

Testamentum Imperium
An International Theological Journal

www.PreciousHeart.net/ti

Volume 1 – 2005-2007

**12 – The Eternal Security of the Believer in Christ
from the Perspective of Philosophical Theology**

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Introduction: From Greek to Hebrew Empirico-Logic

The Greek view of the innate immortality of the soul stands in stark contrast to the Hebraic-Christian view of the resurrection of the body. The former finds its roots in Plato and his idealistic dualism. At the top of his gradation of being is ultimate reality, ultimate good, and pure form. At the bottom are ultimate unreality, ultimate evil, and

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pure matter. Both are eternal. The soul, being near the top of the scale of being, is eternal as well, pre-existent, everlasting, eternal in both directions, backward and forward.

There is no question of the survival of the human soul beyond death in Greek philosophy. It is eternal, innately immortal. The Hindu idea of reincarnation is but one of several ideas of survival arising out of Greek philosophy.

Older than Greek philosophy and Greek logic, the empiric-logical mentality of Hebraic thinking may be traced to about 2500 B.C. and reaches its zenith in the Old Testament, written between 1400 and 400 B.C. In anthropological thinking about A.D. 1900, Lucian Levy-Bruhl, the great French anthropologist, identified two categories of human thinking: logical and pre-logical.²

Shortly before 1940, William Foxwell Albright began to verbalize with clarity an objection to Levy-Bruhl's twofold classification of human thinking.³ In all fairness to Levy-Bruhl, Albright notes that "Levy-Bruhl retracted his view in his famous, *Carnets*, published posthumously in 1947 in the *Revue Philosophique*."⁴ Nonetheless, Albright's third category suggested what he called "empirico-logical" thinking. Some anthropologists contemporary with Levy-Bruhl had voiced objections, but Albright was apparently the first to suggest a third category of thinking.

Empirical logic, the logic born of experience, is as old as animals. A dog will soon learn to run across a square instead of going around the corner, and we all know what white rats can do with a little practice. Dolphins are proving to be extraordinarily quick learners. This is empirical logic on a very low level, but it is logic born of experience all the same.

Nearly all ancient crafts were dominated by it, yet the ancients were no inventors. There were inventors in those days who proceeded by essentially the same methods as Thomas A. Edison, although they were, to be sure, more primitive and without benefit of the scientific discoveries on which Edison drew. But they used the same trial and error, through systematic application of which nearly all of Edison's

² Lucian Levy-Bruhl, *Primitive Mentality* (Trans. Lilian A. Clare; Boston: Beacon Press, 1966): 23.

³ William Foxwell Albright, *New Horizons in Biblical Research* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1966): 24.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

inventions were made. (In order to invent the tungsten filament, according to report, he tried over a thousand materials in succession.) The ancients made thousands of pharmacopoeia consisting of medicinal plants, drugs, and other materials, was developed by the ancient Egyptians, through them to modern times. The early Aztecs and early Chinese also had elaborate pharmacopoeias. In fact, some of the most important drugs used in modern medicine were taken over from folk medicine, for instance quinine from the American Indians and ephedrine from Eastern Asia.⁵

The actuality of empirico-logical thinking is a fact in the phenomena of human history. Empirical logic comes into clearest focus with its masterpiece, the Old Testament. This type of thinking has persisted wherever men seek to learn from experience. It is employed in the world of everyday activity with the best of results. “Sound empirical logic is still in general characteristic of the ordinary man in his everyday dealing with his fellows,” says Albright.⁶ It is out of empirical logic that the Bible was born, a written record of the revelation of God to man.

A. The Nature of Man

1. Greek Thinking—Immortality of Man

The effect of Greek thinking on Christianity has been great. Although the New Testament was written by Jews, and follows Hebraic thinking, it is written in Greek. Thanks to Alexander the Great, all his world was Hellenized to some extent. European and American thought is dominated by Greek thinking today. Western Christianity has never been exempt from its influence. Consequently Western theologians have tended to shape their theology not just from the Bible, but also from a Greek mentality applied to the Bible. One of the tasks of Western theologians today is to reclaim the Hebraic thought pattern for the New Testament. Even though written in Greek, it is thought in Hebrew.

