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Christian P. Ceroke

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PRINCIPLES OF SALVATION HISTORY

The *OT* presents a record of Israel's experience of God in history: "... it was the Lord, our God, who brought us and our fathers up out of the land of Egypt, out of a state of slavery.... Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God" (*Jos.* 24:17-18). The *NT* records the experience of the apostles and the Church, an experience of "God... in Christ reconciling the world to himself..." (*2 Cor.* 5:19).

Through an encounter with God acting in history Israel was led to understand Him as its Savior. It perceived that His activity toward itself was directed to deliverance from the vicissitudes and ills that beset the people. This religious experience of Israel took place in successive steps from the time of Moses in the thirteenth century B.C. to the time of Christ.

Israel's understanding of God as Savior originated in the exodus from Egypt under the leadership of Moses. The exodus caused Israel to re-interpret its Patriarchal traditions, and ultimately to project backwards into the history of man its deeper grasp of God's salvific activity gained through the exodus and its subsequent conquest of Palestine.¹ It depicted creation, the fall of man, and man's early religious history in the light of its conception of God as Savior. Thus Israel formulated a ground plan of God's salvific action in history from creation to its own time.

The final collection of Israel's sacred books and the creation of the literature of the *NT* afford the possibility of outlining in a chronicle form the successive steps of God's salvific activity in human history. When the Bible is utilized to construct this chronicle, the net result is termed "salvation history." However, salvation history as chronicle is more accurately termed "the history of salvation," or "the history of God's sal-

¹ R. Schnackenburg, *Heilsgeschichte*, in *LTK* 5 (1960) 148-149.

vific acts.”² Salvation history as chronicle aims primarily to collect from the Bible the successive stages of God’s self-revelation to men. It does not concern itself with an intrinsic examination of the biblical record of the divine, salvific acts.

The principal stages in the history of salvation, as Israel presented them in the *OT*, are the creation and the fall of man, the primeval history (highlighted by the rescue of Noah from the deluge), the promises of Abraham, his descendants’ exodus from slavery in Egypt, the Mosaic covenant, the history of Israel from its conquest of Palestine through the Babylonian exile, its restoration to the promised land under Cyrus the Great, and the revolt of the Machabees, a period which occasioned the messianism of the book of Daniel. The *OT* history of salvation culminates in Israel’s firm faith in ultimate and lasting deliverance from her enemies—the messianic expectancy formulated through her history by her prophets.

For the continuation of the history of salvation we must turn to the sacred books of the Church. Unlike the *OT*, the literature of the *NT* is not composed from the standpoint of the religious history of a people on whose behalf God has especially acted. It has its origin and its center in a single person, Jesus of Nazareth. The main contention of the *NT* is that the salvific action of God experienced by Israel came to term in the person of Jesus, who is the Son of God. Israel’s historical encounter with God prepared for Him, promised Him, and prefigured Him. The *OT* messianic faith found its fulfillment in Christ. Whereas Israel experienced the transcendent God active in history, the Church experienced, and still experiences, the incarnate Son of God active in history.

The material of the *NT* allows us to complete the history of salvation in terms of Christ. The stages of this history are His virginal conception and birth, His public ministry, His crucifixion and death, His resurrection and ascension, the

² H. Grass, *Heilstatsachen*, in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 3 (1959) 183-194.

origin of His Church, the preaching of His gospel, His parousia, His final judgment of men, and the unifying of the whole universe in Him (*Ephes. 1:10*).³

Thus the Bible portrays God's salvific action in history as a panorama in which sinful humanity, withdrawing from God's rule is gradually returned to Him through a series of divine actions in history itself. When we cull from the Bible the various salvific acts it ascribes to God, we unfold the panorama of the history of salvation.

