

3 Christ and the Bible

The story is told of the time Calvin Coolidge, 30th President of the United States, returned from church. His wife greeted him with the question, 'What did the reverend preach about today?'

'Sin,' was the reply.

'Well, what did he say about sin?' returned his wife.

'He was against it.'

We can at least give the man credit for discerning the main theme, even if he was a little short on the details!

How good are you at following a trail? Peoples who live far from civilisation are often highly skilled at noticing tiny signs (broken twigs, footprints, disturbed undergrowth) and constructing the path which has been taken. This is a similar process to discerning a theme.

In the last chapter we talked about clearly interpreted verses or passages which lead us to trace a Bible theme. In this chapter we see a theme which is presented ready made and for which we are given just a few passages. It is up to us to learn from the nature of these clues and to fill in other evidence for the theme.

Christ throughout the Old Testament

After his resurrection Jesus found on the road to Emmaus some of his disciples who were deeply depressed and seemed to have quite lost the plot (Luke 24:13-27). He chides them with being 'slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken' (v. 25). His summary of 'the prophets' is that the Christ had 'to suffer these things and then enter his glory' (v. 26). Then, beginning with 'Moses and all the Prophets' he explained to them what was said about him 'in all the Scriptures'.

How I would have loved to have been at that Bible study! Christ obviously saw himself as a dominant theme of the Old Testament. In particular he refers to his suffering, his death and his subsequent glorification.

When Christ later appears to all the disciples in the upper room he conducts a similar survey of the Old Testament. Luke 24:44-7 shows him speaking of 'everything . . . written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.' He refers here to the three main divisions of the Hebrew Bible, the Law, the Prophets and the Writings (of which the book of Psalms is the largest part).

Jesus chided the Jews for studying the scriptures in the hope that in them they had eternal life, and missing the fact that 'These are the Scriptures that testify about me' (John 5:39). For Christ, to believe in the Old Testament scriptures was to believe in him: 'If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me' (John 5:46).

Others in the New Testament proclaimed the same truth. Philip's excited news to

Nathanael was, ‘We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote’ (John 1:45). Paul ‘tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and the Prophets’ (Acts 28:23).

There is no doubt that the Old Testament deals with many other matters apart from that of Christ. Nevertheless, it appears that this one theme goes through the whole just like the writing on a stick of seaside rock. (For American readers, British seaside rock is a long, thin cylinder of hard candy, with the name of the town in a different colour of candy running through the stick from one end to the other.)

Tantalisingly, though in the New Testament we are pointed to some verses and passages which are on this theme, we are left to fill in others ourselves. There must be many other such passages if the whole Old Testament does indeed point to Christ.

Now this is something which vitally affects us. Some Christians have reservations about the Old Testament. Perhaps some do not read it. However, the Old Testament is the only Bible which Christ and the early disciples had. Perhaps our problem has been that we have not been able to interpret it aright. If we have come into a relationship with God our Father through what his Son Jesus Christ has done for us, and if the Old Testament tells about the one to whom we owe supreme love and gratitude, then we ought to be digging these things out and relishing them. In the words of E. E. Hewitt,

*More about Jesus in his Word,
Holding communion with my Lord,
Hearing his voice in every line,
Making each faithful saying mine.*

John Bunyan in *The Holy War* gives his own quaint representation of this. He depicts the town of Mansoul welcoming Emmanuel, son of King Shaddai, into the town. Emmanuel entertains the inhabitants ‘with some curious riddles of secrets’.

Emmanuel also expounded unto them some of those riddles himself; but, oh, how they were lightened; they could not have thought that such rarities could have been couched in so few and such ordinary words. I told you before whom these riddles did concern; and as they were opened the people did evidently see it was so. Yea, they did gather that the things themselves were a kind of portraiture, and that of Emmanuel himself: for when they read in the scheme where the riddles were writ, and looked in the face of the Prince, things looked so like the one to the other, that Mansoul could not forbear but say—This is the Lamb, this is the Sacrifice, this is the Rock, this is the Red Cow, this is the Door, and this is the Way; with a great many other things more.

We may be assured that the theme of Christ appears throughout the Old Testament. It would be good to know which verses and passages in the Old Testament form part of this theme. This also we can learn from seeing how Christ and the writers of the New Testament refer to some passages, and then using their methods and viewpoint

when examining other passages. We also need to discern what it is that is said about Christ in the Old Testament and how these matters are picked up in the New.

Who is this man?