Nowhere does the effect of Greek thinking show itself upon Western theology than in the doctrine of man. From the second century forward Western theologians have allowed a Platonic view of

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press 1942): 35.

the nature of man to invade their anthropology. The Greeks viewed man as a pre-existent soul imprisoned in a material body. The body was material, pure evil and even unreal. But the soul was immortal, eternal in both directions, always existing and eternally surviving. Out of that understanding came the great arguments over the dichotomy or trichotomy of man. Is he body and soul or is he body, soul, and spirit.

The Hebraic view of the nature of man is basically a unitary view. The true Hebrew could not imagine the existence of man without his body. Thus, the Hebraic emphasis on the resurrection of the body. Could they have been influenced by the Egyptians in their understanding of the survival of the body beyond the grave? They certainly buried their dead like the Egyptians rather than burning them like the Greeks once did. This author thinks it was more than that. The revelation of God was in such a way that the God of the Bible was revealed as the God of the living, not the God of the dead. And yet He is called the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Jesus Himself uses this argument to support the Old Testament view of the resurrection of the body in Mark 12:26, 27.

The classical view of man tends to treat man as innately immortal. The modern view tends either to make man's immortality an impersonal, social thing, or else yields to Naturalism which obliterates immortality altogether. To this uncertain situation the Hebraic approach to the question of immortality speaks with relevance, clarity and forcefulness.

2. Hebrew View—Unitary and Finite in Death

- a. Unitary View of Man
- b. Finiteness of Man
- c. Finiteness in the Nature of Death
- d. Death and Sin
- e. A Positive Value of Death

a. Unitary View of Man

The Hebraic approach to the unity of man's being heightens the problem of immortality in Christian theology and occasioned its consideration in Judaism. Reinhold Niebuhr says, "The whole Hebraic-Biblical conception of the unity of body and soul and the

meaningfulness of the historical process was about to lead to this wrestling off the mind of later Judaism with this insoluble problem.”⁷

The Greeks view man as an immortal soul imprisoned in a mortal body. The Hebrews viewed man as a psychosomatic unity. The Greek view presupposes a basic metaphysical dualism between form and matter. The Hebrew view presupposes the goodness and reality of the material world and its spiritual aliveness.

b. Finiteness of Man

Coupled with this unitary view of man, the Hebrews accepted the finiteness of human life. This concept is a natural corollary to belief in an infinite Creator. Since creation is from God and therefore basically good, and finiteness is a mark of creatureliness, the Hebrew saw nothing evil about finiteness itself. “The fragmentary character of human life is not regarded as evil in Biblical faith.”⁸

These two concepts—unity and finiteness—were not the only causes of emphasis upon this life to the neglect of the life to come as found in Hebraic thought. The Hebrews were caught up in the rushing tides of history, as they still are in Israel today. They were enamored with the present because of its dramatic nature. But they did not neglect life after death because of an irreligious attitude. Rather, as Dean Stanley says,

Not from want of religion, but (if one might use the expression) from excess of religion, was this void left in the Jewish mind. The Future Life was not denied or contradicted; but it was overlooked, set aside, over shadowed, by the consciousness of the living, actual presence of God himself.⁹

c. Finiteness in the Nature of Death

However, to assert that the Hebrews emphasized this life while overlooking the life to come does not mean that they did not think about death. It was a common, almost daily reality in ancient Jewish life. While they saw nothing evil about finiteness, as such, death was viewed as a corollary of evil, not good. In the words of Niebuhr, “While it is not Biblical to regard finiteness, as such, as evil it must be

⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1955): 298.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁹ Dean Stanley as quoted in Albert C. Knudson, *The Religious Teaching of the Old Testament* (NY: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1918): 393.

admitted that there is strong Biblical support for the conception of death as evil.”¹⁰

d. Death and Sin

Theologically speaking, the universality of death finds two possible explanations. The first explanation is that death is simple a natural phenomenon. Some Old Testament theologians have adopted this explanation to say that, had Adam not sinned, he would still have died. This explanation ignores the connection of death and sin in the early narratives of Genesis, especially Genesis 2:17 and 3:3. Paul acknowledges this connection in Romans 5.

