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# FAITH AND THOUGHT

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Christian Revelation and modern research

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## EDITORIAL

It was stated in a recent issue of "Faith and Thought" (Vol 109, 2) that a new editor was being sought for the journal. As readers will see from the Chairman's report, a new editor has been appointed, and is, in fact, writing these remarks. These introductory notes are written with some trepidation, but I have been encouraged by help from members of the Institute, and in particular by help from the retiring editor, Dr. R.E.D. Clark. I am very heartened that Dr. Clark has agreed not only to assist in the change-over, but also to continue to write "News and Views", which he has made very much his own in the past. I think readers will agree that these short comments have always been very stimulating, and I am delighted that Dr. Clark agrees to continue with them. Accordingly, his name will appear in conjunction with these items, in the role of Consultant Editor.

This issue is also marked by a change in printer, and I should like to thank Mr. Finnely for assistance in this respect.

The current issue includes the four papers which were delivered at the Annual General Meeting in May, and I owe especial thanks to the authors for a very speedy delivery of their contributions, which has been a great encouragement to me.

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## NEWS AND VIEWS (R.E.D. CLARK)

## POLLUTION

When DDT was first introduced as an insecticide (in the early 1940s) it was often used irresponsibly and with harmful results. Nevertheless its effect upon the world as a whole was staggeringly beneficial - at least in terms of saving life, through the resultant rapid rise in population in many countries gave cause for concern.

Later a reaction came, due in no small measure to the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962. Legal battles followed in the USA; DDT was said to have presented "the world's worst pollution problem" and its sale was banned and still is banned in America. The story is retold by T.R. Dunlap in "*DDT, Scientists, Citizens and Public Policy*" (Princeton UP. 1981)

Dunlap's book was recently reviewed by Kenneth Mellanby, head of the British Nature Conservancy Experimental Station at Monk's Wood. Mellanby concludes that, "on a world scale the effects of the American ban on DDT have been disastrous as it has probably led to more deaths than the 1939-45 war". Millions of easily preventable deaths from malaria have followed in the wake of the ban, and too often much more dangerous insecticides have been used instead of DDT, resulting in human and animal casualties. Used correctly DDT is not dangerous: "Since 1970 we have learned that global contamination by DDT is *not* rising; levels in birds and fish are falling". Dunlap gives an excellent account of its use and of the legal battles which followed. Yet his book must be read with caution. He is highly prejudiced against DDT, and the scientific information he cites is now quite out of date, (*Times Literary Supplement*, 21 Aug. 1981).

In the anti-scientific stance shown by some conversationists, many Christians will discern a tendency to reject God's good gifts to man. DDT is cheap, easy to make, and wonderfully effective. In the many factories where it was manufactured in USA not a single fatality from its use was recorded.

Enthusiasm for preserving the environment is declining. "There is disturbing evidence from a number of countries that despite the pace of environmental degradation, the environment has been allowed to slip down the international agenda for action" says Dr. M. Talba of the UN Environment Programme, largely as a result of priorities being given to the arms race. Despite all the efforts of the 'Green' parties, plants and animals are becoming extinct in tropical rain forests faster than scientists have been able to classify or even identify them. An area of forest equal to half the size of Greece is being lost annually as a result of forest clearance. A cheerful note is sounded by the fact that the cleaning of the Thames now enables more species of fish to live in its waters than has been possible for a number of generations (UN Conference, reported *Times*, 14 June 1982): this hooking of a good-sized salmon, the first for many years, was widely publicized.

Certain very hard minerals (zirconolite, which is a calcium zirconium titanate, and perovskite, which is calcium titanate as found in nature) are of great age and often contain radioactive uranium and thorium. The minerals are sometimes found as pebbles in river sands. In the past they have been subjected to great pressures, high temperatures and severe leaching conditions, yet their lattice structures remain intact despite bombardment by alpha and beta particles over long geological periods.

These minerals can be prepared in the laboratory by mixing the appropriate metallic oxides and subjecting them to heat and pressure. With the addition of barium and aluminium a third mineral, a form of hollandite (barium aluminium titanate) which can absorb caesium into its lattice, also crystallises from the mix. If the three-mineral mixture (called synroc) is made from the oxides in the presence of radioactive wastes, radioactive elements are incorporated into the lattice structures of the minerals. Study of the natural occurrence of the minerals leads Professor E. Ringwood, a geologist of the Australian National University, to the conclusion that they will remain unchanged for at least a million years, if buried in the ground. This is more than sufficient for the radioactivity to decay to safe levels. It would seem, therefore, that a solution to the problem of safe disposal of radioactive wastes may be on the near horizon. (Article by Brian Lee, *New Scientists*, 23 April 1981, p 227).

It is natural for a Christian to think that if God intended man to utilize atomic energy, he would have left hints in nature to show us how wastes can be safely disposed of.

Later (*New Scientist Letters*, 14 May) two geochemists argued that under conceivable geological conditions, borosilicate glasses should be at least as effective as Synroc. If placed in boreholes made in solid rocks, leaching would be minimal and radioactive waste should be safe for millions of years.

Experiments recently carried out in USA are encouraging. If cylindrical canisters of waste are deposited in boreholes at a depth of 1 to 2.5 km they will of course heat up radioactively. The question is, will seepage through microcracks in the granite allow for the dissemination of the radioactivity into underground waters? Water was pumped into a borehole containing a heated simulated-waste container and the rate of seepage through the rock studied. It was found to fall off very rapidly - by factors of 10 or 100 within days or weeks. The reason is presumably, that silica is dissolved in the hot regions but crystallises out in the pores and cracks in the rock where the temperature is lower. Thus the high radioactivity of the wastes would of itself enable them to be safely sealed in position. (*Jour. of Geophysical Research* 10 April 1981, 86, 3002).

In addition to oil pollution of seas and lakes, pollution by radioactive wastes has been much in the news. The movement to burn coal in preference to building atomic power stations brings a rejoinder from Dr. S.J. Peerless of the Imperial College of Science and Technology, London. "Conservative estimates" he says "indicate that a typical American coal-fired station emits many more times radioactivity than the average nuclear station of similar capacity" This is because coal contains uranium and though the percentage is very low, the huge weight of coal burnt makes the radioactivity emitted far from negligible. Coal varies, of course, in its uranium content and the way it is burnt is important, but these are matters that need looking into before coal burning is much increased.

Most of the pollutants in air are, of course, washed out by rain. But it seems not to have been known, or at least appreciated, hitherto that even under dry conditions, wild grasses, especially hair grass, remove air pollutants (notably sulphate and lead) in a surprisingly effective way. (Clive Cookson, *Times*, 25 May 1981).

## NUCLEAR WAR AND ALLEGED RUSSIAN PLANS

Discussion and resolutions concerning the nuclear bomb continue endlessly. National governments are being asked to promise never to be the first to use nuclear weapons. But as Nature (300,2) asks "can that be intended seriously"? Either the declaration would mean nothing, or in some future war it will favour the side which is weaker in conventional forces. Another difficulty is that as time passes more and more of the smaller nations who are less responsible will gain, in fact are gaining, access to these weapons.

Yet another problem is that it is quite impossible at present to keep a proper inventory of plutonium and enriched uranium at the centres where they are manufactured. In 1981 over 10 kilograms of plutonium - (more than enough to make a bomb) - was missing in Windscale, Cumbria. It *could* have been stolen though this may not be the explanation. The point remains that if small quantities are stolen from time to time, no one is likely to be any the wiser. (*Times* 6 Nov 1982). According to a 1982 report (Joseph Gallacher of the University of Lancaster, *Nuclear Stocktaking*) Britain now holds nearly 2000 nuclear warheads, 570 being available for anti-submarine warfare. The current accumulation of surplus plutonium will make possible the production of many more in the near future. Military plutonium made at two reactors has been sold to the USA in return for enriched uranium, used both for submarine fuel and warheads. (*New Scientist* 28 Oct. 1982) The price of plutonium has now fallen from 10 to 4 dollars a gram, and there is over-capacity in plants for enrichment of uranium. (Nature 299, 773). Edward Teller, "father of the hydrogen bomb", recently published an article in *Readers' Digest* in which he said that an atomic war would not obliterate all life upon this planet, - which is almost certainly true, even if little is left of civilization.



The Russian news agency "Tass" replied vigorously, saying that Teller was revealing that he must have a vested interest in the arms race, and fears losing his cushy job as a presidential aide. It is the Russians who want peace and the suggestion that war is not too dangerous because it will leave some of humanity intact, must mean that capitalists are trying to counter peace proposals made by Russia. Vera Rich, who wrote on the subject in *Nature* (299, 769) pointed out that The Russians accepted the Teller thesis a long time ago: that they still believe in it is proved by their present interest in civil defence. However, Teller does seem to have made too much of his point. His claim that after Hiroshima and Nagasaki "bridges were open to traffic a day after the blast, trains ran on the second day and street cars were operating on the third" is hardly relevant seeing that these towns received help from neighbouring communities whose facilities were not destroyed. In an all-out war little help of this kind would be forthcoming.

In a Cambridge Union debate (10 Oct. 1980) Lord Chalfont, who claims to have read all the works of the Russian strategists, said that, without exception, they believe that the Russians are capable of fighting an atomic war and winning it. He emphasized that over years of effort the Russians had made agreement after agreement with the West, but had not honoured one of them.

Viktor Suvarov (pseudonym) a former tank commander in the Red Army, who defected to the West, has described the training he received. (*Inside the Soviet Army*, Hamish Hamilton 1982, £9.95 with extracts in *The Times*, 27 Sept and subsequent issues). The Russian generals, he tells us, have little use for defence: instead they plan a sudden preemptive attack. The enemy must be destroyed before the battle can begin. The attack which will use atomic weapons must be as short as possible and of the greatest possible intensity. It should be over in 1.5 - 2 hours. A vast number of reconnaissance plans (many pilotless) will follow, to be followed in turn by air attack with all available aircraft and missiles on the targets not destroyed in the first phase. Tank attacks with deep penetration follow, up to three weeks being allowed for this stage.

In Europe the Russians hope to win the war before Nato commanders have had time to obtain political approval to use nuclear weapons. Christopher Donnelly of the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst claims that much of the latest Soviet equipment has apparently been designed to fit into the new strategy. (4 Oct. 1982, *Times*).

Leonid Vladimirov tells us that he once viewed a technically secret film on a future war which is widely shown to the serving and reservist officers in the Soviet army. First the Soviets dropped an atomic bomb on 'enemy' territory. Paratroopers, wearing protective clothing, were landed immediately at the epicentre of the explosion, where no one opposed them: they subsequently surprised the 'enemy' beyond the zone of devastation. That there was no retaliation from the other side reveals a "Soviet strategic thinking of nuclear assault, not defence". (Letter, *Times* 30 Aug. 1982).

On the subject of tank attacks and neutron bombs, scientists in Switzerland calculate that protection of tank crews from neutron bombs would require enough shielding to reduce the radiation by a factor of one thousand. To date, no such shielding is possible; at best the radiation intensity can be reduced by a factor of ten or less. (*Nature* 299,390). The civilian population could be protected in deep shelters, but not the military.

#### *Atomic Bomb Tests*

The dire results of the first British atomic test on Australian aboriginals only came to light to the public eye recently (see this *Journal*, 107, 69, 1980). The same is now happening in the USA where, in the 1950's around 100 above-ground tests were carried out. People who lived 100 to 150 miles away enjoyed the spectacle of the blood-red clouds rolling overhead. A girl, then 19, describes how she and others sat on a ridge on Utah mountain in April 1953 to enjoy the sight; she has never recovered. Sheep 150 miles from the tests could no longer stand up; they lost their hair, and their skin was covered with purple blotches. 1192 plaintiffs are now suing the US government, who gave them no warning and suppressed fall-out information. Many in the area have died since, as a result of the radiation. (*Times* 18 Oct, 1982).

Britain is now (in 1983) involved in similar discussion, and possible litigation in connection with service-men who watched the tests of the first British nuclear bombs in the Pacific between 1952 and 1958. It is claimed that the incidence of cancer among these men is abnormally high.

## GENETIC ENGINEERING

Since the early restrictions were lifted, genetic engineers have been having things their own way. But fears are growing. It is felt that it may often be necessary to release newly made organisms deliberately, eg, to eat oil slicks in the sea. Novel organisms may find new niches and become ineradicable pests. It is pointed out that nearly one-half of the insect pests in the US originated abroad. Legal issues are involved too. If a new organism is deliberately released, who will pay the bill if it spreads and causes extensive damage? A move is afoot to class such products, legally, as new chemical substances and implement the laws which apply to these. Much trouble may lie ahead (*Nature* 301, 572).

It is reported that the first artificial chromosome has been constructed, and that yeast cells copy it faithfully. Though a vast amount of work lies ahead, the possibility that many genetic diseases will in time be curable now seems increasingly likely. (*New Scientist*, 22 Sept 1983, p 837; *Nature*, 305, 189)

Many bacteria, such as are found on the surface of vegetation produce ice nuclei when the temperature is only just below freezing point (about  $-1.8^{\circ}\text{C}$ ). When the nuclei are present, ice will spread in a plant, resulting in frost damage. Experiments in which antibiotics were applied to kill the bacteria have shown that in the absence of ice-nucleation bacteria function because they produce a protein, the gene for which has now been isolated. It is proposed to make use of genetically-engineered bacteria which do not produce this ice-forming protein, though in other ways identical. If such were used in food-producing plants, crops might no longer suffer damage from mild frosts. Field trials, due to start early in 1984, are being proposed at a site near Lake Tulane, California. Environmental groups are reacting vigorously, being fearful lest recombinant DNA mutants, once released into the environment, might cause unforeseen but irreparable damage. Would eco-systems be destroyed or damaged? It has even been suggested that the frost-resistant bacteria might rise into the upper atmosphere, stopping the natural formation of ice crystals, and disrupting the world's climatic patterns. It is argued, responsibly, that far more work should be done to identify possible dangers before recombinant bacteria are released. (*Nature*, 305, 262).

If, in the end, success with experiments of this kind is achieved, world food supplies might be greatly increased.

## CLIMATE

Predictions of climate are always difficult. A rise in the temperature of the earth might make the ice slip in Antarctica, thereby rapidly raising the level of the seas and causing widespread flooding. But recent measurements indicate that the heat received from the sun is far from constant, and a recent calculation indicates that a fall of only 0.13% might cause the onset of an ice age. The orthodox (Milankovitch) theory at the present time is that there is a rhythm in the elipsity of the earth's orbit around the sun, the period of the cycle being around 100,000 years - which is the average period between successive ice ages over the past million years or so. This rhythm results in changes of 0.18% in the heat received from the sun.