The Church, however, can no longer be satisfied with the chronicle of God's salvific plan which the broad analysis of Sacred Scripture makes evident. It is compelled by modern man's sophisticated understanding of nature and history to come to grips directly with the acts of God that form the chronicle of salvation history.⁴ Even the casual reader recognizes that the Bible entertains a view of reality quite foreign to normal human experience. The view of reality peculiar to the Bible is especially conspicuous in its record of the very acts that make up the history of salvation. If this history is not to be set aside by the modern mind as myth, modern man must be led to appreciate the view of reality which enables the Bible to formulate God's plan of salvation in terms of His perceptible activity within history.

The history of salvation assumes that the salvific acts of God occur as events within objective reality. As occurrences in objective reality, these divine acts imposed themselves upon Israel, upon the Twelve, and upon the Church of *NT* times as real events to which assent could reasonably be given. Authors employ different terminology to express this biblical concept of God acting within history: "saving history," "*Heils-*

³ For a succinct and clear review of the history of salvation, see Neal Flanagan, O.S.M., *Salvation History: An Introduction to Biblical Theology* (New York, 1960).

⁴ On Rudolf Bultmann's theory of "demythologizing," which rejects the concept of *Heilsgeschichte*, cf. Myles M. Bourke, *Rudolf Bultmann's Demythologizing of the New Testament*, in *PCTSA*, 12 (1957) 102-131.

geschichte theology,"⁵ "theology as recital,"⁶ "the theology of history."⁷ This terminology is intended to indicate that salvation history is in itself a theological conception, proper to biblical thought.⁸ As a theological conception proper to the Bible it means man's encounter with God in the historical event. The occurrence of the human and the divine within one and the same reality constitutes the theological conception of salvation history. Each salvific act of God contributing to the history of salvation involves an encounter with Him in an historical event. Each such salvific act combines the human and the divine within one and the same reality.

To determine the characteristics of the theological concept of salvation history in Sacred Scripture—"saving history" as the material out of which the "history of salvation" is constructed—we may examine the exodus, which lies at the basis of the *OT*, and the resurrection of Christ, which is at the root of the *NT*.

The Exodus as Saving History

The narrative of the exodus (*Ex.* 1-14) combines two diverse types of material. One type is devoted to the description of human situations: the slavery of Israel in Egypt and the life of Moses prior to his prophetic call. The second type relates the words and acts of God. The narrative freely passes from one type of material to the other as if both the human

⁵ Alan Richard, *The Bible in the Age of Science* (Philadelphia, 1961) 122. The author prefers the term, *Heilsgeschichte* theology, and remarks: "Salvation-history is clumsy and does not convey any very distinct idea. In German the word bears the double sense of both 'saving history' and 'history of salvation,' and it is nowadays widely used to refer to those saving acts of God in human history which are recorded in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments."

⁶ This term is used by G. Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts* (Chicago, 1952) 33-58 in his discussion of the historical nature of biblical theology.

⁷ A rather common term, used, for example, by Philip J. King, *The Book of Judges*, in the Pamphlet Bible Series (New York, 1960) 13.

⁸ Schnackenburg, *op. cit.*, 148.

situations and the divine activity were comprehensible to the reader with equal ease. The author of the narrative felt no need to explain or to defend the divine action within history. He wrote for an audience which accepted this concept. The first characteristic of saving history in the account of the exodus is reliance on the reader's conviction that God acts within history.

The proportion of the two types of material in the Bible's account of the exodus is heavily weighted in favor of the words and acts of God, as a simple analysis of the material will show.⁹ The assumption of the author is that the reader's concern lies in an understanding of the divine activity, not in an understanding of the human situation. The concept of saving history leads the writer to place the chief stress on God's presence in history in word and act.

