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world. Revelation 17:8 speaks of those whose names are not written in the Book of Life from the foundation of the world. This text, of course, implies that names were recorded in the Book of Life prior to creation. If the eternal gospel of Rev 14:6 is understood in its fullest

sense, then the Book of Revelation teaches that the gospel, the death of Christ, and the people of God are eternal concepts. Thus, the Provider, the people, and the proclamation of salvation existed in the mind of God before the foundation of the world.

After Adam and Eve fell, God placed them under a curse that left them and their descendants in a state of sin and misery. He also proclaimed the eternal gospel to them. In Gen 3:15 God says to the

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A Case for Discontinuity" in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*, ed. John S. Fienberg (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1988), 131-78.

<sup>3</sup>George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972), 193.



serpent, “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.” This verse presents the essence of the gospel. It is a gospel proclamation of the coming Provider of salvation. The gospel was expanded further in the Abrahamic Covenant where the people of God’s redemptive plan are restricted to the posterity of one man (Gen 17:1-8). In this covenant God makes several promises to Abraham. He promises Abraham a seed in Gen 22:18, “In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.” Paul in Gal 3:16 explains that the seed in Gen 22:18 ultimately points to Christ, “Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, ‘And to seeds,’ as of many, but as of one, ‘And to your Seed,’ who is Christ.” In Gen 17:8, God promises Abraham a land, which ultimately points to the new earth. For example, Rom 4:13 reads, “For the promise that he would be the heir of the world was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith.” In Gen 17:7, God also promises Abraham a special relationship between Himself and Abraham’s seed. This ultimately points to the inclusion of the Gentiles who are the spiritual seed of Abraham. In Gal 3:29, Paul explains to Gentile believers that “if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.” Finally, God promises Abraham that his seed would exercise dominion over their enemies in Gen 22:17 where the LORD said to Abraham, “and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies.” This promise ultimately points to the triumph of Christ’s kingdom, “for He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet” (1 Cor 15:25). The rest of Scripture is an unfolding of the Abrahamic Covenant, which is an unfolding of the gospel.

The gospel demonstrates an organic development in the Bible. Geerhardus Vos correctly describes the organic development of revelation in his *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments*.<sup>4</sup> When an acorn is planted in the soil, it contains an oak tree. The acorn sprouts, pushes through the soil, sends out branches and leaves, and continues to grow into a mighty tree. Throughout the growth process the oak is the same oak. In the same way, the gospel as it unfolds in the Scripture remains the same gospel. The author of the book of Hebrews explains in 4:2 that “the gospel was preached to us as well as to them.” The

<sup>4</sup>Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1948, 7-8.



“them” in this verse refers to the generation of Israelites who departed from Egypt with Moses. They heard the gospel. Believers today, of course, enjoy that same gospel with greater clarity, fullness, and glory (2 Cor 3:10-11).

It must be remembered, however, that the organic development of revelation refers to inscripturated revelation. Believers who lived before the incarnation undoubtedly possessed revelation that was transmitted orally. There is evidence in the New Testament that believers before the incarnation had a more comprehensive knowledge of the gospel than is indicated in the Old Testament. Take for example Jude’s statement about Enoch in vv 14 and 15 of his epistle. Here Jude quotes Enoch saying, “Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of His saints, to execute judgment on all, to convict all who are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have committed in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him.” Since Enoch knew about the second coming of Christ and prophesied concerning it, is it not logical to conclude that Enoch also knew about His first coming? Even though believers were not called Christians until they were given that name in Antioch, is it really an anachronism to say that the name appropriately belongs to Enoch? Consider also the statement made by the author of Hebrews in 11:26 where he states that Moses esteemed “the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt.” This statement shows that Moses possessed a fuller knowledge of the gospel than is indicated in the Pentateuch. Even though we do not know the exact content of the oral Bible used by the Israelites, we know that it was more comprehensive than is indicated in the Old Testament Scriptures.

### III. THEY LOOKED TO THE SAME SAVIOR

In John 8:56, Jesus says to the Pharisees, “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it, and was glad.” Jesus was telling them that He was a contemporary of Abraham. They understood that this was what He was saying, so they ask Him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and You have seen Abraham?”



His answer informs them that not only did He see Abraham, He existed before the patriarch. He says in v 55, “Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.” But when did Abraham see Christ? Consider first, that in John 1:18 the apostle explains that “No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.” The One called God in this verse is God the Father. The First Person of the Trinity has remained unseen by men throughout history. Only the Second Person has been visible to men. Thus, the verses in Genesis that tell of the LORD’s appearing to Abraham refer to the appearance of the Son of God (15:1; 17:1; 18:1). For example, in Gen 18:1, Moses specifically says that “the LORD appeared to him.” Also, in Gen 15:1, Moses tells us that the LORD appeared to the patriarch in a vision. Thus, when Gen 15:6 declares that Abraham believed God and He counted it to him for righteousness, the object of Abraham’s faith was undoubtedly the Son of God, the preincarnate Christ. Is it not appropriate therefore to say that Abraham was a Christian?