The second explanation therefore treats death as a consequence of sin. Without tracing the history of this doctrine, one who holds it may say with Karl Rahner, “Until we can know adequately why all living things, com-posed of many cells, and man in particular, must die, the reason offered by faith (that is, the moral tragedy of mankind through its first parents) remains the only available explanation for the uncontested universality of death.”¹¹ Possible, the Hebraic concept of retribution contributed to the connection between death and sin, as pictured in Genesis and explained by Paul in Roman 5:1-12. The problem with death, for the Hebrew, was further complicated by his tendency to view death from a personal and individual viewpoint. Death was (difficult) difficulty for the individual Hebrew because it (ended) indeed life as he knew it and ended a person as he had been know by his family.

e. A Positive Value of Death

The one relationship death did not end was the Hebrew’s relationship to his God. That had been emphasized over and over by the biblical writers as a revelation, a word from God. Consequently, he did not succumb to an utterly tragic view of death. He senses a positive side of death. The word “sensed” is carefully selected. The ancient Hebrew had a veiled intuition that death was not final. One might be tempted to argue that intuition is not consonant with empirical logic. On the contrary, if one conceives of intuition as a supra-rational response to reality, it is quite empirical to employ

¹⁰ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1955): 173.

¹¹ Karl Rahner, *On the Theology of Death* (Trans. Charles H. Henkey; NY: Herder and Herder, 1961): 22-23.

intuition in arriving at the truth. This is one of the characteristics of Hebraic thinking. William Ernest Hocking (not at all in the Hebrew tradition) asserts that intuition is both real and empirical. “Intuition, as persistent awareness of, and reaction to, the real, is our most directly empirical relation to the world, the most universal, the most unrelenting.”¹²

Hebrew intuition arouse, in part, from a profound ethical sensitivity found in Hebraic religion. Coupled with this sensitivity was a positive understanding of the idea of retribution. The same God who punished the wicked would also reward the righteous. Thus, Job in the midst of his suffering could cry, “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth; and after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see Go, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. How my heart yearns within me.”¹³ As Knudson says, “A profound ethical sense such as characterized the Hebrew religion from the beginning leads necessarily by an inner logic of its own [empirical logic] to the belief in an after-life.”¹⁴ So then, belief in a life after death was inherent in the faith and institution of the Hebrews.

In Job’s theology of death, there is a curious mixture of this life and the life to come, which is indicative of the problem the Hebrews had in thinking about death. In Job 19:25-27, as quoted above, Job says that after his body is destroyed, his eyes will see God. He thus demonstrates the utter inability of the Hebrews to conceive of human life apart from some form of bodily existence. If this seems unusual, consider the problem physical science has at this point of describing human existence. “It might be remembered with profit that natural philosophy finds it almost impossible to restrict the idea of the human body to what is covered by the skin.”¹⁵

¹² William Ernest Hocking, *The Meaning of Immortality* (NY: Harper and Brothers, 1957): 195.

¹³ Job 19:25-27, NKJV.

¹⁴ Knudson, *The Religious Teaching of the Old Testament*, 398.

¹⁵ Rahner, *On the Theology of Death*, 105.

B. The Nature of Resurrection

1. Resurrection of Dead

It is at the point of this inability that Hebraic thinking differs from Greek thinking about life after death. This difference is not to be understood just as idea of the immortality of the soul over against the resurrection of the body. Such an understanding describes the Greek view of life after death well enough, but misses the force of the Hebraic view. Yet Western Christian theology, traditionally, has spoken of the Christian view in terms of a “bodily Resurrection. Claude Tresmontant explains why classical Christianity adopted this terminology.

In the New Testament we find the expression: “resurrection of the dead,” (*anastasis nekron*), but not the expression of “resurrection of the body,” since neither the idea nor the word are to be found in Hebrew.