After many earlier warnings that the increased concentration of  $\text{CO}_2$  in the atmosphere resulting from the burning of fossil fuels could produce a rise in the temperature of the earth, with possible serious consequences, fears recently subsided. S.Idso, R.Newell and T.Dopplick have recently argued that the effect is likely to be small, and the change in climate insignificant. The Climate Review Panel of the US National Academy of Sciences has now announced the result of a fresh intensive study of the subject, and the earlier fears have been confirmed. A rise in temperature increases evaporation, and the subsequent increased water content of the air increases the "greenhouse effect", a fact largely overlooked by the authors mentioned. It is calculated that a doubling of the  $\text{CO}_2$

content of air could raise the average temperature of the earth's surface by 3° C, and that with present trends this is likely before the middle of the next century. The effect of this rise would certainly be extensive, and changes in global climate patterns would follow. On the other hand, the increased rainfall might result in the recovery of land which, as a result of human activities, has become desert. (Times, 27 July (1982).

There has been much discussion concerning the possible effect of man-introduced chemicals in the upper atmosphere. Dire consequences were predicted by some as a result of the introduction of fluorocarbons into the atmosphere, or the effect of vapour trails from high flying aeroplanes (Concorde etc). Now the effect of a series of launches of the space shuttle is being looked at with concern. At each launch the upper stage rockets, which use solid fuel, liberate 150 tons of aluminium oxide into the atmosphere. Allowing for its deposition, eventually with the rain, it is reckoned that the regular launches planned (one a week) will mean that 1000 tons of the aluminium oxide will always be present in the upper atmosphere. This could double the nuclei available for ice nuclei to form at the level of the cirrus clouds. The increased reflection of the sun's light and heat back into space might result in a cooling of the earth. (*Nature* 298, 830).

There are many unknowns but the tampering with nature on a large scale is certainly hazardous.

## LACK OF JUSTICE

In the name of justice, payments are made to the victims of the ignorance and carelessness of others such as factory owners. The victims may be workers who have suffered as a result of handling materials used in the manufacture of goods which everyone uses in their daily lives. Those employed in the asbestos industry are often in the news, and insurance companies are reported to have paid out about £58,000 million in compensation. Thousands of law-suits are now pending in the USA, and one multimillion dollar company has filed for bankruptcy as a result. Vast sums will change hands, but for every £3 paid to victims, lawyers and doctors will pocket £5. (Times 27 August 1982). The media seem never to ask whether asbestos, rather than tobacco, is the cause of the killer disease, asbestosis. (Faith and Thought 1980, 107, 8)

Except for a few at the top of the ladder, writers are perhaps the most poorly paid members of our community. The Public Lending Right was passed by Parliament to remedy this situation at least to a small extent. But authors are now disgusted to learn that before they can register for payment because their books have been lent out by public libraries, they must swear that they are who they say they are before a member of the legal profession after payment of a fee (have seen it quoted as £2)! They have discovered too, that not only must every new book be covered by a new oath and a new fee, but that the same applies to every new edition of titles already registered! (*Times*, 10 Aug. 1983). The result of course will be that sensible minor authors (my own total income from royalties for 1982-3 amounted to £25 REDC) will not bother to register, and the money thus saved will accrue to the writers of the best-sellers, who least need the money.

This is the way that human attempts at administering justice often work out in the end. To pay compensation to those injured because of their work seemed so reasonable as did the attempt to help impoverished writers. But for themselves, at least, Christians will not feel upset: Jesus did not receive much by way of justice!

## SHORT NOTES (R. E. D. CLARK)

### *Locusts.*

The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation claims that "The World may have seen the last of the ancient scourge of the locust" (*New Scientist*, 12 April 1983). The international satellites Landstat and Meteostat are working perfectly, sending to earth pictures of the locust-infected desert areas. They give warning of where conditions are such that locusts may swarm and invade crop-growing areas, so that measures can at once be taken to stop breeding or bring it to an end, (See also this JOURNAL 101, 3; 104 87 where attention is drawn to the fact that locusts are not a feature of the judgements at the end of our age).

### *Electric fish.*

If we see design in nature, it is difficult to resist the conviction (even though it is unprovable) that many animals have been created directly or indirectly for the benefit of man. A further possible instance of this is the elephant-trunk fish, *Gnathonemus petersi* of West Africa. This fish lives in murky surroundings, but can "see" by emitting electrical impulses and picking up reflections from objects around. The fish is highly responsive to impurities in water, and the rate at which it emits impulses falls immediately it detects unpleasant chemicals. For

example, it responds to 3 parts in 10 million of lead in water. Its responses are much more rapid than those of the usual chemical tests for trace impurities, and it gives warning of the new pollutants which are constantly being introduced into rivers from factories. Three German cities now use this fish to monitor their waste supplies, the impulses being easy to pick up. (New Scientist, 28 July, 1983, P 270)

#### *Atom Bomb Casualties in Russia.*

Mikhail Klochko a Stalin Prizeman and with the Soviet 'Manhattan Project', in Russia, tells a terrible story of how Stalin ordered the Russians to make the atomic bomb. The bomb was ordered in 1945 and Stalin had it in 1949., but only at the cost of terrible suffering to his country. Scientists and engineers who knew nothing of the dangers were set to work regardless and vast numbers died, often after long illnesses. The author estimates that the number killed in Russia exceeded the deaths at Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined . (New Scientist, 23 June 1983, p 845).

#### *Exports of Plutonium*

The exports of plutonium from nuclear generating stations has occasioned a good deal of disturbing comment. Dr. R.V. Hesketh, a member of the Society of Friends, was recently dismissed from the Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB) with which he had worked for 23 years. The reason for his dismissal has not yet been given, but many of his fellow-scientists suspect that it is because, together with Professor Martin Ryle, he has drawn attention to the implicit contradiction between the statement in the official CEGB history of 1982, viz "The Americans also agreed to take some plutonium for military purposes", and the parliamentary answer of Feb 4 1983 " No plutonium from the CEGB nuclear programme has ever been exported for use in weapons". (Letter from 10 scientists in Times, 19 July, 1983; correspondence in New Scientist, 7 and 28 July, 1983, etc.)

That plutonium has been exported to the USA in quantities of kilograms if not tons is admitted and "no one has explained satisfactorily why the USA needed plutonium if not to make weapons". Plutonium has few other uses, and "the extent of the trade far exceeds any known non-military use for the element". (New Scientist, 17 Feb. 1982, p 422).

#### *Miseries of space travel*

Until recently cosmonauts have been presented in the Soviet press as super-human beings free from human frailties, emotional or otherwise. However, parts of the diary of Valentin Lebedev, who was

in space orbiting the earth for 211 days last year, have now been published. Emotionally, he and his companion had a difficult time. He speaks of feeling irritable and depressed, of the "debris of human relationships" which led up to the historic flight, of days which were increasingly hard to live through, of a nerve-racking time, of difficulties which they both had in falling asleep, of fears that their difficultly - established relationship would be disrupted by a forthcoming visit by other space men, of disgust with the food provided (save for the soup) and finally of their landing on earth in a blinding snow storm. Hardly an encouraging story for those who dream of long dourneys beyond the solar system! (*Times* 16 Aug 1983).

### *Drought*

Two of the three projected volumes of *Drought and man : the 1972 Case History* by R.V. Garcia et al (Pergamon) appeared in 1982. It is described in *Nature* 302, 635 as "A study in exploitation: of poorer countries by rich ones and, within nations, of the poor classes of society by the rich. In particular it deals with the processes by which these forms of exploitation render the poor increasingly vulnerable to the impact of drought:."

### *High temperature bacteria*

Exceedingly hot water issues from volcanic rifts encrusted with metallic sulphides on the floors of the deep ocean. Here, sulphur bacteria are found which flourish at 250° C or even higher temperatures. At such great pressures, sea water boils at 460° C. On removing some of the bacteria, they were found to thrive in boiling water, and even at 250° C under pressure growth was rapid. These findings are surprising because proteins denature when heated, and 120° C is usually considered enough to kill all forms of life. It seems possible that at very high pressure protein structure is held together, ensuring stability. It is thought by some that these forms of high temperature life are responsible for discharging methane, hydrogen, and carbon monoxide into the sea. One wonders if high temperature life was present in the early ocean. (*Nature*, 302, 423 and 303, 381). Large white "worms" which flourish near the vents were recently shown on TV.

### *Erosion in China*

The summer of 1981 saw vast flooding along the upper reaches of the Yangtse river. Several thousands of people were drowned, and millions lost their homes. Deforestation over a wide area is a possible cause. Topsoil from the denuded hillsides now poses a threat to the prosperous lowlands, where the river will silt up, causing havoc unless a large programme of tree planting can be implemented. (*Times*, 4 Sept. 1981).

*Time*

As Augustine noted in ancient times, the idea of time is exceedingly puzzling. It is no less puzzling today but scientists have been trying to make it look more respectable, even to the point of thinking about it much as one might think of a material substance: it is claimed, for instance, that time, like matter, suddenly came into existence at the Big Bang, before which it did not exist. In a recent book Michael Shallis (*On Time*, Burnett, 1983) argues that in physics time is treated as a series of abstractions which, though they are useful in many connections, have little to do with the flowing movement of life which concerns us intimately and deeply. Expressed as a number, and mathematically, it is easy to speak of negative times which have no meaning whatsoever. Nor can we imagine the meaning, in personal terms, of millions or thousands of millions of years. The time of experience does not even move at the same uniform rate as the time of physics: its rate of passage depends upon body temperature and upon the state of our consciousness which may be altered by drugs or by natural sleep. In speaking of periods as long or short, we commonly compare them with physical time. We may say that the day of judgement has been long delayed, yet the sleep of death will almost certainly condense time, as does natural sleep. The coming of the Lord is near for all of us especially for the old: lapse of physical time will probably prove irrelevant.

*Number theory*

Th human mind seems able to twist every form of knowledge into an aid for killing. Number theory, which is concerned with finding out whether a large number is prime (and if not, what its factors are) is "usually thought by outsiders to be one of the purest and least applicable areas of mathematics". To discover whether a number 'n' can be factorized, it is always possible in theory to try all divisors up to the square root of 'n'. With a 40 - digit number and a fast computer this would take about a million years, although mathematicians are now finding quicker ways. Alas, such seemingly useless calculations may now be of military importance in connection with coding. (*Nature*, 302, 661).

*Excessive labelling*

As the years pass, the official bodies who like to write to us seem to rejoice in identifying us with ever-lengthening strings of letters and figures. Sir Eric Smith FRS writes to the Times (5 April, 1983), to say that the South West Water Authority has assigned to him a code number which contains 40 digits and letters, finishing with an 'x'. This is enough, surely, to assign a tag to every atom in our world. He finishes "Could they please be asked to stop this nonsense, reduce their staff accordingly, and to say to



whom, or to which part of his or her person the terminal 'x' of my almost interminable address should be applied?" Nonsense? Or could there be something sinister about this development? The assignment of long lists of digits makes it difficult, if not impossible, for individuals to know how or where information concerning them is filed. Convenient for a police state?

#### *Astronautics*

It is encouraging to learn that astronautics, though largely developed for military purposes, is sometimes put to good use. Two Soviet cosmonauts, after spending 47 days in their orbiting space station spotted a new lake which had formed 12,000 feet up in an inaccessible mountainous region. They were able to warn their ground station with the result that a channel was dug to drain away the water and several towns were saved from unexpected flooding. (*Times*, 15 Aug, 1983).

#### *SETI*

Not long ago, SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) all but closed down. Despite the feelings of most astronomers that it is a waste of time and money, Carl Sagan appears to have revived it again. A multi-channel analyser is to scan 74,000 radio channels simultaneously in an attempt to detect non-natural radio signals. Hopefully, this number will be raised later to 8 million. The chance of success seem remote indeed, and a negative result will never convince those who are imbued with the conviction that there must be other intelligent beings 'out there', because the universe is so vast. (*Nature*, 301 186).

#### *A new food*

It is encouraging to note that a new cereal, *triticale*, pronounced triticaily, a cross between rye and wheat has been introduced on a world scale. It appears to be the first significant new food crop to be introduced over the past 5000 years, and is already proving valuable in the Third World. (*New Scientist*, 12 Jan. 1983, p 97).

#### *Laser Weapons Research continues apace*

The USA government has already spent 2,000 million dollars trying to make them, so far with little success. Lasers have however been developed which will transmit pencils of light energy equivalent to several million watts. So far it has rarely proved possible to focus the beams on targets with sufficient speed, though an occasional success is claimed. Another problem is that if they

are used on the earth, the atmosphere is heated, its refractive index changed and the beam spreads out. The difficulties ahead are obviously enormous and many scientists are sceptical as to whether they will ever be overcome, but the enormous expenditure on research continues. Similar work is presumably in hand in Russia, but the Russians are more secretive than the Americans. "The reality of these threats remains open to doubt. The Pentagon's love for scary stories rivals any addict of late-night horror movies" writes Jess Hecht (*New Scientist*, 10 June 1982).

#### *Western ethics*

West Germany's opinion pollsters have conducted a survey to discover German attitudes towards truth and falsehood in politics. About 40% thought that it was permissible for a politician to tell lies to foreign statesmen, and even on TV, only 80% thought that politicians should always tell the truth. (*Times*, 2 March 1983).

#### *Brain research*

Some interesting ideas about the human brain are circulating. The orthodox view (Sperry, Ornstein), established over the past decade, is that the left hemisphere of the brain controls the right side of the body, and is concerned with language, logical, mathematical and scientific thought, whereas the right hemisphere governs the left side, and is concerned with creative thinking, but lacks the ability of verbal expression. In an interesting article (*New Scientist*, 11 Sept. 1980 p 790) Stan Gooch tells us that until recently surgeons have been reluctant to remove the left hemisphere when a tumour was present, lest the patient lost the powers of self-expression. However, removal has now been carried out on four occasions, and each time the other side of the brain has been able to take over the function of the missing half. In all cases, recovery was remarkably rapid. Gooch suggests that the two halves of the brain may interfere with one another. If one of them is injured its removal may then result in great improvement in the patient's condition.

#### *Testimony*

Radio 'Hams' (amateurs) in the 1920s claimed that after broadcasting a message it would sometimes come back to them in recognisable form after a long interval which might amount to several minutes. Since a radio message would travel right round the earth (assuming a suitable disposition of electrons in the ionosphere) in about one eighth of a second, these reports were long considered quite beyond belief. Yet even time signals were received at times, manifestly late! The subject has now been studied afresh by Robert Freyman, and his conclusion has been confirmed by Russian

scientists. It is claimed that under freak conditions a radio signal can get trapped in a 'conduction plasma duct' created by the solar wind. When the duct collapses the message is released and returned to earth. (*New Scientist*, 11 Aug. 1983 p. 407). As with the Christian miracles it is so easy to disbelieve what we cannot explain!