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The prophet Isaiah is another example of one who had faith in Christ before the incarnation. In Isa 6:1-8, the prophet saw a glorious vision of Jehovah and received his commission. According to the Apostle John, Isaiah actually saw the glory of Christ (John 12:37-41).

Charles Hodge, in his *Systematic Theology*, describes the Son of God as the “manifested Jehovah, who led his people under the Old Testament economy.”<sup>5</sup> This is a significant description of the Christ before His incarnation. If Christ truly is the manifested Jehovah of the Old Testament, it means that Christ is not merely seen in the Old Testament types, shadows, and prophecies, but also in the awesome

<sup>5</sup>Reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977, I, 485.

acts of Jehovah. There are occurrences of the name Jehovah that must refer to God the Father. In Ps 110:1, for example, Jehovah speaks to the Messiah. Thus, Jehovah in this verse must refer to God the Father. Also, in Isa 61:1, it is said that Jehovah will anoint the Messiah. In Zech 2:10-11, one Jehovah is presented as sending another Jehovah. See also Ps 16:5-10 and Isa 48:13-16. These exceptions show that the name Jehovah does not exclusively refer to God the Son. But the Bible does demonstrate that the name Jehovah primarily refers to the Second Person of the Trinity and that it always refers to the Second Person when He is manifested to His people.

Peter declares in Acts 2:16-21 and 33 that Jesus, in fulfillment of Joel 2:27-28, poured out the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, and Joel 2:27 declares that Jehovah said He would pour out His Spirit. John (John 1:3) and Paul (Col 1:16), declare Christ to be the Creator, and Moses (Exod 31:17), Isaiah (Isa 40:28), and Jonah (Jonah 1:9), declare Jehovah to be the Creator. John (John 12:39-40) declares that Isaiah saw Christ's glory and Isaiah (Isa 6:1-5) says that he saw Jehovah. John's statement that no one has seen God the Father (1:18, cf. 6:46) shows that the One who appeared as Jehovah to men in the Old Testament must have been the Second Person of the Trinity. Jehovah appeared to Abraham (Gen 18:1-2, 10, 13), Isaac (Gen 26:1-5), Jacob (Gen 28:10-15), Moses (Exod 3:2, 4, 16, 18-23), and other Old Testament saints. This Jehovah was Christ.

These examples are sufficient to show that believers before the birth of Christ were saved by believing in Him. It is commonly said that Old Testament saints were saved by looking forward to the cross and we today are saved by looking back to the cross. This is in part true. The emphasis in Scripture, however, is not that salvation is by faith in what would or did happen, but by faith in Christ. The saints who lived before Christ's incarnation are appropriately called Christians because they were saved by faith in Him, who was the manifested Jehovah of the Old Testament.



#### IV. THEY ARE MEMBERS OF THE SAME CHURCH

In Heb 3:1-3 the author teaches that Christ built the house of which Moses was a part:

Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, Christ Jesus, who was faithful to Him who appointed Him, as Moses also was faithful in all His house. For this One has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses, inasmuch as He who built the house has more honor than the house.

The word “house” in the Old Testament means “family” and the building of a house refers to the founding of the family as is seen in Ruth 4:11. Thus, it was Christ, not Moses, who established the people of God under the Old Covenant. In v 6 the author says that we belong to the same house if we remain firm in our faith.

Paul describes the people of God as an olive tree in Rom 11:16-24. The unbelieving Jews are represented as domestic branches of the tree that were broken off because of unbelief. Gentile believers are represented as wild olive branches that have been grafted into the olive tree. Christ has only one olive tree, only one Church.

In Eph 2:12, Paul describes Gentile believers before their conversion as “aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.” In v 13 he declares that they have now been brought near. In v 14 he refers to the middle wall around the temple and says that Christ has broken it down. Paul is using figurative language to teach the union of Gentile and Jewish believers. But notice that the middle wall was not broken down to let the Jews out, but to let the believing Gentiles in. The Apostle’s point is that Gentile believers have been joined to Israel and her covenants. This shows once again that Christ has only one people, one believing remnant of Israel, one Church.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Editor’s Note: While most *JOTGES* readers will not agree with this point, all would admit that there are common elements between Christians and believing Jews and Gentiles who died before the birth of the Church. All are



Paul refers to the Church as the Israel of God in Gal 6:16. Some argue that he only refers to Jewish believers within the Church. Paul, however, writes in Gal 3:28 that in Christ “There is neither Jew nor Greek.” Therefore, it is inconceivable that Paul would have made a distinction between Jewish and Gentile believers at the end of a book in which he had stressed the unity of believers in Christ.