The resurrection of the dead is the resurrection of men [and women]. The Councils, in order to avoid a Platonic interpretation of resurrection, and to ensure that the “resurrection” of Revelation should not be confused with the “immortality of the soul” of the Greek philosophies, felt obliged to specify: *cum corporibus suis*. The addition was necessary in the circumstances because the biblical idea was being introduced into a world of dualist thought. Therefore, to give the full equivalent of what the Bible calls the resurrection of the dead, they had to specify that this meant the whole man, that is, in the Greek way of speaking, the soul *and* the body.¹⁶

The nature of the resurrection is centered about the wholeness of man. While Paul, in II Corinthians 5:1-10, seems to indicate a separation of soul from body at death, he does not present a Greek view of immortality. As Cullmann and others note, such a separation was neither desirable nor permanent to Paul.¹⁷ In Davies’ words, “the separation of body and soul, for Judaism was not natural to man but the consequence of sin, and this implied that the reunion of soul and

¹⁶ Claude Tresmontant, *A Study of Hebrew Thought* (trans. Michael Francis Gibson; NY: Desclee Company, 1960): 105.

¹⁷ Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time* (trans. Floyd Filson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964): 238-239.

body in resurrection was involved in any doctrine of survival.”¹⁸ Davies goes further to suggest that Paul, in II Corinthians 5, actually teaches that the dead in Christ, while separated from their physical bodies, nevertheless assume some sort of embodied form. Yet, as Cullmann says, the exact term “resurrection of the body” is not biblical. The biblical term is “resurrection of the dead.”

2. Toward a Biblical View of Resurrected Body

There is no scandal, speaking from a Hebraic point of view, in the idea of a resurrected body, as long as that body is understood to be the whole man. In the context of this understanding, the New Testament does teach a bodily resurrection in I Corinthians 15. Though some argue over the difference between a natural body and a spiritual body, a body is a body. The early Barth notes in his consideration of I Corinthians 15, “That by resurrection, anything else than *bodily* resurrection could be understood by Paul or by the doubters [of such a resurrection] is an assumption to be found nowhere throughout the chapter. It goes without saying that bodily resurrection is meant.”¹⁹

Barth believes I Corinthians 15 to be the occasion of a struggle between this Hebraic concept of man as body and the Greek concept of man as soul. He sees the Corinthian doubters taking offense at Paul’s view of resurrection because it involved a Jewish concept, which conflicted with their Greek ideas.

The immortality of the soul is placed in dispute by what Paul says here. Instead of the human soul, the Spirit of God appears in the resurrection. That which persists is not the soul (the latter is the predicate, which must give place to something else), but the body, and even that, not as an immortal body, but is transition from life in death to life.²⁰

3. Non-Hebraic Influences on Immortal Soul

The Greek concept of innate immortality has not been the only non-Hebraic influence upon Western Christian theology at this point. Kantonen sees Christian philosophy as having been pressured from

¹⁸ W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: S.P.C.K., 1965): 299.

¹⁹ Karl Barth, *The Resurrection of the Dead* (trans. H. J. Stenning; NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1933): 116.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 196.

four influential sources: primitive animism with its idea of a ghost-soul, the Greek idea of immortality of the soul, the Zoroastrian concept of dual kingdoms, and the Hindu idea of retribution. The distinctive element of the biblical view of man is that his existence, “whether as body or as soul, is dependent entirely upon God.”²¹ This is the very point of the Hebraic approach to the problem. As Robinson says so well,

The important point to notice ... is the particular quality of the hope resulting from the way in which it was reached. The hope of a future is made to depend on the relation of the soul to God. That relation is felt to have a mystical value, transcending the fact of death. We have here, as has been truly said, ‘a strength of conviction of the reality of personal union with God, under which the thought of death as it were fades into the background and is ignored.... This conviction of a personal relation to God independent of time and change, and not any particular theology as to the character of the life after death, is the lasting contribution of the Old Testament to the doctrine of a Future Life.’²²

4. Eternal Life a New Level of Existence

In the total biblical picture, whatever form man may assume at death, the assertion is that the man in Christ does not cease to exist at death. Rather, he enters into a new level of existence, which the Bible calls “eternal life.” As Brunner says, “The result of our inquiry into the mystery of death is that for faith death is no longer the conclusion of life but the point of transition to eternal life.”²³ He describes this eternal life by finding the clue to its existence in the resurrected Christ. The resurrected body of Jesus manifested its spatial limits and yet overcame the limitation of space. For Brunner, the time-lapse between death and resurrection is not important. He asserts that the eternal God transcends the time-lapse between departure and resurrection. Theologically, this position is tenable and is quite Hebraic, The Hebrew has no problem with a lapse of time. From the Hebraic standpoint, the debate over and intermediate state between

²¹ T. A. Kantonen, *The Christian Hope* (Philadelphia: The Muhlenberg Press, 1954): 32.

