

Jesus Fulfills the Covenant and Salvation History

The word *fulfillment* is often used in connection with Jesus. The Church teaches us that Jesus Christ is the complete fulfillment of Divine Revelation, meaning that everything that God wants us to know for our salvation has been revealed in the life and words of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the New Covenant and New Law, meaning that he has fulfilled the purpose of the Old Covenant and the Old Law. The Church also teaches us that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament roles of priest, prophet, and king. He is also the fulfillment of God's wisdom, reflecting the development of Israel's wisdom tradition. Thus, because he is the fulfillment of all these things, we conclude that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of salvation history. In this article we look more closely at what we mean when we say that Jesus fulfills salvation history.

A Growing Understanding of the Covenant

God's plan for human salvation proceeds through a number of stages. These stages can be organized in different ways; the following is a commonly accepted outline:

1. After Adam and Eve's fall from original holiness, God calls a Chosen People to be a blessing for the nations (see Genesis 12:3). This stage is told in the stories of the patriarchs and in the Book of Exodus. This understanding of covenant is picked up by Isaiah when he calls the servant of the Lord a "light for the nations" (Isaiah 42:6), a passage Christians later see fulfilled by Jesus Christ.
2. In the next stage, God gives the Israelites the original (Old) Law to teach the Chosen People how to live in right relationship with God. The Bible presents this Law as proclaimed by God through Moses. However, scholars believe the exact formulation of the Law given in the books of the Pentateuch was a later development in Israelite history. Various formulations of the Law are presented in the Books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy.
3. After the Israelites settle Canaan, they first exist as a tribal confederacy. When this seems inadequate to protect them from external and internal threats, they petition God to be ruled by a king. This begins their experiment with a theocracy. When most of the kings and many of the people prove to be unfaithful to the spirit and the letter of the Covenant Law, God sends many prophets to be his voice, calling people, especially the kings, to be faithful to the covenant. This is the stage of the kings and prophets.
4. The next stage begins after the Exile; its focus is on Temple worship and sacrifice. Ruled by foreign powers after the Exile, in this stage the chief priests and the Temple are the heart of Jewish identity. God has revealed to the Israelites—now referred to as the Judeans or Jews—that they do not need to have a king to be his Chosen People. The prophets both initiate this development (see especially Ezekiel) and also critique its abuse.
5. A final stage is the development of a greater sense of personal accountability and responsibility in living a life pleasing to God. God reveals this in the prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, prophesied just prior to the Exile. It is also reflected in the development of the wisdom literature, the Books of Proverbs, Sirach, and Wisdom, with their emphasis on practical virtues and personal responsibility. A result of this stage is the growth of the Pharisees, with their emphasis on a strict observance of the Law.

All of these stages can be understood under the overall concept of covenant. The Israelites' understanding of the original covenant was not static or unchanging. These different understandings are expressions of the Israelites' evolving awareness as God revealed what it meant to be in a covenant relationship with him. The Israelites grew in their understanding of what God was promising them, and how



they had to live to receive those promises. Keep the following three points in mind as we look to how Jesus is the fulfillment of all these various understandings of covenant:

- It is best to see these stages as cumulative rather than successive. That is, the understanding of the previous stages did not disappear with the development of a new stage of understanding. Thus by the time of Jesus, different people were embracing all these different understandings of covenant: kingship, prophetic challenge, Temple worship, law, wisdom, personal responsibility.
- The Gospels and other historical documents mention different groups that existed at the time of Jesus that emphasized one of these particular understandings of covenant: the chief priests and Sadducees emphasized Temple worship and sacrifice, the Herodians emphasized kingship, the Essenes emphasized prophecy, the Pharisees emphasized law and personal responsibility, and the scribes emphasized wisdom. These groups did not necessarily deny the other understandings; they just emphasized their own understanding as the best.
- Jesus' life, death, Resurrection, and Ascension reveal the true, complete, fulfilled covenant. Often he had to confront and correct a person or group's impartial or incorrect understanding of covenant. The authors of the New Testament teach us the meaning of the fulfilled covenant in their accounts of Jesus' earthly ministry and through their apostolic teaching.

How Jesus Fulfills the Covenant

With these diverse understandings of the covenant of God in the background, we now look briefly at how Jesus fulfills these understandings of the covenant according to the New Testament authors.

Jesus Is the Light of the World

Israel was to be a blessing for all nations, a light leading them to communion with God. The Gospel authors are careful to connect Jesus to this promise by showing how he is a descendant of Abraham; see the genealogies in Matthew, chapter one, and Luke, chapter three.

But more important, Jesus completely fulfills this covenant understanding by becoming the perfect mediator between God and all humanity (see 1 Timothy 2:5, Hebrews 9:15). The Beatitudes in Matthew and Luke emphasize that even the most unfortunate of people will find blessing in him. Jesus tells the disciples that they are blessed in what they see and hear (see Luke 10:23), and he tells the crowds that they are blessed in hearing and doing the Word of God as he has proclaimed it (see 11:28). In the Gospel of John, he calls himself the light of the world (see 8:12).