### *Science and Religion in Schools*

Mr. Martin Rogers, chief master of King Edward's School, Birmingham, recently invited a number of public schools to ask their 13-14 year olds to write essays on "What I Believe". When the essays were set as part of the religious curriculum they were orthodox in tone, but when set as exercises in English they showed that von Daniken's *Chariots of the Gods* is still highly influential. Jesus was an alien from another planet; His Ascension "just another blast off" etc. Many boys found S.F. interpretations entirely convincing, only one calling them "total garbage". At that age few of the boys claimed to be atheists or agnostics and they often wrote with "almost burning intensity" showing a strongly felt need for religious belief. Many saw science and religion as totally contrary. "The Bible, they believed, either had to be taken literally, and the Genesis creation story accepted as scientifically accurate, or rejected as having been disproved by advances in scientific knowledge". (Clifford Longley, *Times*, 7 April, 1983).

The half-hearted teaching of RI in many schools is a betrayal of the Education Act of 1944, designed to ensure that the evil irreligion of Nazism did not infect Britain, said Mr. Rhodes Boyson (Minister responsible for schools) recently. "The real betrayal is for a school to leave children without religious knowledge or to treat it as a branch of anthropology or as a Moscow-style tourist walk round a museum of religion". (*Times* 31 Jan 1983).

E. W. IVES

## HISTORY AND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

On Tuesday 10 May 1983 in the Guildhall of the City of London, Alexander Solzhenitsyn delivered the Templeton Address. It was a profoundly prophetic utterance. Not only does Solzhenitsyn look the part, but his words come with the 'Thus saith the Lord' of the genuine prophet. His theme was the great disasters and dangers of today, indeed of the whole of the twentieth century, and the prophetic word was 'Men have forgotten God - that is why all this has happened'.

The address was essentially a critique of recent history. It told of a twentieth century in which men adopted evil policies, easy options and short-term perspectives. The precipitating event was the First World War when Europe, blind to God, 'fell into a range of self-mutilation'. Later, the West deliberately turned its back on the agonies of Revolutionary Russia, ignored the dismemberment of Eastern Europe after 1945, and chose to evade its responsibility by sheltering under the 'nuclear umbrella'. And what underlay all this was a spiritual failure, the lack of 'a divine dimension', the substitution of 'the pursuit of material success' in place of 'the quest for worthy spiritual growth'. As he said:

"The failings of human consciousness, deprived of its divine dimension, have been a determining factor in all the major crimes of this century".

I do not suppose that any Christian can remain unmoved by Solzhenitsyn's words. It seems totally of a piece with the utterances of the Old Testament prophets, and it would be perfectly possible to gloss the key sentences with up to a dozen biblical citations. What, after all, is the theme 'Men have forgotten God - that is why all this has happened' but a latter day version of 'Because they forsook the Lord . . . therefore hath he brought all this evil upon them'. It also chimes in with the way in which Christians see history, as not only the record of God's dealing with men but the mechanism by which God acts in judgement and purpose. As a religion which asserts the action of a supreme being in the creating, continuance and final destiny of the universe in which we live, and also asserts that this supreme being is engaged in a redemptive dialogue with that universe and with mankind in particular, Christianity must be revealed in giving a meaning to history.

The *Times* editorial seemed to approve of at least the generality of Solzhenitsyn's address, but a historian must be more doubtful. Solzhenitsyn appears to have a decidedly romantic view of the past. He claims that:

"In its past Russia did know a time when the social ideal was not fame, or riches, or material success, but a pious way of life",

and he locates this time before the seventeenth century. But is he correct in saying this, and how do we know? He criticises the changes associated with Peter the Great as:

"favouring the economy, the state, and the military at the expense of the religious spirit and national life".

Perhaps, but it is hard to imagine the story of Russian land mass without a centralising effort by the Tsar; the probable alternative would have been Balkanisation. Solzhenitsyn's condemnation of the West for its failure to respond to the challenge of the Russian Civil War is equally emotional. It only has force if it is possible to suggest in some detail what the West should have attempted and how that could have been achieved. The way the prophet looks at history and the way the historian looks at it are quite distinct. In historical terms the Biblical Kingdom of Israel reached its apogee of political importance in the reign of King Omri who rates only ten verses in the Book of Kings and the damning: 'wrought evil in the eyes of the Lord'.

Confusion about the distinction between history and prophecy underlies much of the popular misunderstanding about the relationship between history and the Christian faith. Believers all too frequently assume - contrary to scriptural evidence - that divine purpose in history is clear. After all, was it not the case that God warned that he would give the Jews over to their enemies if they forsook him? Given that they did forsake God, the prophetic word seems obvious. Yet Jeremiah was a prophet commenting on events in a way opposed by the majority of prophets, and was recommending a course of action which it was politically impossible to follow. Prophecy, as the Bible insists, is a matter of spiritual discernment and divine experience; the word of the Lord 'comes'. This is not synonymous with studying history. If you like to put it this way, prophecy is a matter of inspiration; history of analysis.

Perhaps a modern analogy will help to establish the contrast. I am myself a strong advocate of national defence and of the pursuit of the reduction of international tensions, and the armaments which flow from those tensions, by the process of multilateral negotiation. I make no bones about saying, as a Christian, that such a course seems to me to be the most moral and Christ-like one to take in an immoral world. Equally, as a Christian and a historian I say that, on past evidence, this course appears to offer the best

hope for peace. But so, of course, did Egypt seem the safest refuge for the survivors of Jeremiah's Jerusalem - and they were wrong, and he had told them that they were wrong. The message of history and the message of prophecy were contradictory. I must, therefore, ask myself whether the illogical policy of one-sided nuclear disarmament might not be a prophetic word to me and my generation, despite the dictates of reason and historical experience. My current judgement on that is 'no', that Bruce Kent and his colleagues are, unconsciously, what the Bible terms 'lying prophets' who say 'peace and there is no peace'. Whether I am correct in this is however not the point here. What matters is the example. The allegedly prophetic word is different in kind from the avowedly historical and rational assessment. In the one there may be divine revelation; in the other is human wisdom. God reveals himself in history to the prophet, not to the historian.

Confusion between the role of the prophet and the role of the historian is compounded by widespread misunderstanding of what the historian does and does not do, can and cannot do. Two ideas are widespread. The first imagines the study of history to be concerned with the discovery and accumulation of factual data about the past, and the arrangement of such data into its proper and coherent pattern. Since events either did or did not happen, a completely successful piece of historical scholarship will be one which establishes the truth about the past once and for all. Although limitations of data may make this often no more than a goal of perfection, knowledge of the past can, in principle, be ultimate and final. To the question, 'Did William the Conqueror invade England in 1066?', the answer is an unqualified 'yes'.

The alternative point of view is urged by those who see the force of the qualification 'limitations of data'. Information about many past events and periods is, they urge, scarce and patchy. What is more, it is all suspect in the same way that we regard all contemporary documentation as suspect. Has the gas board read the meter correctly; is the policeman telling the truth about what happened; did the 1979 Conservative government plan to use unemployment to force down wages, as Newspaper A says, or was unemployment a consequence of earlier failure to control wages - see Newspaper B; in the election of June 1983, did Mrs. Thatcher 'cut and run' - or was she driven by newspaper speculation? In none of these cases do we use less than a pinch of salt, so why should our approach to the past be different? Furthermore, we know that accounts of past events differ - Mrs. Thatcher's version of the Falklands' campaign was quite different from that of Tam Daiyell - and personal prejudice and commitment does not diminish as events recede. The Catholic historian and the Protestant historian of the Reformation can appear to be writing about quite different experiences; for Halevy, Methodism in England saved the country from the tragedy of social revolution, while for E.P. Thompson, Methodism mediated industrial work discipline to the masses. Thus, it is argued, not only is history based on sources which are inherently

unreliable, but it reflects the viewpoint of the person who is writing it. The conclusion, therefore, is that a great deal of history - and certainly the more interesting part - is a matter of opinion. As Voltaire said, 'history is a myth which has been generally accepted'.

Neither the extreme 'factual' notion of what history is, nor the extreme 'speculative' interpretation coincides with what historians actually do. Historians are, in essence, engaged in the business of problem-solving on the basis of the proper collection and evaluation of data. In other words, what they do is cognate in kind with much of what is done in the higher echelons of the civil service or business. We do however have one distinction which is both an advantage and a disadvantage. Our material is final, the total of whatever evidence has survived from the past and *no more*. Not for us the luxury of calling for more data. The historian must accept that there will be cases in which he simply will not know. But, on the other hand, this gives him a great strength because he is basing his work on the reality of what is there. The ultimate in history is the evidence itself. Of course we can discuss meanings and interpretations - as one would in any problem-solving exercise - but this is a discussion of what *is* there, not an exchange of opinion and ignorance: does the evidence suggest that our economy is beginning to recover, or does it suggest the opposite; does the evidence suggest that protestantism did give rise to capitalism, or does it refute such a theory? The *data* of history are fixed, final and ultimate. When two colleagues go to the Public Record Office and call for the same file, they see the same documents; provided their technical skills are equal, they read the same words; they may argue about what it all means, but they will be arguing about what is *real*. Those who say that textual evidence is 'nothing but this' or 'nothing but that' - and the point is relevant to Biblical Studies as well as history - do not sufficiently appreciate the fact that, in the last resort, the texts themselves are our knowledge.

It is with the evidence that the historian begins. His first task is to assemble all the relevant materials and then to subject these to detailed technical criticism, assessing first of all their identity and status. That, of course, was the stage at which in the Spring of 1983, Lord Dacre's evaluation of the so-called 'Hitler Diaries' came unstuck: he was deceived and pressured into accepting the provenance of the documents and the authenticity of the handwriting, paper etc, where he should have made sure himself. Once he is certain of exactly what he has in front of him, and of its authenticity, the historian next proceeds to assess its implications and the relationships within his material. Had the 'Hitler Diaries' been genuine, scholars would have gone frantically to work, investigating how they were composed, what was their purpose, how the material in them related to other known Hitler material, and so forth. Finally historians go on to construct a story and explanation of the past on the basis of the detailed assessment which they have undertaken, relating it to existing narratives and interpretations.

Again, had the 'Hitler Diaries' been genuine, after about six months one could have expected preliminary accounts to begin to appear showing how the new material modified our understanding of the man, the events, and the issues - first in particular detailed episodes and later in general accounts of the Nazi years.

The historian's pattern of work is, therefore, akin to that of the maker of jigsaw puzzles. The first task is to tip out the box and make sure that any obviously extraneous pieces are set aside - an important exercise, simple for the jig-saw puzzler but, as Lord Dacre and many others know to their cost, one fraught with pitfalls for the historian. The next stage is to sort the pieces and to get some idea of what they are and where they might fit. Then it becomes possible to see how individual pieces join together, then small sections, later those less-defined features which lie between the more obvious patterns. And so one proceeds until an overall design appears. Of course, as puzzle enthusiasts will know, progress does not always follow what is the logical sequence. The appearance of a local pattern can lead to one area being established before another. The same is true of history, where very detailed examination of one obviously important episode or problem can go alongside deep ignorance elsewhere. A jig-saw can also be started with one known or expected feature, and built up from there. So with history. There is no definitive picture of the past to work from, but we do have in the secondary literature a record of what previous history puzzlers made of it. Very often, indeed - life being short - we have to take for granted those parts of the puzzle on which there is an established consensus. It is dangerous, but one has to start somewhere. But however the detail of our research may depart from the classic progression, the logic of what we do is there, unbroken - collection, technical assessment, evaluation, positioning and interpretation.

Like all illustrations, the jig-saw analogy is not completely exact. In the first place, a puzzler can usually establish whether he has the right solution by consulting the picture on the box, even in those advanced puzzles where the pieces have all but identical shapes and can be assembled in different ways. In history, however, the pieces can very often be put together in different ways and there is no box to refer to. The only test of what is the right order is the neatness and congruence of the fit - just as it is in those very advanced puzzles which give you no picture at all. We need to remember, too, that the jig-saw *does* have a pattern built into it, where history may not, or if it does, we may be ignorant of it, or it may be beyond our understanding. The historian thus has often to begin with a possible pattern in mind, and look to see whether it will make sense of the past. The task is further complicated by the fact that important human pieces must be missing. Despite attempts at writing psychological history - was Hitler a psychopath or Luther the victim of chronic constipation - we can never know all that is going on in the minds and hearts of people in the past. Add to that, gaps produced by loss or destruction of



material, and (especially with the oral material) the failure to make any adequate record in the first place; compound this, in the case of recent history, by a weight of evidence which compels a selective approach, and it is easy to see how the methodology I have outlined is difficult to apply in the field, or, rather, in the library, and why as materials are discovered and historical approaches change, the puzzle of the past has to be remade again and again.

There is an obvious connection between this methodology and that of other areas in life. I have already instanced problem-solving in government and industry, but the same can be said of work in the natural sciences. It is not fully the so-called 'scientific method' since the distinctive feature of that is experimentation. I cannot re-fight the Battle of Waterloo to determine whether Napoleon was right when he claimed that he did defeat the Duke of Wellington only to fall himself to a fresh Prussian army which his generals had allowed through. But the progress of the historian from observation through evaluation to interpretation or hypothesis is one which is basic to science, and many scientists will have a fellow-feeling when it comes to the contrast between the cool theory and the actual application of the method in day-to-day research.

All this may seem some distance away from the theme of 'History and the Christian Faith', but I think not. Only by knowing the limitations of the historical process can we avoid the pitfalls. Take, for example, the historical basis for Christianity. My own view - and I will state it bluntly - is that without its historical basis, Christianity is a delusion. It might still contain glimpses of ultimate metaphysical realities but these would be a sediment left when the soda-water of religious fizz had been thrown away. To give but two brief examples. I cannot see that the central rite of Christianity, the Lord's Supper, the Communion, the Eucharist, the Mass, whatever its label, has any meaning at all unless the Last Supper and Crucifixion took place broadly as the New Testament records. If Christ did not say 'Father forgive them, they know not what they do', all we have is a fiction of self-sacrifice on a par with that of Sidney Carton in *A Tale of Two Cities* and far less than many real life examples.