²² H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Religious Ideas of the Old Testament* (9th ed.; London: Gerald Duckworth and Company, 1952): 96, from C. F. Burney, *Outlines of Old Testament Theology* (3rd edition; London: Rivington’s Limited, 1920): 104.

²³ Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption* (vol. III of *Dogmatics*, trans. by David Cairns and J. H. L. Parker; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962): 389.

death and resurrection is unnecessary. Biblical man is kept by the eternal and living God. And with the resurrection of Jesus, coupled with His post-resurrection appearances, the intuited thought of resurrection found in Job becomes hard, empirical thought as the disciples personally encountered the resurrected Christ.

C. Redemptive History and Resurrection

When Augustine wrote his *City of God*, he introduced a philosophy of history that was new to the philosophical world: rectilinear history, known simply as linear history today.²⁴ It could be argued that this was perhaps the first Christian philosophy of history. This view of time is clearly biblical and Hebraic. Plato's view of time was a cyclical view. Mircea Eliade explains it in his writings as "The Myth of the Eternal Return," the sub-title for one of his books.²⁵ Cultures contemporary with ancient Judaism held to a cyclical view of history. The early Greek philosophers later expressed that same view. While early Mesopotamians did not articulate a philosophy of history they did emphasize a particular view of history.²⁶ Their cyclical view emphasized the repetition of the Cosmogony when stimulated by periodic, imitative rituals. In its religious setting, this cyclical view of history fostered an attitude of hope as long as life was going well. When agricultural crops were plentiful, health was sound, and foreign as well as domestic relationships were steady, these rituals gave the opportunity for periodic renewal and hope. But when things, events, and relationships were bad, the cyclical view led to despair because whatever happened was assumed to be beyond human control.

In the midst of the golden age of the cyclical view of history, a radically new horizon appeared to men. Judaism's rise brought with it a sense of linear movement in history. Later, when Augustine penned his *City of God*, the cyclical view has degenerated into nothing but despair. It would be easy to suppose that Augustine's linear view of history was a corrective to a degenerate view of time. But Judaism arose in the midst of the very highpoint or golden age of the cyclical view. James Connolly warns against distorting the grandeur of the

²⁴ Aurelius Augustine, *City of God* (trans. Marcus Dods; NY: Modern Library, 1950).

²⁵ Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History* (trans. W. R. Trask; NY: Harper and Brothers, 1954).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1-48.

cyclical view of history by examining its degenerate form of Augustine's day instead of its golden age of expression.²⁷ When Judaism began to hold a linear view, in the golden age of cyclical thinking, a radically new horizon in thinking was begun.

D. History of Rise of Judaic View of Linear History

1. Robinson's "Disclosure Situations"

A unique combination of elements occurred in early Judaism, which gave rise to the biblical sense of history. There was the element of what Alan Richardson calls "disclosure situations."

The distinctive character of Israel's history was that it was built around a series of disclosure situations, which through the activity of prophetic minds became interpretative of Israel's historic destiny and ultimately of the history of all mankind. It is to this distinctive feature that we should look for the beginnings of an answer to the question why it was, Yahweh and not Chemosh who was recognized as the God of Righteousness and the Creator of heaven and earth.²⁸

In the face of these disclosure situations, the early Jews reacted with an empirico-logical response and grounded their faith in the Divine will as they saw it expressed around them.

This would account for the element of contrast between Israelite faith and surrounding faiths. According to Vriezen, Israelite faith was not static like Egyptian faith. It was dynamic. It was not dualistic like Babylonian faith, but monotheistic in a very practical sense. Nor was it grounded in natural and vegetative phenomena as was Canaanite faith. Rather, Israelite faith was grounded in Divine will. Of this last contrast, Vriezen says, "This contrast is not to be taken lightly; for historically speaking it is the factor that more than anything else governs the religion of Israel."²⁹

2. Pannenberg's "Promise and Fulfillment"

Pannenberg surveys the whole sweep of Jewish history to propose the element of promise and fulfillment as giving rise to Israel's historical consciousness.