From New Testament passages quoting the Old Testament we learn more about the nature of Christ. He is not simply a mere man.

Peter quotes Moses saying that, ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me’ (Acts 3:22, quoting Deuteronomy 18:15), and applies this to Jesus. Someone like Moses would certainly be an important personage, but more is to come.

Jesus accepted as his designation ‘the Christ’ (Matthew 16:16-17). ‘Christ’ in Greek, or ‘Messiah’ in Hebrew, means ‘anointed one’. In the Old Testament those who were anointed with oil for service were prophets (e.g. 1 Kings 19:16), priests (e.g. 1 Chronicles 29:22) and kings (e.g. 1 Kings 1:34). The title of ‘Christ’ implied the one anointed by God and sent by God to deliver Israel.

The Christ is not only descended from David, but David himself addresses the Christ as ‘Lord’ (Matthew 22:43-4, quoting Psalm 110:1). Jesus declares himself as greater than Jonah (Matthew 12:41) and even greater than Solomon (Matthew 12:42). Moses may have been a servant in God’s house, but Christ is Son over God’s house (Hebrews 3:5-6).

A Jehovah’s Witness friend of mine declared, ‘There is no evidence in the Bible that Jesus is God.’ Is there not? Even if you deny the clear statement in John 1:1 that ‘the Word was God’, there are plenty of other indications. The writer to the Hebrews declares that Psalm 45:6 (‘Your throne, O God, will last for ever’) is written about the Son, Jesus the Christ, who is addressed as none other than God. Thomas hailed him as ‘My Lord and my God!’ (John 20:28). Paul, describing how Christ humbled himself to take human form, describes him as ‘Being in the form of God’ (Eph. 2:5-6). Col. 1:15-17 says, ‘He is the image of the invisible God’. Col. 2:9 tells us, ‘In Christ all the fulness of the Deity lives in bodily form’.

Titus 2:13 speaks of ‘The glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ’. Is this about the appearing of both God and Jesus? Nowhere else does the NT speak of the Second Coming being the appearing of God the Father. Moreover, the Greek construction for ‘the God and Saviour’ matches ‘the God and Father’ (e.g. in 1 Pet. 1:3), which is obviously not speaking of two different persons. In similar vein, 2 Pet. 1:1 speaks of ‘The righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ’.

When John tried to worship angels, he was told, ‘Do not do it . . . Worship God!’ (Rev. 19:10; 22:9). The disciples, we are told, “Worshipped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God’ ” (Matt. 14:32), without any rebuke from Christ. Every creature sings, ‘To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power for ever and ever!’ (Rev. 5:13), showing that the same worship due to God is due to the Lamb also.

One could go on producing much more evidence, but space here forbids it. When we examine the context of the whole of the Bible, especially the New Testament, we see that the deity of Christ is a powerful theme. How much does it matter? If Christ is not God and yet we have honoured him as God, then this is none other than blasphemy. We might, however, wonder why the Scriptures have not made it clearer that he is not in fact God, rather than giving us so many indications of his true deity.

If Christ is indeed God, and yet we have not honoured him as such, and have taught others that he is not God, then we have denied God the worship due to him.

This is a vital decision, and not one to be taken lightly. What do you make of Christ?

The sacrifice for sin

The New Testament is very clear that the Old Testament not only foretells the coming of Christ, but predicts his suffering, his death and resurrection. Christ was quite specific about what was written concerning him in the scriptures. 'This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day' (Luke 24:46-7).

Peter saw in the death of Christ 'how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Christ would suffer' (Acts 3:18). Peter described how the Spirit of Christ worked in the prophets, predicting 'the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow' (1 Peter 1:10-11). The core of the gospel is that 'Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures' (1 Corinthians 15:3).

These references all describe the Old Testament message in general. Is it possible to be more specific, to pin down the very passages which the New Testament must have had in mind?

On the day of Pentecost Peter declared that David in Psalm 16:8-11 wrote about the resurrection of Christ. Philip found the Ethiopian eunuch reading Isaiah 53 (Acts 8:32-5), the chapter which deals with a 'man of sorrows' who bears our sins. 'Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news of Jesus' (v. 35).

It is very clear throughout the New Testament that Christ's was a sacrificial death. He died for our sins. By his death he has atoned. We are ransomed and set free. What is there in the Old Testament to correspond to this?

The answer is simple: the animal sacrifices.