So Christianity must be based on history, but what can the historian say about it? The answer is, more than might be imagined but less than is often expected. I am not an ancient historian, but my reading of the immediate experts and an application of general historical criteria and method, convince me that the existence of Christ, his execution in Judaea between 26 and 37 AD and the survival of his followers, can all be established from hostile sources in a way which is congruent with the story as told from the Christian side, and at the level of proof which is appropriate for such an event in the ancient world. Christian sources, of course, need to be treated with much more caution and with a recognition, both of the

problem of authenticity, and of the danger that belief in a truth about something or somebody can affect the way in which the evidence of the event or person is preserved. But that said, there is every reason to accept that the New Testament faithfully preserves the record of the life of Christ of those 'nearest to the facts and whose life and outlook had been moulded by them'.

Thus far historical method does bring you, but it cannot go further. In particular it cannot help at all with the supernatural, and particularly with the problems of the miraculous. The reason for this is not that miracles are improbable - if they were not, they would not be miracles - nor that they are alien to science which, in the later twentieth century, is fully aware of the factor of randomness. The reason is that miracles cannot be fitted into the historical method which we have been discussing. The historian examines the sources. He finds that they allege a miracle. His response is to scrutinise the documents to attempt to discover what happened and why men claimed a supernatural event. In many cases he will have no problem in deciding that the miraculous element was in the eye of the beholder; it is not hard to imagine how Halley's comet, appearing as it did at Easter 1066, could be represented as a divine warning of the disasters which would follow King Harold's sacrilegious breaking of the oath he had taken to Duke William of Normandy in 1064. At other times the historian will be left with the unexpected or the apparently inexplicable. But this is as far as he can go; he cannot postulate explanations beyond human experience. History, in just the same way as science, is an autonomous, self-authenticating discipline with a range of explanations which can be demonstrated by its methodology; if the method cannot demonstrate the explanation, it is inadmissible. 'God' is no more a permitted answer to the historian's question: 'how did Germany lose the Second World War?' than it is to the scientific question: 'how do flowers grow?'. The historian can no more prove miracles than the scientist can find the soul.

Take, for example, the central miracle of the Christian faith, the Resurrection. The historian can say a great deal about this which is important. He can point to the strong arguments that Christ's tomb was empty, and to the unsatisfactory nature of naturalistic explanations for this; he can point to the early and vigorous proclamation of the Resurrection in the very place where Christ had been crucified; he can justly claim that there is an overwhelming case for accepting that something so far unexplained did take place. But he cannot positively claim a miracle. He has no criteria to establish that Christ did rise from the dead. Even supposing that we had an eye-witness to the event, there would still be no way in which we could be sure that what was reported was not the result of error, hallucination or pious credulity. The historian can only guard against these dangers by judging against general experience, but there is no general experience in the case of a miracle. Miracles are unique events and there are no comparisons by which the historian can establish that they occur. He cannot exclude them, he may even note an unexplained blank in the story, but

anything more is impossible. Other Christians may condemn him for adhering to what they see as 'secularistic assumptions', but this only displays their ignorance of what history is about. They should consider the alternative. If the historian who is a Christian should admit miracle into his account, by what reason should another scholar not admit extra-terrestrial influences and little green men from Mars? Integrity demands from the historian the answer 'I cannot know'

The strict limitations which determine the sorts of statement which historians may legitimately make, are not only important when considering the historicity of Jesus Christ. In the Bible, the Incarnation is only ever understood as part of a story of divine redemptive purpose which started with the fall of primitive man and will achieve final consummation at 'the end of the age'. The life and work of our Lord is the great lens which concentrates the rays of God's love before Christ - BC - and beams this out over all periods and places so that time itself becomes AD - the year of the Lord. But although this is something which is taking place in history - something, indeed, which is the supreme and central theme of history - it still remains unidentifiable to the historian. There is no way in which the Christian historian can interpret events from a divine point of view. He is simply not in that position. He is in the position of men before the eighteenth century who lived as we do in a world of electro-magnetic and nuclear force but who had no awareness that these forces were at work.

Here, perhaps, it may be objected that men before the Scientific Revolution still had the evidence of natural phenomena around them, and that the historian must, equally, have the evidence before him of God's action in history. Certainly, but the conceptual frame work of the pre-scientific world restricted men to explanations within their own immediate terms, and the student of history, as we have seen, is similarly restricted to explanations which are within, not outside, his conceptual scheme. Nor would it be fair to put this down to the blindness of historians' eyes, on the argument that pre-scientific man could have known if he had looked, and they likewise. Any 'Historical Revolution' we can conceive of, would be the reverse of the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. That was based on the acceptance of the autonomy of science and the authority of the experimental method; for the historian to begin to admit the supernatural into his explanations there would have to be an interruption of autonomy from outside, in other words by divine revelation. There is no way in which God's plan for the world can be established by the canons of history, any more than miracle can be - or, for that matter, a scientific proof of divine creation. We have reached a position of modern scholarship which has been fundamental to the resolution of the religion-versus-science debate. Knowledge exists on different levels. Scientific explanation tells of a painting in terms of pigment, light patterns and the distribution of paint layers; an aesthetic explanation is in terms of subject matter, purpose and

impact. To unlock each level of meaning you need a different key, and they are not interchangeable. In precisely the same way, God's knowledge of the march of his purpose and my knowledge of the march of history are infinitely different.

It is this which makes the Christian who is a historian cringe when his fellow believers claim to discern the signs of the end of the world - although if he is wise he would be advised to keep his doubts to himself! It must be that the 'signs of Christ's coming' are visible but the historian as historian cannot know. The acknowledged signs are mostly general in character, and wars and rumours of wars are not a peculiarity of the later twentieth century, nor likewise famine, moral decadence or even 'men's hearts failing them for fear'. To be convinced of the need for caution, one has only to remember widespread Christian conviction on earlier occasions that the prophetic signs were being fulfilled - for example, as the year 1000 AD approached. The same is true even when a specific event is alleged such as the post-war return of the Jews to Palestine. This was the third time that the Jews had returned to their homeland, and neither the returns in the sixth and fifth centuries BC nor that of 1948 have been the total restorations envisaged by the prophets. It is also right to point out that among a minority of Jews and a much larger number of Christian supporters was a desire to see prophecy fulfilled so that the episode had in it something of a deliberate human attempt to make God's promises come true. This is not, and I stress this, a denial that 'God is working his purpose out', simply a declaration that being a historian gives no professional qualification to identify that action. We are back to the distinction between the historian and the prophet.

You may, of course, be saying to yourself: 'Well, granted that the historian is not a prophet, does that really allow him to avoid making any attempt at all to perceive God's action in history'? If he cannot observe directly or prove divine participation in events, it is still hard to accept that he can offer no suggestion at all as to what the consequences of divine activity might be. A scientist may not bring God into his hypotheses, but he is able to suggest ways in which God can be understood to be acting in natural phenomena and what the phenomena of nature suggest about God. A very strong tradition in Christian thinking and in individual religious experience would tell us that the involvement of God in human history is direct and detailed. From the words of God about the fall of the sparrow, to the popular song 'He's got the whole world in his hand', Christians have stressed the sovereign command of God over history which they have found so clearly put by the prophets of the Old Testament. Surely something of that should be visible in, or at least congruent with history!

The feeling is understandable, but the historian must point out that there are great difficulties in answering such a call. It is not that it is incredible that God could exercise an immediate

monitoring role in history - the arrival of computers has put paid to that old rationalist argument - nor the admittedly difficult problem of human free will in those circumstances. The difficulty is that if all history is the will of God, then the control of God in history ceases to have any meaning. We are firmly impaled on the horn of fatalism. And we have a moral problem too. If the proper model for history is a chess board on which God moves and disposes of the pieces in order to win the game, every move he makes must be assumed to be part of the game-plan, and this must include the destruction of the righteous as well as the sinners. Nor are we out of the wood if instead we see God's action more as that of a steersman, directing and over-ruling events. That leads to determinism. If God wills the present (even as a stage in directing the future), and also willed the sequence of past events, history is a matter of chronological inevitability.

We have, moreover, to remember how much our ideas owe to the narrow Biblical concern with the Jewish nation. It would certainly be wrong to suggest that the Old Testament shows God only concerned to further his Chosen People. But it is that which sets the whole approach. He is portrayed as disposing of the nations at large, but Israel is his *chosen*. Take away this Old testament context, and one is forced to ask about the whole validity of looking for God's purpose in national history at all. We are told that Paul said to the Athenians that:

"God made of one, every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed seasons and the bound of their habitations".

But are we to take this literally to mean that God has a political map of the world with a chronology for the rise and fall of political communities? And what is a nation? Are we to assume that Ireland is now two nations but that if the Border disappeared this would be because God intended it to be one, and if so, how do we avoid returning to the position that whatever happens to be most recent history is God's will? On this argument, God intended the people of the Low Countries to comprise one nation in 1576, to become two in 1579, to have fluctuating borders in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to be absorbed in the 1790s into a third nation, France, although the Netherlands temporarily appear as a nation for the four years 1806-1810. In 1814 the divine will freed a combined Dutch-Belgium nation from France until 1836, when two separate nations again became what God intended.

We need to remember too that the idea of history as a divinely-ordered scenario raises even more difficult problems once we go outside the Judaeo-Christian context. Before the coming of the Europeans, the civilisations of Central and South America were entirely isolated from those of the Old World. Given those circumstances, in what terms can we conceive of a divine purpose in that history? And without an answer to that, how do we interpret

divine purpose in the comparatively little we do know about Pre-Columbian history? We reach much the same position, even in better-documented lands, if we consider the implication of the fact that divine action in history is supremely directed to the final triumph of God. It follows, then, that within the life span of a single individual or even longer, there may be no significance to observe. And once the scale of magnification goes beyond what can be resolved by the human eye one is left with what may be a truth about God, but is hardly a truth for me.

The idea that the events of history are moving inexorably under the direct control of God to its final dénouement thus presents real difficulties to the historian. How are these difficulties to be resolved? The answer is, painfully and not completely, but I think some progress can be achieved. Clearly we are never going to end up with a complete blueprint of divine activity and we can never presume that divine sovereignty will not allow God to act in ways which are entirely unexpected. The essence of both the Incarnation and the Parousia is the unique intervention of God in human history. But the issue for the historian - and what he has to explain to those who are not historians - is the way in which we are to conceive of a normal divine activity in history. Part of that problem, I would suggest, is that we approach the issue from a wrong position, trying to project forward from the New Testament a vision of God's activity which is derived from the Old, with God disposing the nations to his will, and especially to the development of his Chosen People. Is that actually the New Testament emphasis? I think not. What we find is Paul's proclamation of a new Israel which smashes through all barriers of race, education, class and gender. The idea is taken up in *The Revelation* in the vision of the Bride of Christ, while Peter writes of 'a holy nation, a people for God's own possession', using one noun, 'nation', which traditionally meant 'Gentiles' and another noun, 'people', which was especially associated with Jewish identity - Gentile and Jew together making a new Chosen Race. This new Israel continues and transcends the divine purpose of the Old Israel and that must mean that we should henceforward be looking for God's primary initiative in the world in the advance of the Christian community, 'the manifestation of the Sons of God'.

For the historian to turn from the alleged macro-purposes of God which he is in no position to observe, to examine the micro-activity of God in his people is at once to make progress. It is not easy. We are not tracing ecclesiastical developments which are well evidenced in the archives, but the story of real religion which is manifested in the hearts of men and has its full record in 'the Lamb's book of life'. Nevertheless, Christian experience does produce documentation in this world, and with documentation the historian at least has something to work on. Wills, diaries, letters, charities, art, music, all witness to Christian perception, indicate spiritual values and proclaim the faith we lived by - or denied. It is hard to quantify spirituality, but the more we become familiar with the tools of social anthropology, the deeper and

richer our awareness of the growth of the kingdom will become. It will, as K.S. Latourette saw very clearly, be a story of earthen vessels, cracked, chipped and dirty, in which the treasure of the spirit is nevertheless found. But it is a story which the historian can tell. He can proclaim God in history.

It must, however, be evident that in getting thus far I have still only offered a partial solution to the question: 'how does God work in history?' This formulation will explain his *purpose* in the period since the life, death and resurrection of Christ, but there remains that macro-area where, as I have argued, ideas of purpose do not seem very helpful. What can we say there?

We need, I believe, to recognise that history as presented in the Bible is not just a story of God pursuing a grand plan of human and global redemption. It also operates according to moral principles. One has only to remember that text beloved of moral reformers that 'righteousness exalts a nation but sin is a reproach to all peoples'. No-one will need to be convinced of the weight of the evidence in both Old and New Testaments in favour of the view that God's sovereignty is deeply concerned with morality. Since this is so, I would suggest that here is an alternative to the idea of a detailed divine manipulation of history which, at a macro-level, had presented us with so much difficulty. Perhaps our formulation of God's action in history should be in three parts - first in miracle, second in a sovereign direction of the growth of the believing church, and third, in providential action, to preserve and enforce morality in corporate human behaviour. Such a formulation would certainly reflect the fact that God's redemptive purpose is consequential on his moral character and the moral character of the world he has created. It would equally meet the objection to the 'chess-board' hypothesis that since we cannot see the board, the moves of the game must, to all intents and purposes, appear arbitrary.

The formulation, I would suggest, also has the advantage that it is possible to conceive historically of a way in which morality does operate in history. The Christian historian is not left, as he is with ideas of macro-purpose, in the difficult position of asserting divine action at the same time as admitting that it is impossible to say what that divine activity is or might be. And the gain which that would bring should not be underestimated. The 'chess-board' hypothesis imposes on the Christian historian a piece of moral lengerdemain, all too like the schoolboy definition of faith as 'the power to believe to be true what we know to be false'!

The assertion that it is possible to conceive historically of a way in which morality operates in the world is a high claim to make. How can it be justified? It must, of course, be clear, both from scripture and from experience, that judgement in this life does not operate as an immediate system of sin and reciprocal punishment. Indeed, if we were inclined to think of that as the right

formulation we would run immediately into difficulties. Would it really seem convincing that divine sovereignty intrudes into the complexity of human affairs to punish this wrongdoer or that; is that not rather like the man who pushed a screwdriver into a watch in order to alter the hands? What is more, the evil very often do not appear to be punished at all. They die in their beds; it is the good who die in misery or on a cross.

For most people - including the Psalmist and other Biblical writers such a fact can only be squared with God's justice in a future life. But is that the only form of retribution? Is it not the case that evil carries with it its own punishment? The perception was put most powerfully by the sixteenth century poet and courtier Thomas Wyatt who wrote of men who set their hearts on satisfaction:

"No other pain pray I for them to be  
 But when the rage doth lead them from the right,  
 That looking backward, virtue they may see  
 Even as she is, so goodly fair and bright;  
 And whilst they clasp their lusts in arms across,  
 Grant them, good Lord, as thou mayst of they might,  
 To fret inward for losing such a loss".