²⁷ James Connolly, *Human History and the Word of God* (NY: Macmillan Company, 1965): 3-4.

²⁸ Alan Richardson, *History, Sacred and Profane* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964): 224.

²⁹ Theodor C. Vriezen, *The Religion of Ancient Israel* (trans. Hubert Hoskins; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967): 72-73.

The disclosure of history in Israel appears to have different roots than those in Mircea Eliade holds responsible. Eliade connects Israel's discovery of a meaning of history with prophetic proclamation: [*sic*] The punishment for the transgression of the people, and history gained meaning and coherence when these announcements were fulfilled in the historical destiny of Israel (149f.). But Eliade's arguments do not touch the real basis of the Israelite consciousness of history. It cannot originate with the prophets' proclamation of judgment because the beginnings of Israelite historical writing, which can be recognized at the characteristic understanding of history for Israel, reach back into the time of David and Solomon.

The presuppositions of the historical consciousness in Israel lie in its concept of God. The reality of God for Israel is not exhausted by his being the origin of the world, that is, of normal ever self-repeating processes and events. Therefore this God can break into the course of his creation and initiate new events in it in an unpredictable way. The certainty that God again and again performs new acts, that he is a "living God," forms the basis for Israel's understanding of reality as a linear history moving toward a goal. But we have not yet thereby described the structure of this history itself.

Within the reality characterized by the constantly creative work of God, history arises because God makes promises and fulfills these promises. History is event so suspended in tension between promise and fulfillment that through the promise it is irreversibly pointed toward the goal of future fulfillment.³⁰

E. Towards for Historical Certainty

1. Historical Certainty in O.T. Exodus

It is precisely in the midst of history that Christian faith finds its certainty. The biblical man is caught up in a certainty of the moment as God works in his life. The magical powers of Moses impressed the Hebrews as much as they did Pharaoh.³¹ The crossing of the Red Sea represented a certainty of deliverance for Israel and a certainty of

³⁰ Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Redemptive Event and History," in *Essays on Old Testament Interpretation* (ed. Claus Westermann; English trans. James Luther Mays; London: SCMP, 1963): 315.

³¹ Exodus 4:1-9.

defeat for Egypt no matter how one interprets Exodus 14. This Exodus event became the central event in Israel's history and may be regarded as the key interpretative event in the Old Testament. As Vriezen says, "History as event, disclosure of the divine will, and a personal relationship, determine the course and character of religion in Israel."³² The Exodus, with its subsidiary wonders, gave momentary certainty to Israel. Even though this certainty was tried by hardship and attacked by doubt often, there remained a continuity of certainty in Israel's faith and history.

2. Extended Certainty in God's Favor of Israel

It was quite natural for Israel to extend this certainty both backward and forward in thinking about history. When Moses wrote what we now call the Book of Genesis, the Creation Narrative about the beginning of time was written after the Exodus. Since Yahweh as powerful enough to deliver Israel from Egypt, the Israelites had no difficulty in believing Him to be powerful enough to create the heavens and the earth and all therein. They easily extended the momentary certainty of the Exodus into the pre-history of the Creation Narrative. In later Judaism, this same type of empirico-logical thinking would enable the extension of momentary certainty forward to the prophetic statements about the future of Israel. In this backward and forward extension, momentary certainty became historical certainty.

Thus Israelite faith arose in empirico-logical response to the acts of God in history. This faith did not arise in full bloom. As history continued, faith grew and deepened. Finally, the Jews had an entire history of God's acts with all the certainty derived therefrom. The Bible contains the record of that belief in response to the continuing revelation of God both in His promises and in His mighty acts. Wright says the Bible became "a confessional recital of His acts."³³

3. A New Center of History in Jesus Christ

With the coming of Christ, the history of God's Old Testament people, having been centered for thousands of years in the Exodus, suddenly became centered for God's New Testament people in the

³² Vriezen, *The Religion of Ancient Israel*, 75.

³³ G. Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1961): 85.