#### V. THEY ENJOYED THE SAME BLESSINGS OF SALVATION

There are those who minimize and outrightly deny the regeneration of Old Testament saints. For example, Lewis Sperry Chafer, former president of Dallas Theological Seminary, wrote:

With respect to regeneration, the Old Testament saints were evidently renewed; but as there is no definite doctrinal teaching relative to the extent and character of that renewal, no positive declaration can be made...If the first law of interpretation is to be observed—that which restricts every doctrinal truth to the exact body of Scripture which pertains to it—it cannot be determined that this spiritual renewal known to the Old Testament, whatever its character may have been, resulted in the impartation of the divine nature, in an actual sonship, a joint heirship with Christ, or a placing in the household and family of God.<sup>7</sup>

In this statement Chafer stops just short of actually denying that Old Testament saints were regenerated. Richard C. Trench was one who did deny the regeneration of Old Testament saints. According to him

Christian new birth was not till after Christ’s birth, as men were not new-born, till Christ was born (John 1:12). As their regeneration did not go before, but only followed his generation;

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part of God’s coming kingdom. All believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. The points the author is making in this article are not undercut by seeing a distinction between Israel and the Church.

<sup>7</sup>*Systematic Theology* (Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), VI, 73.



so the word could not be used in this its highest, most mysterious sense, till that great mystery of the birth of the Son of God into our world had actually found place.<sup>8</sup>

An appropriate place to affirm that the Old Testament saints were indeed regenerated is in John 3 where Jesus speaks to Nicodemus about the need for being born again. When Nicodemus expresses ignorance concerning this doctrine, Jesus responds in v 10 by saying, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?” Our Lord’s rebuke shows that Nicodemus should have known what He meant by being born again. The implication is that the Old Testament Scriptures are sufficient for understanding this doctrine. Regeneration is the infusion of spiritual life by the Holy Spirit. The Old Testament does not mention regeneration explicitly, but it does refer to the reviving work of God within the believer. The initial reviving experienced by the Old Testament believers is regeneration. A significant text in the Pentateuch is Deut 30:6. In this text, Moses declares that the LORD would circumcise the heart of His people in order that they might love Him. Thus the text presents the need for the LORD’s inward act of cleansing a man’s heart in order for him to love God. There are numerous prayers in the Psalms for revival (Ps 85:6; 119:25, 37, 40, 88, 107, 149, 154, 156, 159). The necessary implication is that revival in the soul of a believer assumes that an initial revival must have taken place. Another expression in the Old Testament used for regeneration is the law of God in or on the heart. In Jer 31:33, the LORD promised that He would put His laws in the minds of His people and write it on their hearts. In Isa 51:7, the LORD describes the faithful in Isaiah’s day as those “in whose heart is My law.”

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<sup>8</sup>*Synonyms of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1880), 60.



The Old Testament does not explicitly teach that believers before Christ were regenerated. Their regeneration, however, is a necessary inference. It is an inference Nicodemus should have made, and Jesus rebuked him for not making it.

The Scriptures clearly teach that the Old Testament saints were justified. Paul argues in the book of Romans that men are justified by faith rather than works and he uses two examples from the Old Testament to prove his point: Abraham and David. In Rom 4:3, Paul quotes Gen 15:6 where it states that Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness. Then in v 6 he quotes David from Ps 32:1-2 where he “describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works.” Revelation 13:8 refers to Christ as the Lamb that was slain from the foundation of the world. The death of Christ has always been the basis for the forgiveness of sins, fellowship with God, and the hope of heaven. Thus believing Israelites who lived prior to the incarnation enjoyed justification by faith even as believers do today.

It should be pointed out that the animal sacrifices offered under the Mosaic Covenant did not serve as a temporary basis for justification as some teach. O. Palmer Robertson, in his excellent book *The Christ of the Covenants*, states that “the constant renewal of sacrifices for sins under the old covenant gave clear indication of the fact that sin actually was not removed, but only was passed over.”<sup>9</sup> This statement contradicts Ps 103:12, which reads, “As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.” The animal sacrifices were not like credit cards that were used to make temporary payment for sin until the actual payment was made. Abraham was justified without a sacrifice 430 years before the sacrificial system was instituted under Moses (Gen 15:6; Gal 3:17). When the author of Hebrews writes that “it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins,” (10:4) he is referring to the forensic taking away of sins. He is not teaching that the animal sacrifices accomplished nothing. Otherwise he would be contradicting those statements in Leviticus, such as 4:20, which show that through the sacrifices atonement was made and forgiveness was granted. The animal sacrifices actually represent the same type of forgiveness expressed in 1 John

<sup>9</sup>Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980, 283.