Desire brings its own penalty. The perception has also clear support in scripture. Paul specifically speaks of the ungodly whom the Creator has abandoned to the consequences of their ungodliness, and the notion of 'dead in trespasses and sins' must imply the same - 'eternal death' must be much a real, current condition as 'eternal life!' We may also discern the same implication in the condemnation of the Pharisees by Christ as 'whited sepulchres' and in the spiritual burden which the self-righteous Pharisee took home with him - unlike the penitent publican.

If I am correct in suggesting that retribution is in part inherent in wrongdoing and not merely something that will take place at some future bar of judgement, the way is open to an understanding of the sovereign judgement of God in human affairs which escapes many of the traps which beset simpler versions of crime and punishment. God can be seen not as making interventionist raids into history but as having built into his human creation a series of norms and consequences which act as moral regulators. If a nation acts in a proud and exploitive manner, God has so decreed it that the nation will have to bear the consequences of its pride and self-seeking. It is not hard to find examples from Scripture which support this view, notably from Isaiah and Amos, nor examples from history itself. The disasters which befell Germany at the latter part of the 1939-45 war can easily be understood as a consequence of Hitlerite militarism. The argument is akin to the way in which we understand God's regulating action in the natural world. If I fall off a cliff, I shall be killed - not because God has specifically arranged my death, but because he has built the principle of gravity into the universe and I have defied it. Indeed, it may be that we



should see the pattern of natural consequence and the working of consequence in human affairs as a continuum of divine providence which maintains the equilibrium of existence.

One problem which needs to be fitted into this hypothesis is the fact that punishment of the kind I have described is very often delayed beyond the generation responsible. But that, of course, is something which is well attested by scripture. The punishment of David fell on a later generation and there are many other examples. The perception of the Old Testament that the sins of the fathers are visited on generations yet unborn, is difficult for modern individualistic egalitarian minds to take. We are far more at home with the vision of Ezekiel that every man should die for his own sin. But suppose we take the 'sins of the fathers' notion literally. Do we not find examples of this in history? Is it not true to say that racial tension in Britain and the U.S.A. is the consequence of the evil of the slave trade? Is it too far-fetched to see it also as punishment for it? Is Solzhenitsyn not correct on at least some of his history when he sees the tragedies of the years since 1920 as a consequence of the sins of 1914? Europe has been very thoroughly punished for the *hubris* and adventurism of that era. Can we not imagine the sorrows of Ireland today as the latest chapter in the penalty for centuries of exploitation and neglect?

As that last example shows, we have also to recognise that individual innocence is no barrier to the operation of judgement in history. That, of course, is inherent in the fathers and children idea, and it is suggested also by the notion of punishment being worked out in the operation of sin itself. Once evil has been sown it will bear fruit. Or, to alter the metaphor, once the toxin of sin has been loosed into the bloodstream it will liberate the poison somewhere. So good men, and quiet, humble communities go down before the brutality of the conqueror and the quiet and humble descendants of that conqueror may find themselves falling prey to aggressors whom they have never injured. And the connection may often be many times more complicated. Of course, it may be objected that such a contingent interpretation of judgement involves a highly-attenuated view of morality; a reviewer once remarked that it allowed me 'to side-step the problem of evil in a way that is too neat to be true!' The reply must be that we have to start with what actually takes place in history. Since the world is God's world, history must, if no more, at least be what he allows to happen, and contingent judgement can plausibly be argued where direct retribution rarely can be. And is there a greater moral problem in the idea of moral infection in human history than in physical infection or the operation of natural law? And is it not precisely congruent with the prophets who show Jewish pride provoking Assyrian invasion, Assyrian military frightfulness being punished by the revolt of Babylon, and Babylonian imperialism falling before the even greater power of Persia?

It is important, certainly, that such a formulation should not be extended into a doctrine of *Karma* - inescapable cause and effect. If God's judgement operates in history, so must his grace, and again the idea of a continuum of providence allows us to see a way in which such grace could operate. Butterfield pointed out that time after time in history, tragedy has had a quite unexpected beneficial outcome. And no Christian can but marvel at the infinite resilience of the human spirit; man, though fallen, simply will not lie down and abandon himself to fate and chance. This is not to argue that 'progress' is the law of history, simply that evil has, in the long term, been sufficiently often confounded to make it possible that this is grace, not luck. Thus the argument for a world of consequences is not for a kind of disguised inevitability in history. The suggestion, rather, is that just as historians are familiar with political and economic cause and effect, so we may well argue for moral cause and effect.

The purpose of this paper has been to range widely over the relationship between history and the Christian faith, and it certainly has ranged widely. It has touched on the relation between historical study and prophecy, on the nature of historical method and the limitations of that method in commenting on the Christian Faith. It has raised deep questions about the action of God in history, noting the problems which lurk in certain common formulations and the possible advantages of alternative approaches. But there is one final interface between history and Christianity which must be raised, and this is the relationship between a Christian commitment and the practice of history.

Once again we need to clear away popular misconceptions. The test of good history is often supposed to be objectivity, neutrality, or the most frequently used term, lack of bias. By that test a Christian is ruled out; he is committed. The only hope for him is to suppress his convictions while he pursues his scholarship. Value judgements and good history simply do not mix. But, let us pause. Are we really saying that in writing of the Jewish Holocaust the historian should preserve a strict impartiality? Certainly he must work with professional integrity, but is he obliged to become a eunuch? And if he does examine the episode with clinical detachment will he not be accepting the attitude of an Eichmann for whom the exercise was no more than a technical problem of disposing of x million carcasses? And do we want history written by a man who can suppress the sickness in the stomach which comes from a serious inspection of the loathsome episode?

We must also doubt whether any historian actually could be as cold and calculating as objectivity requires in this case, and even if he could apparently be so, he would have a whole range of sub-conscious responses which he may not even be aware of. The truth is that every historian, not just the Christian, comes to a subject with a framework of values recognised and unrecognised. Indeed,

without such a framework, it is impossible to be a historian. By what criteria otherwise do you assess your evidence and, even more, arrive at your interpretation? Certainly a historian must be faithful to his evidence, diligent in his application, as self-critical as possible, and willing to listen to criticism and alternative interpretations. But he has no obligation to bend over backwards to assume an artificial neutrality which he cannot achieve any more than others can. We must, indeed, go further. The life which the historian breathes into the past is the life of his own experience and imagination. He depends on an empathy between himself and the past, and empathy is a thing of warmth and commitment. A neutral detachment, in other words, will make him less able to bring the past to life. Sterilised history is sterile.

Two consequences flow from this. First, the Christian embarking on, or engaged in, the study of history has no cause to conceal his faith or operate some form of intellectual apartheid between what he believes on Sundays and what he practises on Mondays. Certainly he is constrained by the methodology of the discipline, which as we have seen, limits the answers it is proper for him to give. But his personal commitment no more invalidates him as a historian than the various commitments or rejections of commitment characteristic of all other historians. The second consequence is that there is such a thing as Christian history - not the history of Christianity nor history written from a teleological point of view, but history written on Christian presumptions. A history which shows men and women responding to their environment as creatures fallen, but made in the image of God. A moral history, full of passionate awareness of injustice, of evil, of war, of apathy and ignorance. A history of hope, sensitive to the strivings of men after divinity and to their capacity for virtue. As we pick up our pens we must always have in mind that we are telling the story of the creature God made, to live in the world God made, in the way God intended.

A.R. MILLARD

## THE OLD TESTAMENT AND HISTORY : SOME CONSIDERATIONS

1. *Could ancient writers report accurately?*

Any historical study of ancient texts has to begin by establishing their reliability as records of events or situations. The historian has to consider whether it is proper to suppose the documents he is able to use may relate faithfully what happened, or not. All will agree that every document from the past has historical value. A single name scratched or painted on a cup is witness to the currency of that name, and probably of its parent language, and of the script, in a society where the cup was inscribed at some stage of its existence. The writing and the cup may be mutually illuminating in matters of date and origin. A long royal inscription can offer much more information. If it includes narratives of the king's deeds, their form and style will throw light on literary practices and traditions, their content may give a precise date for their composition. Their content will also indicate the way the author or authors thought, and perhaps reveal the purpose of writing the work. Whether a name on a cup or a campaign record, a ration-list, or a religious hymn, all ancient documents yield such incidental information.

The mundane papers of daily administration, the deeds of sale, divisions of inherited property, marriage settlements drawn up in accord with the law, are evidence that those things were done. They were the actions of everyday through which the state and society function. Such things are the basic sources of the historian; with them he builds his reconstruction of an ancient society and its career. He will fit them together to produce as consistent and as complete a picture as he can. That picture he will present as the most plausible interpretation of the knowledge available that he can offer. Historians will expect the picture to conform with well-known and widely observed patterns of human behaviour. If it involves absurd anachronisms such as Julius Caesar riding in a motor-car, or otherwise unknown experiences such as creatures arriving from other planets guided by strange man-made markings in the landscape, it will be dismissed.

Now of course the modern historian is not the first to try to tell the tales of the ancient states; many have told them before. And for the past century or so, more and more ancient, native, often contemporary, records have entered the historian's repertoire. They have brought to the fore the question of how the modern historian should treat ancient 'historical' writing, a question some scholars had asked earlier about the Greek and Latin and biblical histories. Should the historian repeat the narrative of the ancient writers in his own work as history? Should he accept their claims at face

value? Should he discount any particular record unless he can find corroboration elsewhere? Should he select those elements he considers reasonable and consonant with his own view of the period, and leave others aside?

During the nineteenth century there grew up a strong consensus that ancient works of 'history' were to be treated with great scepticism, any but the most ordinary statements raising doubts about the accuracy or veracity of the records. Whatever fell outside the scope of recent human experience, that savoured of folk-lore or involved the supernatural was, by definition, unhistorical; to be taken as evidence of ancient beliefs, but not as in any way reliable accounts of events that occurred. Especial suspicion fell on stories that had discernible motives, most of all if the motive could be defined as 'religious'.

This attitude was an understandable reaction to the wholesale credulity found in some mediaeval and later 'histories' and to the fantasies of 'travellers' tales'. Its ancestry is traced back to the Greek historian of the fifth century B.C., Thucydides. He composed a history of the war between the Greek states that occurred during his lifetime, making careful inquiries of eye-witnesses to establish the true course of events to the best of his ability. In this he differed from his predecessor Herodotus of Halicarnassus, writing a little earlier in the same century, who is called 'the father' of history. His nine books are full of anecdotes more or less relevant to the events of the Persian war against the Greeks, his main theme. Mingling with the battles and the political intrigues are accounts of impressive sights the author had seen, of strange customs and wonders others had told to him. Herodotus frequently states that he is relying on what he was told, and sometimes comments that he does not believe the report. He may give more than one account of something, with a note of which he prefers. Not surprisingly, many have impugned 'The Histories' of Herodotus as containing little more than gossip. Yet today his accounts of Scythian kings buried with retainers and numerous horses, or his description of Babylon are accepted as valuable sources of contemporary information because archaeological discoveries have largely substantiated them.<sup>1</sup>

Repeatedly, modern distrust of earlier writers has proved ill-founded. In the study of the British prehistoric monument at Avebury, the largest stone circle in Europe, scholars have long known about an avenue of standing stones leading to the south entrance. An eminent eighteenth century antiquary, William Stukeley, recorded its existence before local people destroyed the stones. Two hundred years later, parts of the avenue were excavated and some stones re-erected. The same writer recorded a second avenue leading to the west entrance of the great circle. Scholars writing later have refused to believe this existed, attributing it to Stukeley's 'too-vivid imagination'. In 1968 the digging of trenches for electricity cables in two places not far from Avebury proved that large stones had stood along the line of this second avenue. Thus the testimony of a leading scholar of the eighteenth century, a man

whose observations of certain other features had already been confirmed by aerial photography, finds confirmation after decades of derision.<sup>2</sup>

For an example of such misplaced scepticism about very ancient writings, we turn to cuneiform texts from Assyria and Babylonia. Among the vast quantities of cuneiform tables recovered during the nineteenth century was found a story about an early king, Sargon, who rose from obscurity to become king of the city Agade, and established a great empire. A king named Sargon ruled over the Near East from Assyria, c. 721-705 B.C., (he is named in Is. 20.1) so scholars proposed that his deeds were projected back to a hero of a remote age, for the manuscript of the story stemmed from the century after Sargon of Assyria.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the story of the early king was reckoned valueless for the historian of his reign. Continuing discoveries of inscriptions and other remains prove that there was in fact an important city in northern Babylonia named Agade, although its site remains to be discovered. Agade was the seat of a major dynasty, a high point in Babylonian culture, whose kings have left us their own records in contemporary and later copies. The founder of the dynasty was a Sargon who ruled about 2300 B.C. and campaigned in western Persia, Syria and Anatolia. Whatever may lie behind the story current in the seventh century B.C., telling of his ignominious birth and exposure in a basket on the Euphrates, the accounts of his imperial achievements have a firm factual basis and are not read back from the deeds of a later king.<sup>4</sup>

Rehabilitation of statements made by men of times past and the manner of these examples has become quite frequent. Each case is proof only of the reliability of a particular record or claim. It would be naive to suppose all are utterly reliable, or to jettison any criticism. Every case does, however, warn the historian against facile dismissal or deprecation of texts from antiquity. Any record held to be suspect should be carefully tested. Ideally there should be visible pictorial complements, or independent written accounts. Circumstances and attitudes involved should be harmonious with what is known of the period, with due allowance for local variations, for innovations, and for incomplete information. Nevertheless, lack of comparable data alone is never an adequate basis for rejecting ancient statements. Nothing should be dismissed simply because the modern critic finds it unbelievable!

What has just been discussed over a wide range of times and places also applies to the Old Testament. Plain statements in the biblical books have repeatedly been derided, contradicted, or dismissed. Further research and new discoveries have then led to the re-instatement of the Jewish writers and the rapid abandonment of scholarly positions often put forward with great assurance. At this juncture one example will suffice.

Writing a commentary on the book of Daniel, a German scholar could find no mention of Belshazzar outside Daniel, and concluded he was pure invention by the author Daniel ch.5.<sup>5</sup> His work was published in 1850. Barely four years later, a British official, J.G. Taylor, made some soundings in the ruins of southern Babylonia. At the site of ancient Ur he unearthed four clay cylinders inscribed in Babylonian, with a prayer for Nabonidus, the last king of Babylon, (555-539 B.C.), and for his son, Belshazzar. Henry Rawlinson, one of the principal decipherers of the cuneiform scripts, announced this new information quickly: 'By the discovery, indeed, of the name of Bel-shar-ezar, as appertaining to the son of Nabonidus, we are, for the first time, enabled to reconcile authentic history . . . with the inspired record of Daniel'.<sup>6</sup> Hitzig's verdict was refuted entirely.