It appears to be this which John the Baptist had in mind when he saw Jesus coming towards him and said, 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!' (John 1:29). Paul tells us that God sent 'his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering' (Romans 8:3). When the Israelites were about to leave Egypt the Passover lamb had to be killed. Now, Paul says, 'Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed' (1 Corinthians 5:7).

In the Old Testament much stress is laid on the blood of the sacrificial animal.

'The life of a creature is in the blood' (Leviticus 17:11). Blood shed meant life laid down, and in particular, life laid down on behalf of someone else. 'It is the blood that makes atonement for one's life' (Leviticus 17:11). The blood of Christ is similarly emphasised in the New Testament. Peter tells us we were redeemed 'with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect' (1 Peter 1:19).

The writer to the Hebrews goes further. 'It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins,' he tells us (Hebrews 10:4). Instead, 'we have been made holy through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ' (Hebrews 10:10). In Chapter 9 he describes how the Jewish high priest would go into the holy of holies once a year on the Day of Atonement to offer blood to atone for sins (vv. 6-7). Now Christ, as our high priest, has offered his own blood to bring us into our inheritance (vv. 11-14).

In these passages and many more, the New Testament writers indicate that the sacrifices of the Old Testament were intended to point forward to Christ and his death on our behalf. This is a major theme running throughout the whole Bible.

A unique salvation

'All religions are much the same,' some would say. This is probably the politically correct thing to say. That way, you are being fair to all. Believe what you will, so they say, it makes no difference.

But why should it be considered that all religions are the same? All religions are about moral standards, they would say. This is to ignore the fact that the standards upheld by different religions can be poles apart, so that what one religion considers the highest kind of law is to another religion horrendous cruelty. Every religion shows man's search for God, some say. However, this is not completely true. Christianity is about God's search for man.

Let us lay our cards on the table straight away. Christianity, as revealed in the Bible, makes no pretence at being politically correct. Christ's way is a unique salvation. By 'salvation' is meant 'rescue', 'deliverance', 'a way to God'.

After all, if the message of the Bible is indeed true, and if Christ himself is God come down as man, paying for our sins by his own sacrificial death, then how could there be any alternative way of salvation? So Jesus declared, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me' (John 14:6). Peter insisted, 'Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved' (Acts 4:12). The writer to the Hebrews asks, 'How shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?' (Hebrews 2:3).

Does this sound intolerant? Some aspects of truth cannot be other than intolerant. If we believe that two plus two equals four, and neither three nor five, then we must risk the charge of intolerance by saying so.

Once for all

You might think that in the Bible there are two ways of salvation. In the Old Testament there was the keeping of the Law, with its offerings of animal sacrifices.

In the New, salvation is no longer by keeping the Law (as we shall see in a later chapter) but by trusting in Christ's sacrifice for us. How do these two fit together?

As we have seen, the animal sacrifices were a picture of the sacrifice of Christ. In World War II those left behind would have a photo of their loved one, and would look at this regularly to remind them of the one far away. When their loved one came home after the war, the photo was no longer necessary.

The writer to the Hebrews makes it clear that the sacrifices under the Law were only a picture and never were effective. The sacrifices of the Old Testament could only provide a 'shadow' (Hebrews 10:1) of the reality, but Christ's sacrifice was that reality. A thirsty man cannot slake his thirst with any number of photographs of water; only the reality of water itself can suffice. 'It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins' (Hebrews 10:4).

The sacrifices needed to be made over and over again because they were ineffective. 'Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins' (Hebrews 10:11). Some jobs have to be repeated indefinitely. The painting of the cantilever railway bridge over the Firth of Forth near Edinburgh is one of these tasks. As soon as the painting from one side to the other has been completed, it must be started again. The sacrifices were a never-ending task also.

In contrast, Christ's sacrifice is described as 'once for all'. 'He has appeared once for all . . . to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself' (Hebrew 9:26). 'When this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God' (Hebrews 10:12). Sitting down here demonstrates that one's work is finished. (Compare the busy housewife who says, 'I haven't sat down all day!') The fact that Christ sat down at the right hand of God means that the work of atoning for sin is finished.

The conclusion is that in God's sight there cannot be any more sacrifices for sin. Christ has accomplished it all.

So what?

In this chapter we have seen that the theme of Christ runs through the whole of the Old Testament. All the sacrifices made point forward to his one supreme sacrifice for sin, once for all. This is a theme which will help us in interpreting other parts of the Bible. If we come across other ideas based on less secure evidence which contradict this theme, then we can be pretty sure that they are wrong.