Nevertheless, he is concerned to present sufficient data on the human situation to make it clear that the divine, salvific act of the exodus was an occurrence within history itself. He offers two portraits of the condition of Israel in slavery (*Ex.* 1:8-2:14; 4:6-19), which dramatize the evil inherent in her historical condition. He provides information on the early life of Moses as the backdrop to the divine choice of this man as the leader of the enslaved people.¹⁰

The action of God is situated within the limited description of the human situations. It takes the form of a meeting between God and Moses in the episode of the burning bush (*Ex.* 3:1-14). There is the declared purpose of God on the one hand, and the response of Moses on the other. God declares His salvific intention concerning the enslaved people, while Moses responds in fear and with objection over his own role. While

⁹ The sections in the narrative which treat merely natural circumstances are as follows: 1:1-19; 1:23-3-1; 4:18-20; 4:28-31; 5:1-23; 6:14-27; 9:27-30; 9:31-32; 10:7-11; 10:24-29; 11:10; 12:31-36; 12:37-42; 12:43-51; 13:17-21; 14:5-9; 14:10-14.

¹⁰ For an historical evaluation of this material on Moses, cf. art. *Moses* in *EDB* (ed. by Louis F. Hartman, New York, 1963).

the narrative of the exodus as a whole deals chiefly with the words and acts of God, it lays clear stress on the human response in the sense of a commitment of the human person to the divine plan. It is a characteristic of the saving history that the action of God requires a human involvement implying difficulty, if not risk.

The encounter of Moses with God as Savior is now mediated to the whole people by means of the communication of the word of God (*Ex.* 4:29-31).¹¹ Thus the experience of Moses with God becomes the experience of the people through faith. The people's encounter with God as Savior through faith is also posed as accompanied by hardship (*Ex.* 5:6-18) and risk (*Ex.* 5:21).¹²

Finally, the narrative of the exodus leads us to the decisive salvific act of God on behalf of His people, Israel's deliverance from the Egyptian force at the reed sea. The historical situation of the Israelites as encamped between the sea and the Egyptians is mentioned by the author in passing (*Ex.* 14:2) to set the stage for the act of God. The act of God is variously described as a strong East wind (*Ex.* 14:21), a division of the water like a wall (*Ex.* 14:22), a glance of the Lord throwing the Egyptians into a panic (*Ex.* 14:24), the clogging of the chariot wheels (*Ex.* 14:25), the drowning of the Egyptian force (*Ex.* 14:28). What actually occurred—and the only certainty seems to be the fact of "the Egyptians lying dead on the seashore" (*Ex.* 14:31)¹³—is presented as a not entirely comprehensible reality. Its ultimate explanation is found only through faith: "When Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the seashore and beheld

¹¹ On the important concept of the word of God in the Bible, cf. Louis Charlier, Humbert Cornelis, François Coudreau *et al.*, *La parole de Dieu en Jesus-Christ* (Paris, 1961); and *The Word: Readings in Theology* (New York, 1964).

¹² Because of the uncertainty of the role of the plagues in the intention of the author of *Ex.*, we omit consideration of them. Cf. *Plagues of Egypt* in *EDB*.

¹³ See the discussion of Martin Noth, *Exodus: A Commentary* (Philadelphia, 1962) 115-120.

the great power that the Lord had shown against the Egyptians, they feared the Lord and believed in him and in his servant Moses" (*Ex.* 14:31). The final characteristic of the saving history is that it escapes full rationalization.

The Bible's account of the exodus as saving history follows a pattern of thought which shows no interest in the human situation of the Israelites except as God has chosen to act on their behalf. It shows no interest in individual personalities among the Israelites except in the one person, Moses, to whom God chose to address Himself immediately. Saving history is governed by the economy of the divine activity itself. And while it poses this activity as a reality within human history—witness the mention of the Egyptian dead—it frankly ascribes recognition of this reality to a conviction of faith that in the human situation God and man have met.

Since saving history presents divine action as occurring in the circumstances of human life, it is susceptible of historical evaluation. The human history in which the divine activity inserts itself may be studied and evaluated by the science of historical criticism. But this science meets with very real limitations when confronted with saving history. In this type of history, interest in the human condition is limited to the data necessary to make the saving action of God comprehensible. Consequently, many questions which spontaneously arise from the Bible's presentation of saving history cannot be answered due to the lack of data. In the case of the exodus, the exact route taken by the Israelites, the precise point of their crossing at the reed sead, and the size of the Egyptian force are points of information which we have no way to acquiring. Saving history is very sparing in the utilization of material concerning persons and the circumstances of their lives. It devotes the lion's share of its coverage to the activity of God. This phenomenon is clearly evident in the *NT*'s account of the resurrection of Christ.