1:9. This verse teaches that the condition for forgiveness is confession of sins. Leviticus 5:5 and 16:21 connect the confession of sin with the animal sacrifices.

The Bible teaches two types of forgiveness. One may be called judicial and the other paternal. Consider the table of comparison below. Judicial forgiveness expresses the relationship of the believer to God as Judge. Paternal forgiveness demonstrates the relationship of the believer to God as Father. Romans 3:24 and 1 John 1:7-9 show that both types are based on the sacrifice of Christ. The judicial type of forgiveness is not repeated, but the paternal is.

**A COMPARISON OF THE TWO TYPES OF FORGIVENESS**

Judicial Forgiveness	Paternal Forgiveness
Given by God as our Judge (Heb 12:23)	Given by God as our Father (Luke 11:2, 4)
Based on the sacrifice of Jesus (Rom 3:24)	Based on the sacrifice of Jesus (1 John 1:7-9)
Not repeated (Ps 103:12)	Repeated (1John 1:9-10)
Appropriated by faith (Gen 15:6; Rom 5:1)	Appropriated by confession (1 John 1:9)
Not achieved by animal sacrifices (Heb 10:4)	Achieved by animal sacrifices (Lev 5:5, 10; 16:21)
Brings us into fellowship with God (Rom 5:1-2)	Restores us to fellowship with God (1 John 1:3-9)
Keeps us from being separated from God in hell (Rev 20:11-15)	Keeps us from being separated from God on earth (Ps 66:18)
Related to justification (being declared righteous)	Related to sanctification (being made righteous)



Failure to recognize the existence of judicial and paternal forgiveness can result in serious error. If a person recognizes paternal forgiveness but fails to recognize judicial forgiveness, he may believe that if he dies with unconfessed sin he will go to hell. If a person recognizes judicial forgiveness but fails to recognize paternal forgiveness, he may believe that it does not matter how he lives because his sins have been judicially forgiven.

It is essential for believers to recognize both types of forgiveness to fully experience the benefits of the Christian life. A believer is not repeatedly granted forensic forgiveness, but he is repeatedly granted paternal forgiveness. Old Testament believers enjoyed both types of forgiveness, even as New Testament believers do.

Old Testament believers also enjoyed the blessing of sanctification. In the New Testament God the Father, Christ, and the Holy Spirit are presented as the sanctifiers of believers (John 17:17; Rom 15:16; Eph 5:26). There are several references in the Old Testament which speak of God as the sanctifier of His people. For example, in Lev 20:8 we read, "I am the LORD who sanctifies you." See also Exod 31:13, Lev 21:8, and Ezek 20:12. Thus sanctification is still another example of believers before and after the incarnation enjoying one of the same benefits of salvation.

The ultimate and final aspect of sanctification is glorification. When a believer dies his soul is transformed so that he is perfect in holiness. His body remains in the grave until Christ's return when it will be transformed into perfected humanity. Believers before the birth of Christ anticipated the glorification of both soul and body. In Ps 73:24 David addresses the LORD saying, "You will guide me with Your counsel, and afterward receive me to glory." Daniel described the glory of the resurrection in his book. He wrote:

And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake,  
some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt.  
Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament,  
and those who turn many to righteousness like the stars forever  
and ever (Dan 12:2-3).



Thus believers living before the incarnation enjoyed regeneration, justification (which is judicial forgiveness), paternal forgiveness, and sanctification, and they anticipated glorification even as those living after the incarnation did and do.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The Bible teaches only one way of salvation. It is by the grace of God through faith in Christ. Believers before the birth of Christ heard the same gospel, looked to the same Savior, were members of the same Church, and enjoyed the same blessings of salvation as we who believe today. The more we recognize the unity of the salvation of Old Testament saints with our own, the more we will recognize the unity of the Scriptures and the usefulness of the Old Testament. Martin Luther said long ago, “It is the intention of all the apostles and evangelists in the New Testament to direct and drive us to the Old Testament, which they call the Holy Scriptures proper.”<sup>10</sup> Even though we acknowledge this, may we not treat the Bible as though it is a book in which three fourths of it is merely the introduction.

<sup>10</sup>*Sermons of Martin Luther*, ed. John N. Lenker (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), I, 31.