If the negative attitude scholars have taken, as seen in such an example, is agreed to be a wrong way of approaching ancient texts in general, then it is a wrong way of approaching the Old Testament in particular. Should not the Old Testament texts that claim to be accounts of events in human history or to reproduce contemporary documents be treated as what they claim to be? There are further objections to so straightforward an attitude. Whatever specific instances gain credibility in the ways illustrated, the Old Testament is a religious work, or a compilation of writing mostly with a primary religious interest or aim. The religious outlook will have coloured both the parts and the whole. The narratives are selective, and therefore are likely to be very biased in their telling of events, at best, and at worst quite untruthful. To compare other ancient books with the Old Testament is alleged to be misleading, for their nature is not the same. In considering this attitude, two issues need attention, the effect of the authors' interests on 'historical' narratives, and the evaluation of 'miracle' stories in them.

## 2. *The question of bias*

The application of literary criticism and ideas of religious development in ancient Israel encouraged the attitude which sees the Old Testament as the product of Israelite faith growing over several centuries, and the New Testament as the statement of the post-resurrection Christian Church. Both collections of writings and their separate constituents are forms of propaganda for particular points of view. Now all can accept this; the Bible is clearly a religious document, and a series of common themes runs through many of its parts. Above all, it claims to represent God and God's point of view. It follows that the writers of the books set down opinions and described events in this light. Again, historians recognise preconceptions and bias of some sort exist in every writer's work, consciously acknowledged or not.

From here, however, many biblical scholars take a further step, a step into paths of assumption and speculation that leads to increasingly subjective hypotheses. Religious interests are held to have led writers to distort and even invent in order to produce acceptable 'history'. If the information given by their sources was unacceptable, then it could be tailored to fit their pattern. Here is an example of the way such a transformation is envisaged, as expressed by the patriarch of such studies with reference to an episode in Chronicles which is absent from Kings.

"The Book of Kings knows no worse ruler than Manasseh was; yet he reigned undisturbed for fifty-five years - a longer period than was enjoyed by any other king (2 Kings xxi.1-18). This is a stone of stumbling that Chronicles must remove. It tells that Manasseh was carried in chains by the Assyrians to Babylon, but there prayed to Jehovah who restored him to his kingdom; he then abolished idolatry in Judah (xxiii.11-20). Thus on the one hand he does not escape punishment, while on the other hand the length of his reign is nevertheless explained. Recently indeed it has been sought to support the credibility of those statements by means of an Assyrian inscription, from which it appears that Manasseh did pay tribute to Esarhaddon. That is to say, he had been overpowered by the Assyrians; that is again to say, that he had been thrown into chains and carried off by them. Not so rapid, but perhaps quite as accurate, would be the inference that as a tributary prince he must have kept his seat on the throne of Judah, and not have exchanged it for the prison of Babylon. In truth, Manasseh's temporary deposition is entirely on the same plane with Nebuchadnezzar's temporary grass-eating. The unhistorical character of the intermezzo (the motives of which are perfectly transparent) follows not only from the silence of the Book of Kings (a circumstance of no small importance indeed), but also, for example, from Jer. xv.4; for when it is said there that all Judah and Jerusalem are to be given up to destruction because of Manasseh, it is not presupposed that his guilt has already been borne and atoned for by himself".

Whatever one may think about the peculiar and complex problems of Chronicles, this passage reveals plainly the attitude we have described: if a narrative has an explanation in terms of religious interest, any question of a factual element may be dismissed, or ignored, and all the more if there appears to be some lack of harmony or contradiction with other passage, or with modern thought.

Much Old Testament scholarship today follows the lines which Wellhausen laid down. A comment on a study of monarchy in Israel is typical, 'biblical texts are handled as if they provide rather more of historical information than is likely to be the case'.<sup>8</sup> At greater length, an eminent writer has recently issued a volume devoted to arguing that the account of the deliverance of Jerusalem from the Assyrian army of Sennacherib in 701 B.C. 'is a product of



distinctive royal Zion theology, which emerged during the reign of Josiah in the seventh century? For this writer there was no deliverance; Hezekiah submitted to the Assyrian and retained his throne, the enemy army then, presumably, continuing on its way, unhindered by an 'angel of the Lord'. A combination of literary criticism, form criticism, and historical criticism helped to produce this conclusion. The literal sense of the story in 2 Kings 18:17-19,37 is the result, according to this study, desired by a school of religious propangandists; it is not an account of actual events in 701 BC.

If one account or another can be re-interpreted in these ways, then it would appear all may be. In fact, very many parts of the Old Testament are so treated, as those acquainted with current work will be aware. Followed consistently, this approach to the text and related ones could result in its being emptied of any significance for history apart from its testimony to a religious faith. Extra-biblical documents prevent anyone from going to this extreme by corroborating a few of the Old Testament's historical statements. At least the existence of a Judean king named Hezekiah and an attack on him by Sennacherib is beyond dispute. Where there are no sources apart from the Old Testament, the protagonists of such attitudes may be free to treat those passages as totally fictional, the products of religious fantasy. King David can be turned into an entirely imaginary figure, on these lines of argument, a necessary ancestor for the dynasty of Judah, credited with powerful kingdom, to make him glorious, with heroic acts to exalt the figure of the king, and with moral failings balanced by a religious conscience to encourage orthodoxy. Here the question imposes itself: Is this a proper way to treat the biblical writings? Are we confined to a state where accepting the Bible as a religious composition compels us to doubt, or even to discount, any and every apparent statement of fact?

Although all the records that survive from the Old Testament world were written by people for whom religious beliefs were an integral part of their lives, it is not normal to treat them in this way, whether or not other sources support their claims. Thus the Assyrian kings, who can be characterized as excessively vainglorious, took care to acknowledge that their campaigns were undertaken at the behest of their gods, and that their victories and booty were the gifts of the same gods. They had the reports of their achievements written so that future generations would learn from them, remember the prowess of their predecessors, and honour the gods of Assyria. These kings, or their historians, naturally wrote the records in the framework of their own beliefs. They believed their gods, and others, were at work in the events they observed, much as the Israelite writers did, and sometimes they asserted there was divine intervention (see below, part 3). Additional texts from different sources complement only a few of the narratives, either in other cuneiform tablets (e.g. letters), or the records of other nations (e.g. Aramean states, Urartu). Nevertheless, the Assyrian kings' inscriptions are basic to modern histories of the ancient

Near East. Overt theological intent and the authors' clearly held beliefs in gods involved in human affairs have not brought rejection of the 'historical' narratives, nor cast much doubt upon them.<sup>10</sup>

Occasionally allegations are made that an ancient document is historically unreliable because of its bias. One case is a well-known Assyrian text called *The Synchronistic History*. It purports to relate victorious Assyrian campaigns against Babylonia over a period of seven hundred years, (c.1500 to 780 B.C.) Peace treaties terminated many of the campaigns, with boundary demarcations usually in Assyria's favour. The introduction to the text is lost. An epilogue implies that the text was engraved upon a stele to display the glory of Assyria and the wickedness of the treaty-breaking Babylonians. In editing the tablet, an Assyriologist speaks of its blatant pro-Assyrian prejudice and arbitrary selection of facts, claiming that one victory ascribed to the Assyrians was really won by the Babylonians. He concludes that the composition was intended to be a historical justification of a particular boundary line, 'the line existed of course only in the author's imagination, but this did not prevent him from regarding any Babylonian violation of this boundary as a crime'.<sup>11</sup> Here, according to the editor, is a piece of ancient 'history writing' which shows a heavy bias, totally in Assyria's favour, producing distortion of facts and invention. At the same time, several lines are demonstrably quoted from the inscriptions of earlier kings, up to four centuries older than the text.

Upon further investigation, so negative an evaluation of the document is seen to be ill-founded. Part of the editor's mistaken conclusion arises from treating this *Synchronistic History* beside another series of records, the *Babylonian Chronicles*. The latter won the editor's approval as reliable and sober accounts of affairs, for the most part, and thus precipitate a contrast with the former as if it is pretending to be a text of a comparable type. Yet it does not; it belongs to a different genre. It claims to be a copy of an inscription on a boundary marker, dealing principally with changes in the boundary over previous generations. There is nothing unlikely in this. Stone pillars or blocks marking the extent of an estate were customary in Babylonia. Special ones had details of the terrain inscribed upon them, occasionally with a plan and measurements, sometimes with the history of the ownership of the property and details of litigation in the past. The *Synchronistic History* is more like the 'Babylonian Boundary Stones' than it is like the *Babylonian Chronicles*, and that is what it claims to be. Since that negative evaluation of the *Synchronistic History* was made, further discoveries have given additional reason for accepting it at face value. Two stelae have been found, erected by Assyrian kings to signal the boundaries they had set between warring subject rulers. On one of them, the arrangements made by one Assyrian king were re-inforced by his son who added his inscription on the other side of the stone. Those two monuments delineated territories in the north of the Levant, but their discovery - no others are known -

makes it likely that stelae of similar type stood to mark the disputed and often shifting line between Assyria and Babylonia. If we allow this, then we may interpret the Synchronistic History as a copy of the Assyrian inscriptions of a series of such stelae. It contains precisely what might be expected on those monuments: Assyrian reverses have no place, but can be seen to be tacitly accepted when the boundary appears to have been re-drawn in Babylonia's favour. Read thus, the major objections raised against the Synchronistic History disappear, and it can be treated positively by historians.<sup>12</sup>

Undoubted bias, therefore, need not provoke the modern reader to a totally adverse attitude to a document, nor give rise to allegations that the accounts are untrue or imaginary. Recognition of the unsealed standpoints of many ancient documents has resulted in fuller understanding of their contents, without any recourse to a devaluation or discrediting of them. The fact that the modern interpreter does not share the beliefs and aims of the writers does not prevent him from respecting them and giving them their due weight. When Pharaoh Ramesses II returned from the Syrian expedition culminating in the Battle of Wadesh (c 1274 B.C.), he had inscriptions and records made. They illustrate the point well, their *raison d'être* clearly being the glorification of the king. His exploits are plainly exaggerated, as is the magnitude of the victory. The accounts and their details are accepted as primary documents which can serve as the basis for reconstructing a major episode in Egyptian military history.<sup>13</sup>

Turning back to the biblical narrative concerning Manasseh in 2 Chronicles 33, it is easy to see how presupposition about the Chronicler coloured the comment quoted earlier. Within the Old Testament itself the grounds for certain of the observations are hard to find; there is no substantiation of the long reign of a wicked king being a stumbling-block to the Israelite historian, nor is it taught that Manasseh's imprisonment atoned for his idolatry. The text observes explicitly that people continued to worship at Manasseh's high places, albeit worshipping the Lord (2 Ch.33:17). Even if a sin is forgiven, the Old Testament consistently explains its consequences cannot be avoided therewith. Assyrian records name Manasseh as a vassal of Esarhaddon and of Ashurbanipal; nothing is said of an imprisonment in Babylon. That is no basis for denying it happened. Both kings were concerned with affairs at Babylon, and in each reign a revolt took place in which the king of Judah could have taken part, as his father had done. To deport a rebel king, hold him a while, then return him to his throne would not have been a novelty in Assyrian imperial politics. That is not to say it did happen, simply that it could have done. Surviving Assyrian records are far too meagre to allow anyone to suppose that their lack of reference to an imprisonment of Manasseh is evidence that he was not held captive in Babylon. On the basis of the treatment normally accorded to ancient writings, the absence of the story from 2 Kings is equally unsatisfactory evidence for its fabrication by the

Chronicler. Instead of discarding the Chronicler's account from Judean history, we would see it as preserving a piece of information that otherwise would have been lost.<sup>14</sup> The information as useful to him not to explain Manasseh's long reign, but to demonstrate that even so determinedly wicked a man could repent; could still reach God's mercy.

The case of Sennacherib's invasion of Judah is more complicated, and deserves a detailed re-examination. Among the facts that oppose the arguments for Sennacherib's capture of Jerusalem are those derived from his own inscriptions. Both the king's own 'annals' and the Old Testament agree that Hezekiah paid tribute to Sennacherib. In the Assyrian inscription the payment is clearly placed after the emperor had returned to Nineveh: 'Hezekiah ... did send men, later, to Nineveh ...! Nowhere in the Assyrian monarch's proud display of his achievements is there notice of a conquest of the Judean capital of Hezekiah surrendering it, nor of Assyrian troops entering it. As to the destruction of the Assyrian army, its commander-in-chief said nothing, as might be expected. A divine intervention, as expressed in the Hebrew narrative, may be unacceptable to the modern writer, but rejecting the form of expression should not carry with it rejection of the possibility that a notable occurrence lies behind the expression (see further, part 3 below). That attitude reveals more bias on the part of the modern writer than it accounts for in the ancient text.

### 3. *Divine intervention in history*

Throughout the Old Testament, history is viewed in the light of Israelite faith. Whatever occurred was part of God's plan; whatever men did, Israelites in particular, was judged right or wrong, good or bad, by a religious standard. While the Israelite history books are unique in several points, they share this feature with other ancient, near-eastern, 'historical' compositions. For ancient man the distinction of sacred from profane, of religious from secular, was unknown. Gods and goddesses, spirits and demons had a role in every part of life. The will of the gods was sought before major political moves, for religious occasions, in marriage, building a house, travelling abroad. That is not to say everyone consulted the soothsayer on every occasion, doubtless many did not, but that was the mental attitude in general.

#### a. *God commands; man acts*

Assyrian kings had their triumphs described in 'annals' which were sometimes publicly displayed and more often buried as 'foundation stones' in the temples, palaces, and city-gates they built. These are commonly quoted for their bombastic tone, their seeming joy in reciting the slaughter of enemies and the sack of cities. What has been called the 'calculated frightfulness' of Ashurnasirpal II (c.883-859 B.C.) is seen in such passages as:

In a clash of arms I besieged and conquered the city. I killed 800 of their warriors with the sword. With their corpses I filled the streets of their city, and reddened their houses with their blood. Many soliders I took alive and carried many of them away captive. I razed the city, destroyed and burnt it. I conquered the city H. with 30 cities around it. I massacred them, and took captives, with oxen and sheep. I razed the cities, destroyed and burnt them. I burnt their youths and girls.<sup>15</sup>

The savagery of numerous accounts like this one have given the Assyrian kings a reputation as merciless imperial aggressors. Not all the 'annals' are so full of blood-letting as Ashurnasirpal's, but all concentrate on the triumphs of Assyrian arms. Their intention is plainly to glorify the king. Often there is a prologue, almost a hymn, of titles and epithets applied to the king. At the end of an inscription, a plea is usually included to a succeeding ruler who might unearth it, asking him to treat it with reverence and re-inter it. A prayer may follow that the gods will curse anyone who destroys the text or erases the king's name.