The Resurrection of Christ as Saving History

The presentation of the resurrection of Christ in *Acts* is remarkably similar to the thought of St. Paul in *2 Cor.* 5:19: "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself. . ."¹⁴ The sermons in *Acts* which record the early apostolic preaching (*Acts* 2:14-36; 3:12-26; 4:8-12; 5:29-32; 10:34-43; 13:16-41) concern the resurrection of Christ primarily as a work of God. They deal very much less with the human situation in which the resurrection occurred. Thus they reflect the same pattern in the presentation of saving history that we have seen in the narrative of the exodus: the major portion of the material treats the act of God in history; the minor portion of the material treats the act of God in history; the minor portion states the historical situation in which the divine act happens.

In Luke's record of the apostolic preaching in *Acts* the resurrection of Christ is a declaration of the *prophetic* testimony of the Twelve. It is in no way set forth as their human witness to an historical wonder. Every example Luke provides of the apostolic preaching asserts specifically that *God* raised Jesus of Nazareth. The Twelve are not simply witnesses to the fact that Jesus, dead and buried, afterwards appeared alive. Their testimony embraces the explanation that the appearance of Jesus alive was a divine act in history. The very essence of the apostolic proclamation of the resurrection is the theological conception of saving history as the salvific act of God with which the Twelve have had a personal encounter.

The apostolic preaching in *Acts* further elaborates the meaning of the resurrection in a series of judgments that are prophetic in nature. The crucifixion and death of Christ were determined beforehand by God (*Acts* 2:23). The slayers of Jesus were "wicked men" (*Acts* 2:23). God's resurrection of Jesus was in fulfillment of *Ps.* 15:8. The ascension of Jesus

¹⁴ The verse may also be translated, "For it was God who, in Christ, reconciled the world to himself," as is done by the *Bible de Jérusalem*. But for our purpose the sense is not affected.

fulfills *Ps.* 109:1. The principal meaning of the resurrection is that Jesus is "Lord and Christ" (*Acts* 2:36), and the only Savior given to men (*Acts* 4:12).

Faithful, however, to the concept of saving history, the apostolic preaching made reference to the human situation in which the salvific activity of God inserted itself to effect the resurrection. The human situation is the personal history of Jesus of Nazareth. He was "a man approved by God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did through him, as you yourselves know" (*Acts* 2:22). The allusion is to the historical fact that Jesus of Nazareth was popularly accepted as a prophet who performed certain signs.¹⁵ "... you disowned the Holy and Just One, and asked that a murderer should be granted to you..." (*Acts* 3:14). The reference is obviously to the trial before Pilate as the paradoxical conclusion to the life of Jesus, rejudiated by the leaders of His own people.

The apostolic preaching proclaimed the resurrection as the divine, salvific activity occurring within the circumstances of adverse human judgment against Jesus of Nazareth. God acted in history to save Him from the bonds of death, to establish, as St. Paul wrote, that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself." As with the exodus, the final deliverance cannot be completely rationalized. The Egyptian force lying dead on the seashore requires prophetic interpretation to be perceptible as saving history. So it is with the empty tomb. If the apostolic preaching is true prophecy, the tomb of Jesus will be found empty. But if the tomb be found empty by the historical critic, he is confronted with a riddle, not with saving history. For this reason, the apostolic preaching begins with a declaration of an act of God in history rather than with an historical enigma that must logically be explained by an act of God. If the prophetic testimony of the resurrection is correct, accounts of the appearances of Jesus are possible, and the gos-

¹⁵ For a treatment of this question, cf. H. A. Guy, *New Testament Prophecy* (London, 1947) 52-89.

pels provide them. But if the appearances of Jesus be related for their own sake, they become stories of phenomena susceptible of many possible explanations.