Cross and Resurrection of Jesus. The saving history of the Exodus now gave way for Christians to the saving history of the Cross. Conzelmann says,

The church points not only to an event in the past, but also to the consistent tradition of the salvic event, to the church itself as a factor of the Heilsgeschichte. Its self-consciousness is a historical one from the beginning.³⁴

The historical milieu in which this self-consciousness occurred was Hebraic. In adopting the Hebraic stance, the New Testament writers used a new center of history.

Cullmann maintains that the mid-point in time for the Jews was always future as they looked for the coming Messiah.³⁵ If Cullmann means by mid-point the basic interpretative event of strictly Jewish history, one must object strenuously. The key event for a Jewish history must remain the Exodus. In the New Testament, however, this key interpretative event is displaced by a new center of history, the Cross/Resurrection of Jesus Christ. In taking either the New Testament alone or the Bible as a whole, the Cross/Resurrection is the key interpretative event.

When one looks at Paul, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, he sees this shift to a new center of history quite vividly. As a Pharisaical Jew, Saul of Tarsus was thoroughly immersed in the Jewish idea of the Exodus being the center of history. No doubt he had an extended certainty in the truth of Moses' Creation Narrative and Isaiah's predictions of a coming Messiah. He had no idea that Jesus was that Messiah until he was confronted by the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus.

The new center of history hit Paul between the eyes when he heard the voice of Jesus and was blinded by His presence. That converting moment became for Paul the starting point of certainty. Perhaps better than any other New Testament writer, Paul was certain in both directions. He was certain that Jesus was the Son of God because He rose from the dead and appeared personally to Paul. Paul never doubted for a moment the Virgin Birth of Christ, His mighty

³⁴ Hans Conzelmann, "The First Century as Christian History," Part One of chapter vii, *The Bible in Modern Scholarship* (Ed. Philip Hyatt; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1965): 217.

³⁵ Cullmann, *Christ and Time*, 83.

miracles the Gospel writers recorded, or Jesus' prediction of His return and reign. Paul's extended certainty moved in a linear sense in both directions, backward all the way to creation, and forward into His personal return. At the heart of this certainty was the Cross/Resurrection. Paul no doubt knew the body of Jesus was missing from the tomb. But he had no idea Jesus had really risen from the dead. But once he met Jesus personally, he had no doubts again. It was Jesus' resurrection from the dead that convinced Paul Jesus was who He claimed to be and could do what He had promised to do.

F. Resurrection and the Certainty of Everlasting Life

Paul connected Jesus' resurrection with the certainty of his own eternal life. While one might interpret Hebrews 6 as teaching the possibility of losing one's salvation, Paul did not write Hebrews (Paul would never have identified himself as a second-generation Christian as the Hebrew writer does in Hebrews 2). Paul uses the same kind of hypothetical argument in 1 Corinthians 15 to show the awful consequences if Jesus did not rise from the dead, but he clearly says that Christ has risen from the dead and has become the "first fruits" of them who rise from the dead.

Paul connects the security of the believer in Christ with the resurrection of Christ. To Paul, to suggest that one could lose his salvation is no different than suggesting that Jesus did not rise from the dead.

Theologically, this is a brilliant connection. It places the security of believers not in themselves, but in Christ; not in their faith, but in His faith. Theologically, the resurrection of Christ guarantees eternal life to all who believe in Him. The Cross/Resurrection stands clearly in the center of history. Belief in the Creation Narrative is no problem for the true Christian. Belief in Jesus' miracles becomes no problem. If Jesus could save Paul out of his lostness Jesus could certainly have healed the sick and raised the dead. Belief in Jesus' resurrection was no problem for Paul, after his Damascus Road experience. He had met Christ. Belief in His return was no problem. He who could rise from the dead and ascend into heaven in His own power can certainly return in His own power. Jesus promises,

My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me. And I give unto them eternal life and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to

Me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand.³⁶

If Jesus was able to keep His promise to rise from the dead exactly on the schedule He promised, one would be hard pressed to argue that He could not keep His promise to keep those who had come to Him in faith. How can one be certain about that? By being certain about His resurrection. How can one be certain about His resurrection? The same way Paul was certain, by meeting Jesus personally.

The Gospel invitation Jesus gave is still open today, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”³⁷

³⁶ John 10:27-19, NKJV.

³⁷ John 3:16, NKJV.