Preserving the king's repute for posterity was evidently the purpose of these compositions when they were buried in foundations, engraved on stone obelisks and palace walls, impressing subjects and foreign visitors. The narrative is predominantly in the first person; the king tells his own deeds. Yet the Assyrian victories were not depicted as the work of the king alone, despite the impression created by repeated phrases 'I destroyed, I burnt, I razed' or 'my hands conquered'. Almost invariably the wars were undertaken in the name of the national gods. The paragraph quoted above from Ashurnasirpal begins with a report that the cities concerned 'had withheld the tribute and corvée of Ashur my lord'. So 'at the command of Ashur, the great lord, my lord, and the divine standard which goes before me . . . I mustered my army . . .'. Similar phrases are found throughout the Assyrian royal inscriptions, some being even more specific, e.g. 'The god Ashur, the lord, commanded me to conquer the land M'.<sup>16</sup>

Beside their military actions, the kings recorded their building activities, usually at the end of a text, and might claim that divine commands instigated the work on a temple. Certain kings at the end of the second millennium B.C., and early in the first, included lists of wild animals, lions, wild bulls, elephants, in their 'annals'. These, too, were hunted 'by the command of the god Ninurta'.

Assyrian inscriptions are numerous and readily accessible in English translations, so they furnish good examples of this attitude in ancient 'historical' sources. The same thing is present in Sumerian and Babylonian, Hittite, and occasionally in Egyptian texts, and in the rarer inscriptions of the immediate neighbours of the Israelite kingdoms, Moab and Aram. All ancient people accepted

the control of their gods over events, and believed that they might reveal their wishes to their worshippers. When the accounts of the events were written, this was made explicit. The documents concerned are not specifically 'religious', nor are they deliberately contrived propaganda for a new, or unusual, or minority opinion; they are representatives of a normal idea, an idea that was readily and easily expressed. The documents are also contemporary. Some were inscribed within the year the events took place, others shortly afterwards. If an interval occurred, the attitude remained the same, and it can be followed from the third millennium B.C. through to the first.

In considering the ancient Israelite narratives, therefore, the mention of divine commands, of God speaking to Moses or other leaders, should not affect the historian's evaluation of the affairs described. The presence of these concepts is entirely in accord with the outlook of ancient near-eastern peoples. There is no need to suppose they are signs of writing by authors or editors with a particular intent, working long after the time in which the events are set. They are not necessarily a part of a single theological construction, the product that characterized one school of thought. The gods of Babylon spoke to their worshippers, the gods of the Hittites to them, and Chemosh to the Kings of Moab. Seldom do the biblical and extra-biblical texts explain how the leader or king was aware of the deity speaking to him. Occasionally an oracle was given through the customary processes, the Urim and Thummin in Israel (e.g. 1 Sam. 23:9-12; 28:6), the skills of the diviner in Assyrian and Babylonia (e.g. Ashurbanipal's defeat of the Elamite Te-umman: 'At the command of Ashur and Marduk, the great gods, who helped me, with good omens, the oracle of an ecstatic, I brought about his defeat within Tell-Tuba'<sup>18</sup>). Although these means are rarely stated, they may have been assumed as normal, as Numbers 27:21 implies for Israel, and so only mentioned occasionally in special circumstances or to emphasize divine sanction for acts that might be challenged (as in 1 Sam. 23). There are similar occasional references to utterances made by prophets or other individuals under 'inspiration'. Whether or not modern readers share the belief that supernatural powers communicated with ancient leaders and others, the statements remain, and they remain as the contemporary origin or justification for many actions. The fact of the ancient belief has to be accepted, the words attributed to the divinity can be essential to any historical reconstruction.

b *God acts*

(i) *By unspecified means*

Biblical writers report more than the commands of God to the leaders, and their fulfilment; they relate some incidents as the acts of God. These vary in detail and in relation to other actors. A

warrior might be told to move into battle because God had put the enemy in his power, or had gone before to strike the enemy. A promise of divine aid might come in the ways already noted where a command to go to battle was heard, especially through consulting an oracle. A straightforward example occurs in the history of David's war against the Philistines.

' . . . David enquired of the Lord, and he answered, "Do not go straight up, but circle around behind them and attack them in front of the balsam trees. As soon as you hear the sound of marching in the tops of the balsam trees, move quickly, because that will mean the Lord has gone out in front of you to strike the Philistine array". So David did as the Lord commanded him, and he struck down the Philistines . . . ' (2 Samuel 5:22-23).

Assyrian royal inscriptions have similar accounts, for example, when king Asurbanipal was fighting against Elam, c.650 B.C., the goddess Ishtar sent a message telling the king she would defeat his enemy:

(v 46) The goddess Ishtar heard my anxious sighs and "Fear not!" she said, and filled my heart with confidence. "Inasmuch as you have lifted your hands in prayer (and) your eyes are filled with tears, I have mercy". During the night in which I appeared before her, (50) a seer reclined and saw a dream. When he awoke Ishtar showed him a night vision. He reported to me as follows: "Ishtar who dwells in Arbela come in. Right and left quivers were hanging from her. She held the bow in her hand (55) (and) a sharp sword was drawn to do battle. You were standing in front of her and she spoke to you like the mother who bore you. Ishtar called unto you, she who is exalted among the gods, giving you the following instructions: 'You will contemplate fulfilling my orders. (60) Whither your face is turned, I shall go forth. You told me: Wherever you go, let me go with you, O Lady of Ladies!' She informed you as follows: ' You shall stay here, where the dwelling of Nabu is. (65) Eat food, drink wine, supply music, praise my divinity, while I go and do that work in order that you attain your heart's desire. Your face (need) not become pale, nor your feet become exhausted, (70) nor your strength come to nought in the onslaught of battle'. In her loving bosom she embraced you and protected your whole figure. Before her a fire was then burning. To the conquest of [your] enemies [she will march forth] at (your) side. (75) Against Teumman, king of Elam, with whom she is wroth, she has set her face".<sup>19</sup>

(ii) *By overwhelming power*

The manner of the divine aid is not explained in cases such as this, although there is no doubt about it. Whatever efforts the king and his army made, some supernatural intervention was also acknowledged. Sometimes it is a little more explicit, not in concrete but in psychological terms. Gods, goddesses, and other

divine beings emanated an aura or radiance, a splendour that could be felt, according to Assyrian thought. This power could bring an enemy to submission. Tirhakah, king of Egypt, was so affected, according to Ashurbanipal's historian: 'When he heard of the defeat of his troops, the radiance of Ashur and Ishtar overwhelmed him, he fell into a frenzy' and, eventually, 'the terror of the weapon of Ashur, my lord, overcame him, and he died'.<sup>20</sup> Four and a half centuries earlier, the annalist of Tiglathpileser I (c 1100BC) related the *surrender* of any enemy:

'The land Adaush was frightened by my strong belligerent attack and abandoned their territory. They flew like birds to ledges on high mountains. The splendour of Ashur, my lord, overwhelmed them and they came back down and submitted to me'.<sup>21</sup>

When set beside other paragraphs where the Assyrian king's 'strong belligerent attack' alone brought submission,<sup>22</sup> these lines suggest the enemy's behaviour was in some way unexpected. Without, apparent, military 'flushing out' operations, the fugitives left their fastness and bowed to the conqueror. In his eyes the only explanation could be that they were 'overwhelmed by the splendour of Ashur'.

The uninvolved reader will attribute these reactions to fear of the consequences of opposition, to the common instinct for self-preservation, or to a careful calculation of the odds, rather than fear of the assyrian god. Fear of further military action seems a very likely explanation in the light of the idea that divine power flowed to the king as the viceroy of his national god. In many passages little distinction between the 'fear' of the god and the 'fear' of the king is visible. Nevertheless, where the ancient writers name the cause of an event as the power of the god, and that stands alone, the reader may suspect that they are relating something which was not normal, and which was not the direct result of known human action.

Perhaps comparable with the effect which Assyrians declared their gods had on their enemies, are the occasions when the Hebrew writers asserted that the God of Israel threw their enemies into panic. The Chronicler uses the phrase 'fear of the Lord came/fell on' the foe (2 Ch.14:14; 17:10; 20:29) of contests during the Monarchy. Earlier, the initial defeat is described 'After an all-night march from Gilgal, Joshua took the enemy by surprise. The Lord threw them into confusion before Israel, who defeated them in a great victory at Gibeon. Israel pursued them . . .' (Joshua 10:9,10). Similar is a sentence in the narrative of Deborah and Barak: 'At Barak's advance, the Lord threw Sisera and all his chariotry and all his camp into confusion at the sword's edge, and Sisera abandoned his chariot and fled on foot' (Judges 4:15). On both occasions, Israelite forces were involved, with an element of surprise, yet there was need to explain the results in terms of divine help, otherwise, we may suppose, the victories would have been more costly, at least, to Israel.



*(iii) By miracles*

Most prominent of all divine actions is what we call 'miracle'. In the Old Testament terms for 'sign' or 'wonder' describe demonstrations of God's power and care for his people, which could not be expected in the ordinary course of life. They were frequently occasions when Israel herself, or her forces, were inadequate for survival or success. Israel's continuance, however, was not made to depend on a *deus ex machina*, on an intrusion into her ancient world of an utterly alien power or personage. No-one travelled through time to fix the course of history with a nuclear missile, no creatures glided through space to perform deeds impossible to comprehend. Again and again, the 'saving acts' of God are linked to the normal world. Thus, after the Amorities were defeated at Gibeon, the historian states '. . . the Lord threw down great stones from heaven . . . there were more who died because of the hailstones than were killed by the swords of the Israelites' (Joshua 10:11). For the Israelites the perception of a 'natural cause' did not diminish the miracle. They believed their God controlled the universe and all in it, therefore he could take any element in it to use its normal forces for his purposes.

Here, too, records produced by Israel's neighbours and contemporaries display the same outlook. Having many gods and goddesses, those peoples allocated each unexpected or unusual happening to the appropriate one. Thus it was Adad, the storm-god who completed the destruction of one enemy of Sargon of Assyria: 'the rest of the people who had fled to save their lives, whom I let go for the praise of the victory of Ashur, my lord, mighty Adad, heroic sone of Anu, uttered his loud cry over them (i.e. thundered) and with heavy clouds and hail-stones finished off the remainder'.<sup>23</sup> For the Hittites of Anatolia, a similar event was the work of thjeir storm-god, Teshub: Murshilish II (c. 1345-1315 B.C.) tells in a fragment of his 'annals' how 'the noble weather-god again showed his divine guidance: he caused it to rain all night and he laid down a mist (so) the enemy did not see the army's camp-fire and the enemy did not flee' and in the morning hid the Hittite forces from their foes by a cloud as they marched, so that they caught the enemy unprepared.<sup>24</sup>

Allowing for differences in the types of records, these episodes, and others like them, reveal the same attitude as the Hebrew historians held. The gods were intimately involved in the welfare of their people, especially in the king as the embodiment of the nation. In addition to their continuing and normal business, they might intervene strickingly to rescue their worshippers or prosper their plans. The interventions could be reported as answers to prayers, as the half-expected punishment of the wicked, or as unforeseen, though welcome support. Ancient Israel was not the only nation to perceive the hand of her God moving dramatically in her history.

Orthodox Israelites also saw the hand of their God in the history of other nations. When foreign rulers threatened or attacked, the God of Israel caused them to do it. Cyrus is a unique example, for the priests of Babylon could claim Marduk had brought him to supremacy, while a prophet of Israel could claim that it was the Lord's doing (Is 45:1ff). Israel also affirmed that it was her God who directed the affairs of the other nations (e.g. Amos 6:2; 9:7). If asked, therefore, an ancient Israelite would presumably have claimed that it was his God who ordained the 'miracles' we learn about from extra-biblical sources, and gave victory to Sargon or to the Hittite king over his enemies. How those peoples saw these matters is not clear to us.

#### 4. *Records of 'miracles'*

Assyrian and other sources supplying the examples of reported 'divine interventions' cited in the previous paragraph are also of interest for their nature as records. At present the practices of Assyrian court historians are little known. However the royal 'annals' were produced, accounts of military campaigns were created very soon after the king or his generals returned to the capital. The surviving manuscripts of the 'annals' often include lengthy descriptions of martial achievements of the years in which they were written, or the years immediately before. Among the more noteworthy is the history of an expedition Sargon II conducted in north-west Persia, a letter to the god Ashur over four hundred lines long, apparently composed shortly after the king's triumphant homecoming in 714 B.C.<sup>25</sup> Occasionally a longer interval may have elapsed between the events and the recording of them, but in all the examples, and in the majority of others, the time was short.

Whatever attitudes the Assyrian and other writings of similar sort exhibit, therefore, are the attitudes of men involved in the events and of their fellows who know about them. The interpretation given to any happening shows how those contemporary with it understood it.

Here a contrast arises between the way Israel's neighbours treated 'miracles' and the way modern commentators suppose the Hebrew accounts of 'miracles' came into being. Since the eighteenth century the majority of historians have excluded the concept of miracle. Consequently, biblical scholars have handled the miracle stories of the Old Testament as the products of extended tradition and folk-lore, of cult-legend and saga. The literary forms of the passages containing accounts of 'miracles' are determined firstly, then the stages of their growth are delineated. 'Biblical instances of miracle . . . are to be related to their peculiar literary sources . . .'.<sup>26</sup> The 'miracles' then prove to be the work of pious editors and the embellishments of old stories produced long after the times depicted. This results in a typical comment: 'Whatever undoubted historical nucleus the story may contain, that has almost certainly been expanded in saga to the proportions of the miraculous'.<sup>27</sup>

The weight given to literary forms and their effects should be balanced against other aspects of text and content. Where 'miracle' stories are present, the part they play in determining modern judgements about the literary form of their contexts should be recognized. Where they occur, they are a major reason scholars adduce for calling the passages legend, saga, or even fairy-tail. Of the widow of Sarephath's unfailling oil-supply, J. Gray stated 'The unfailling supply is a well-known motif in folk-lore, and is here an indication of the saga-character of the Elijah story.'<sup>28</sup> The miraculous elements become the product of a literary form through a circular process in such investigations.

Scholarly opinion based on literary and formal analyses of this kind varies in its appreciation of the miracle stories. At one side are those who dismiss them as 'novelistic expansion', at the other those who concede some kernel of reality is buried within them. Even when occurrences of memorable events are assumed to underlie miracle stories, they are usually reckoned to be so remote or so heavily augmented by later traditions as to be beyond the historian's reach.