Saving history is the prophetic assertion of man's encounter with God in historical reality. If this concept be accepted, satisfactory explanations of the divine experience are possible. Thus the gospel narratives of the empty tomb and the appearances of Jesus are addressed to those who assume that the tomb will be empty and that Jesus will have appeared to His own, since it was to them that the saving history was immediately made known as an encounter with the salvific act of God through the personal history of Jesus of Nazareth.

The Church and Saving History

As is clear from our examination of the narrative of the exodus and of the apostolic preaching, saving history is mediated through the word of God. This function is performed by the prophets, such as Moses and the Twelve, who first grasp the action of God in history and then communicate it through God's own word. The Bible contains an inspired record of this prophetic word by means of which we are able to identify the salvific acts of God in history, and so construct the history of salvation.

But the word of God which communicates saving history is also a living reality outside the Bible. It lives first in the minds and hearts of the people who are formed by it as believers: "... they who received his word (i.e., Peter's) were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls" (*Acts* 2:41). It is in turn communicated by those who possess it to others who have not as yet received it: "Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God (i.e., Philip's), they sent to them Peter and John" (*Acts* 8:14). The communication of the word of God concerning Christ forms the Church: "... when you heard and received from us the word of God, you welcomed it, not as the

word of men, but, as it truly is, the word of God, who works in you who have believed" (1 *Thess.* 2:13).

The simplest *NT* portrait of the Church lies in the statement of Luke (*Acts* 1:13-14): "... they mounted to the upper room where were staying Peter and John, James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alpheus, and Simon the Zealot, and Jude the brother of James. All these with one mind continued steadfastly in prayer with the women and Mary, the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren." It is a characteristic of saving history to be sparing in its mention of persons and their circumstances. People are mentioned and elaborated upon to the extent that record of them makes the action of God in history comprehensible. Thus it is quite clear why Luke in his initial chapter of *Acts* specifically names the Twelve among the one hundred and twenty persons (*Acts* 1:15) who formed the nucleus of the primitive Jerusalem community. In *Acts* the Twelve mediate the word of God—their encounter with the risen Christ in history—to form the Church. Their role in the history of salvation is evident.

But the other personages listed by Luke as making up the one hundred and twenty are also in his thought people who have been especially formed by the word of God. "The women" are those who accepted the teaching of Jesus during His ministry, and who in gratitude ministered to His needs (*Lk.* 8:1-3). The "brethren" of Jesus had made a special approach to Him, together with the mother (*Lk.* 8:19-21), during His life, and now, in accepting His resurrection in faith, "hear the word of God, and act upon it" (*Lk.* 8:21). Luke is portraying the Church as consisting of those who are formed by the word of God which has communicated to them the saving history concerning Jesus.¹⁶

In Luke's picture of this community, we find mention also of

¹⁶ That Luke already has the Church in view in *Acts* 1:13-14 is clear from his expression in 2:41 that the three thousand baptized on Pentecost "were added."

“Mary, the mother of Jesus.” In the naming of the mother of Jesus, Luke invokes the saving history he has described in the Annunciation and other events of his infancy gospel. By an act of God in history Jesus was conceived virginally of Mary espoused to a man named Joseph. The word of God to the shepherds declared Him *sōtēr*, Savior, and *christos Kyrios*, the Messiah-Lord. The sign of the manger hinted at His rejection.¹⁷ Through another act of saving history, the resurrection of Jesus, the mother, who “. . . kept in mind all these things, pondering them in her heart” (*Lk.* 2:19), has come to understand them. The Twelve replace the shepherds to proclaim Him “Lord and Christ” (*Acts* 2:26). And the Jerusalem community now shares faith in the mystery of salvation through Jesus with the mother, and, like her, will keep “all these things carefully in her heart” (*Lk.* 2:51).

REV. CHRISTIAN P. CEROKE, O.CARM.

Whitefriars Hall
Washington, D.C.

¹⁷ Ben F. Meyer, S.J., “*But Mary Kept All These Things. . .*,” in *CBQ*, 26 (1964) 45-47.