Jesus Is the New Law

God gave Israel the Law, the Torah, to teach them how to live in communion with him and with one another. In his words and his actions, Jesus Christ fulfills the Law by showing us its true meaning and by accomplishing its purpose through his death and Resurrection. Jesus' extended teaching on this is shown most clearly in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew (see chapters 5–7) and the Sermon on the Plain in Luke (see chapter 6). In this extended teaching, Jesus says several times, "You have heard that it was said," and then he interprets an Old Testament law to reveal its deeper meaning.

In his teaching on faith and the Law, Paul further helps us to understand how Jesus fulfills the Law. Paul makes it clear that it isn't following laws perfectly that saves us; rather, it is faith in the lawgiver, Jesus Christ, that saves us. See Romans 3:19–31 for a summary of this teaching.



Jesus Christ, Perfect King and Prophet

The Gospel authors are clear in their intention to connect Jesus to the line of Israelite kings, particularly King David (in fulfillment of God's promise to David, see 2 Samuel 7:16). David's name is mentioned fourteen times in Matthew, specifically calling Jesus "Son of David." In the triumphal entry to Jerusalem, the crowds say, "Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is to come!" (11:10). They see Jesus as their new king who will fulfill their hopes for a glorious Israelite nation.

However, Jesus' fulfillment of the covenant understanding of kingship completely confounds many of the Jewish people of his time. He emphasizes that true leadership is found in the sacrificial service of others. The king of the heavenly banquet will open up the doors to all, especially the poor and marginalized. The wealthy and powerful of this world will even reject the true king who fulfills the covenant. Christ is the sacrificing, crucified king who brings salvation to all who believe, and who now reigns in Heaven.

It is hard to find explicit examples of how Jesus is the fulfillment of covenant prophecy because his every word and action is prophetic; he is the perfect, complete, and final Word of God. One Gospel example to point out, though, is the account of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (see Luke 24:13–31). In this account we read how Jesus interpreted former prophecy to apply to his life, death, and Resurrection: "Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them what referred to him in all the scriptures" (verse 27).

Jesus Christ, the Perfect Sacrifice and Perfect Priest

Throughout their history the Israelites practiced cultic sacrifice in their covenant relationship with God. They acknowledged the evil of human sacrifice, so they sacrificed the best of their plants and animals to God. In this way they acknowledged that all they had was a gift from God. The priest who made the sacrifice was a theological acknowledgment of the need for a mediator between God and the people.

Jesus Christ fulfills this understanding of the covenant by becoming both the perfect sacrifice and the perfect priest. Many allusions to this are found in the New Testament. The clearest example of Jesus as the perfect sacrifice is in the Gospel of John, in which Jesus is called the Lamb of God at the very beginning of the Gospel (see 1:29,36). Jesus is killed on the day before Passover, the day the Paschal lamb is slaughtered (see 19:14). The clearest teaching on Jesus as the perfect priest is in the Letter to the Hebrews, chapters 5–10.

Jesus Christ, the Wisdom of God

The Old Testament wisdom books speak eloquently of the wisdom of God, sometimes personified with feminine attributes, who is a gift to human beings to lead us to God. The wisdom tradition emphasizes our responsibility to live a life pleasing to God. Jesus fulfills this covenant understanding by teaching us how to fulfill this responsibility. Christ's parables echo the stories and proverbs of the Old Testament wisdom writers. At one point he says, "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' but not do what I command?" and then compares the person who listens to and acts on his words to a wise person who builds his house on a firm foundation (Luke 6:46–49; see also Matthew 7:24–27).

Paul has a significant reflection on God's wisdom at the beginning of the First Letter to the Corinthians (see 1:17–2:16). In it he describes how God's wisdom was hidden from our full understanding until it was revealed in Jesus Christ, who is the wisdom of God. "It is due to him that you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God" (1:30). Paul emphasizes that human wisdom is folly to God and that God's wisdom is foolishness to many people.



Old Testament Prophecies and Salvation History

Completing and perfecting these various understandings of the original covenant was not the only way that the first Christians saw Jesus fulfilling salvation history. They also saw the events of Christ's life fulfilling specific Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah. Looking back over the writings of the prophets, they saw some prescient connections between Christ's life and certain prophetic oracles. (Today we might say this practice comes close to proof texting!) It is better to see these connections as confirmation of Jesus' identity as the Messiah rather than as proofs of his messianic role. The following shows some of the most common prophetic connections with events in Christ's life; many others can be found by doing an Internet search.

Event	Old Testament Prophecy	New Testament Fulfillment
The Savior will be born of a virgin.	Isaiah 7:14: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you this sign: the virgin shall be with child, and bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel."	Matthew 1:22-23: "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'Behold, the virgin shall be with child and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,' which means 'God is with us.'"
The Savior will be born in Bethlehem.	Micah 5:1-4a: "But you, Bethlehem-Ephrathah / too small to be among the clans of Judah, / From you shall come forth for me / one who is to be ruler in Israel. . . ."	Luke 2:4-7: "And Joseph too went up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David that is called Bethlehem. . . . While they were there, the time came for her to have her child, and she gave birth to her firstborn son."
The Savior will be full of zeal for God's house, the Temple.	Psalms 69:10: "Because zeal for your house consumes me, / I am scorned by those who scorn you."	John 2:17: "His disciples recalled the words of scripture, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.'"
The Savior will be filled with the Spirit of God.	Isaiah 61:1-2: "The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me. . . ."	Luke 4:16-21: "[Jesus] unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it was written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.' . . . He said to them, 'Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.'"
The Savior will come into his glory, arriving on an ass (donkey).	Zechariah 9:9: "See, your king shall come to you; / a just savior is he, / Meek, and riding on an ass, / on a colt, the foal of an ass."	Matthew 21:4-5: "This happened so that what had been spoken through the prophet might be fulfilled. . . . 'Behold, your king comes to you, / meek and riding on an ass, / and on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.'"
The Savior will be betrayed for thirty pieces of silver.	Zechariah 11:12-13: "And they counted out my wages, thirty pieces of silver."	Matthew 27:3-10: "Judas, his betrayer, seeing that Jesus had been condemned, deeply regretted what he had done. He returned the thirty pieces of silver. . . ."



<p>The Savior will suffer and die.</p>	<p>Psalm 22: “My God, my God why have you abandoned me? . . . All who see me mock me. . . . As dry as a potsherd is my throat. . . . They divide my garments among them; for my clothing they cast lots.” (Read the whole Psalm for many more connections to Jesus’ Crucifixion.)</p> <p>See also Isaiah 52:13—53:12.</p>	<p>Mark 15:34: “Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?’ which is translated, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’”</p> <p>Mark 15:29: “Those passing by reviled him.”</p> <p>John 19:28: “Jesus said, ‘I thirst.’”</p> <p>John 19:23–24: “So they said to one another, ‘Let’s not tear it, but cast lots for it.’” (Read the complete accounts of Jesus’ Crucifixion to see other connections.)</p>
<p>The Savior will be the Son of God and will overcome death.</p>	<p>Psalm 2:7–8: “I will proclaim the decree of the LORD, / who said to me, ‘You are my son; / today I am your father.’”</p> <p>Psalm 16:10: “For you will not abandon me to Sheol, / nor let your faithful servant see the pit.”</p>	<p>Acts 13:32–35: “It is written in the second psalm, ‘You are my son; this day I have begotten you.’ . . . “That is why he also says in another psalm, ‘You will not suffer your holy one to see corruption.’”</p>

The early Christians also saw connections between certain Old Testament prophecies and what Christ has accomplished by completely fulfilling salvation history. The following table lists some of the most common references used to show how Jesus, as the Messiah, fulfilled God’s saving plan for humanity.

Location	Description	Connection to Christ
Isaiah 9:1–6	Isaiah prophesies that the “people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” A child will be born to lead them and among his names will be “God-Hero” and “Prince of Peace.” His kingdom will be just and peaceful forever.	Jesus Christ is the Prince of Peace and the Son of God who forever rules the Kingdom of Heaven.
Isaiah 11:1–9	Isaiah prophesies about a coming ruler from the “stump of Jesse.” He shall “judge the poor with justice” and “with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked.” Even natural enemies will play together peacefully in his kingdom.	Jesus Christ is a descendant of Jesse (David’s father) who will bring justice and peace into the world.
Isaiah 52:13—53:12	This is one of the suffering servant passages in Isaiah. Isaiah speaks of a servant of the Lord who is “smitten for the sin of his people.” “The LORD laid upon him the guilt of us all” and “by his stripes we were healed.”	Jesus Christ suffered and died for our salvation.
Jeremiah 31:31–34	Jeremiah prophesies about a new covenant God will make with Israel and Judah: “I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts.”	The New Covenant is established in Jesus Christ. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ lives in every believer’s heart.
Ezekiel 34:11–31	Ezekiel prophesies that God will act like a good shepherd, rescuing his people, giving them safe pasture, and healing their injuries. He will “make a covenant of peace with them” and “free them from the power of those who enslaved them.”	In the Gospel of John, Christ declares that he is the Good Shepherd.



Ezekiel 37:1–14	Ezekiel has a vision of a valley of dry bones being resurrected and coming alive again. “O my people, I will open your graves and have you rise from them.”	With the coming of the New Covenant, all the faithful who have died will rise again, having been saved through the Passion, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.
Zechariah 9:9–10	Zechariah prophesies about a king and a “just savior.” He shall “proclaim peace to the nations” and “his dominion shall be from sea to sea.”	Jesus Christ is the promised king and just savior.