The ancient near-eastern evidence speaks against such attitudes. As we have seen, the unusual and the unexpected occurring at the right moment were understood forthwith as acts of the gods on behalf of their followers. Long years of developing tradition were unnecessary, the religiously conscious were aware of a miracle as soon as it took place. The religiously conscious of the ancient near-east were not alone in this; it is widespread behaviour. In 1588 the Armada sent by Philip of Spain to conquer his sister-in-law Elizabeth's England was wrecked by gales and adverse winds, and by the harrying of the English. A medal was struck within the year to commemorate the salvation of England. On one face were engraved in Latin the words 'God blew with his winds and they were scattered'.

We conclude that accounts of 'miracles' in the Old Testament deserve a more positive treatment than they have normally received from Old Testament scholars. As much weight should be given to the likelihood of an impressive phenomenon being remembered as a miracle as to the possible creativity of continuing tradition.

##### 5. *Interpreting the acts of God*

The claim that a deity acted in a certain historial incident is common throughout history. Our study has shown that the claim may be made at the time of the event by those connected with it. The people involved were aware of something which was inexplicable in terms of their ordinary experience, yet was to their advantage. They could express it only in theological terms; their god had acted, and they expressed it in these terms forthwith. Two facts lie here. Firstly, the fact of belief. Incontrovertibly, men of the past believed in

divine intervention in human affairs, in the possibility of 'miracles'. In discussion, the miraculous is easily broadened to encompass the whole of life. 'The hand of God, it must be remembered, is as really and as fully present in the ordinary course of nature as in the most amazing miracle; and the ordinary course of nature is in reality infinitely more marvellous and outstanding than any miracle can be'.<sup>29</sup> This is turn and deserving of constant emphasis as man arrogates to himself more and immediate control of his environment. Nevertheless, in pondering biblical 'miracles', it is irrelevant. Throughout the Old Testament there is recognition of God's power as creating and sustaining the world and caring for his people. Beyond this, in the Old Testament there are special acts of God, recorded deliberately as unusual and notable, affecting the career of Israel. In the other ancient writings, too, what are mentioned are the unusual and particularly opportune events, the works of deities who, like the God of Israel, were also held responsible for the ordering of the world and its continuance, but who had special concern for their own people or land.

The miraculous, it may be stressed, was not unexpected by ancient people with faith in their gods, but 'miracles' were viewed as unusual, as already noted. Divine intervention was by no means a requisite of historical narrative. 'miracles' are rarely repeated, and their occurrence does not fall into any pattern that can be predicted. Kings campaigned, fought battles, and won wars time and again without any 'miracle'. David's Philistine war had its success because of specific divine aid, his victories over the Jebustites, Moab, Ammon, and Aram are related as straightforward military achievements, the strategy sometimes revealed, accompanied by a plain acknowledgement of God's over-ruling (e.g. 2 Samuel 10:12). In the Old Testament and in other ancient documents 'miracles' were really uncommon events, and so were noteworthy. The authors of the records believed unusual things had happened which were public acts of their gods, and those beliefs deserve respect from all who read them, whether they can sympathize with them, or not.

The second fact attached to miracle stories is cause. Concentration on the history of literature and tradition has led to the location of the cause of the stories in the requirements of those forms; the stories are either totally fictitious, or elaborations of an undiscernible event. Alternatively, the ancient near-eastern sources suggest the cause of miracle stories should be sought in occurrences that impressed observers or participants as so unusual that they assumed divine powers were at work. They do not suggest miracle stories resulted from a long period of legendary addition to an ordinary event, nor is there reason to suppose they were invented for cultic or theological ends.

If the assumption of impressive events underlying miracle stories is followed, the question will arise; what was the nature of the events? One may answer that they were beyond human experience and cannot be characterized beyond the phrase 'an act of God'. Both

biblical and extra-biblical stories stimulate further inquiry by expressing the vehicle in which the 'miracle' happened, among them storm, hail, wind. Following these hints, some have tried to convey the 'miracles' in entirely rationalistic ways. Yet those who attempt to reduce the plagues of Egypt, for example, to a series of tricks by Moses fail to treat the phenomenon of the stories adequately. On the other hand, natural explanations of the events in many of the stories can be seriously entertained, following the indications of the texts themselves. During the Exodus of Israel and her sojourn in the Wilderness 'miracles' took place, according to the Hebrew narratives, in diverse places and ways. Diligent observations of physical features and conditions in Egypt and Sinai have made it possible to explain how some of the 'miracles' worked. These explanations are attractive because of their appropriateness to the localities of the biblical stories.<sup>30</sup> In this light, the circumstances and the impact of the events may be understood better.

To disclose the mechanism of a 'miracle' is not to deny its nature, for that lay more in its timeliness than its manner. Behind that every man will see what he pleases. According to their faith men of old saw Marduk or Ashur, Adad or Baal or the Lord of Israel as the cause. Nowadays providence or historical process may be named. The appreciation of claims that one god or another acted will depend very strongly on prior disposition toward the world and what happens in it. For the faithful of ancient Israel, and for the Christian Church the role of miracles in Israel's career has always appeared to be greater than coincidence or chance could allow; they were signs of the living God.

. . . . .

To conclude: the 'historical' narratives of the Old Testament need to be read and studied critically, but the critical approach has to be scientifically based. That is to say, the critical historian should not treat these texts as if they are products of contemporary western writers, expecting them to conform to the standards of modern historiography. He should not apply vague or wholly subjective criteria, but work from a factual basis within the known norms of ancient societies. Only after he has read the records in their ancient context can he begin to ask 'Did this really happen in that way'. At the same time, he should go further than the present study to seek distinctive features in the Israelite writings. It is here that he will hear any message the ancient Hebrew books have for today.

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## I. HOWARD MARSHALL

### SOME ASPECTS OF THE BIBLICAL VIEW OF HISTORY

This paper contains the rather superficial and naive comments of a bungling amateur in the field who can claim no specialised knowledge of modern study of the nature and methods of history. They are offered on the principle that sometimes naive questions by an outsider can usefully probe the habitual assumptions of the experts and lead to a constructive discussion.

We are not concerned here primarily with the quality and reliability of the story recorded in the Bible, a topic which is covered in another paper in this symposium by Alan Millard. This question arises from me only in the context of whether the biblical writers aimed at accuracy, and even this theme is not at the centre of my discussion.

The question that I do want to raise is how the biblical writers understood the character of 'history'. Here I am thinking of history in the sense of what happened, *res gestae*, rather than in the sense of a written record. The difficulties and complications in the way of answering the question are obvious. First, if we are going to avoid superficial harmonisations, we ought properly to speak of the biblical *writers'* view rather than the *biblical* view of history, because it cannot be assumed that there is one common view held by them all. It may well be that writers in the same period and cultural setting share the same general outlook, and it may be that the biblical writers all do share the same understanding, but this must be demonstrated rather than assumed. Granted that we accept the unity and harmony of the biblical writings, we have still to show in what way they present a unified outlook on any given subject. It may be that the unity lies deep down rather than on the level of superficial harmonisation. Although, therefore, for brevity's sake, I shall tend to talk of the biblical view of history, it must be remembered that this can be won only by a detailed consideration of the outlooks of the individual writers. Second, it is debatable whether the biblical writers had the concept of history before them as a specific conscious theme in the same way as they could be said to have specific concepts of sin, judgement and salvation. We may therefore be asking modern questions of the text, and we have to remember that it is a risky and speculative procedure. And, third, closely linked with this, we have to remember that we are dealing with a different culture from our own, which may have had quite different assumptions and views about the problem which we are discussing.



Two initial and, I hope, non-controversial points can be made. The first is the reassuring one that in spite of what I have just said it does seem to be the case that the Bible contains material which is patently historical in the sense in which we would understand the term and which would appear to have been intended as such. There are plenty of accounts of ordinary human events which the biblical writers believe to have actually happened and which they researched in the kind of way practised by historians. Accounts are given which incorporate, or are based on, official records and documents, chronicles and other sources believed to be historical, and traditional and eye-witness materials, and the writers clearly assumed that they were giving a reliable picture of what happened. Even though Luke alone explicitly characterises his work in this way, it would be absurd to assume that he alone of the gospel writers had this concern. And even though the biblical writers may have lacked modern historical techniques, it would be false to assume that they did not have some standards of historical accuracy. Thus, without arguing the point in detail, we can say that there is a strain of history in the generally understood sense of the term in the Bible. And this should not surprise us since broadly speaking the same phenomenon can be seen in the nations surrounding Israel and Judah.

The second introductory point is that all history is interpreted history. The Bible is no different from other historical writings in this. All historical accounts are selective, partly because of the impossibility of recording everything, partly because of the inaccessibility of some of the information, and partly because of the particular interests of the writer. History is necessarily written from a particular viewpoint or from a combination of viewpoints, and so-called neutral reporting is impossible in principle. We have, therefore, to take account of this factor in any assessment of biblical history and to recognise that what is told will not be the whole story or a neutral story. This is not to say that the story will necessarily be inadequate or untrue; that question can be answered only in terms of the purposes which the narrative ought to fulfil.

Our real difficulties in evaluating the biblical concept of history arise from the fact that it is often said that historical research should be conducted in terms of the principles enunciated by E. Troeltsch. These state: (a). All historical statements are open to doubt and can lead only to probabilities. (b). We must assume that events in the past happened in the same kind of way as they do in our experience, and so we must assess evidence about the past in terms of analogy with what we know to be possible. (c). Everything which happens in history is interrelated in terms of cause and effect. The effect of these principles is that the historian has the onus of testing all the evidence which comes to him and that historical explanation must take place on the level of natural cause and effect as experienced by us.

So far as the first of these principles is concerned, let me comment:

(i). The requirement that historians must test the reliability of their sources is elementary and obvious. However, a distinction needs to be drawn between being required to test every single statement made by a source and sceptical about it unless it can positively be proved to be reliable, and secondly, being required to test and demonstrate the general reliability of a source so that one can reasonably assume its reliability in individual cases. Thus, if I find evidence that X was usually a good eye-witness, I shall be disposed to accept his statements as reliable even when I cannot substantiate them individually. If, however, I find Y was liable to errors of reporting on a major scale, then clearly I must test each of his statements in detail.

(ii). This requirement extends to the study of the biblical records. Even though I accept the full inspiration of the biblical writings, the statements made in them are still open to historical testing. Such testing will certainly be carried on by people who regard the Bible historically 'like any other book', and it will be necessary to examine the validity of their conclusions. But even apart from this, it is necessary to consider the purportedly historical statements in the Bible in order to assess in what way they are true. Scholars of an earlier generation assumed that, if the Gospels are historical documents, their accounts of events would be in exact chronological order. Today it is recognised by scholars who are fully committed to a high view of biblical inspiration and accuracy that the order of events in the Gospels is not necessarily intended to be chronological, and therefore it is necessary to analyse the records to determine whether the original order of the events recorded can be reconstructed. Again, it is universally recognised that the book of Acts records only a small selection of events in the rise and spread of the early church, so that a historian is bound to probe beneath the surface in order to understand more of the total picture. Further, the Bible does contain historical statements which conflict *prima facie* with other biblical statements or with statements made in other sources; manifestly responsible biblical scholarship must aim to show how these apparent conflicts are to be explained, and this can be done only by historical study. Thus, although one may want to protest against the excessive scepticism which Troeltsch showed in developing his first principle, basically it is valid statement of the historian's approach, applicable to biblical as well as to secular history.

It is, however, the second and third of Troeltsch's principles, taken together, which constitute the nub of the problem I want to discuss. Basically, the problem is that the Bible understands history in terms of the actions of both God and mankind. This takes place in two ways which cannot be sharply distinguished. On the one hand, there is the occurrence of miraculous events which cannot be

explained in terms of natural cause and effect and which have no analogy in modern experience, except where the modern experience is that of Christian believers (and of other groups which accept the miraculous), experience that secular historians would explain away. Orthodox Christian believers would insist here that Troeltsch's principles reveal themselves as secular or naturalist presuppositions which are nothing more than arbitrary assumptions and by which they do not feel bound. However, it is important to know how one justifies the refusal to accept them. An answer might be developed in two possible ways. One is to argue that the historical evidence for certain miraculous events - the resurrection of Jesus is usually chosen - is so strong that it calls the assumption in question. This reply would lead to a discussion of the nature of historical evidence and in what circumstances a 'neutral' assessment of it would lead to a rejection of naturalist presuppositions. How would the believer justify the view that his reading of the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus demanded a Christian interpretation of it? The other possible answer would be in terms of a general Christian understanding of the nature of reality and one's experience of it, which leads to a belief in the possibility and reality of miraculous events taking place in the world.

I do not propose to take up this issue in any further detail, but rather to turn to the second way in which history is understood in terms of the actions of both God and mankind. This is the way in which in the Bible events in general - or, to be more precise - some events, can be regarded as due to divine causation. In some sense God is seen to be active in the historical process. First, the biblical writers may look back at past events and state that God did certain things or caused certain things to happen. Examples need not be multiplied: the writer of Judges is quite typical when he explains how *the Lord* sold the people of Israel into the hands of Cushan-Rishathaim, and then they cried to the Lord, and he raised up a deliverer for them who delivered them (Jdg. 3:8f). Second, the biblical writers may prophesy what is going to happen in the future by the hand of God: as Amos says, 'Lo, I will command, and shake the house of Israel among all the nations, as one shakes with a sieve' (Am. 9:9). Thus there is the belief that the hand of God can be seen in past history and that it will be seen in future history. In other words, history is determined and controlled by the will of God. If this belief is most conspicuous in the OT simply because of its subject-matter, it is by no means absent from the NT.

Linked with this view is the concept that the biblical writers, and especially the prophets, were equipped to declare the interpretation of past events and to foretell future events. The divine purpose already worked out in history and the divine plan for the future can be known only if God reveals his plans to his spokesmen in one way or another. 'Surely the Lord God does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets' (Am. 3:7) sums up this belief.

Further, it is in general clear that these actions ascribed to God are related to his moral and spiritual judgements. When the people behave both religiously and morally, then they can expect national prosperity, but when they behave irreligiously and immorally, usually by falling into idolatry and associated practices and forsaking God, then they can expect judgement in the shape of national disaster. This applies first of all to the people of Israel who stood in a covenant relationship to God, but in the OT especially the prophets also speak out against pagan nations, and they threaten them with judgement for disobeying the principles of what may be called common morality or for acting excessively or without justification in attacking the people of Israel. We can say that there appears to be a moral principle working itself out in history whereby moral behaviour leads to prosperity and immoral behaviour leads to disaster.

Finally, linked with this idea of a moral dimension to events in history is the further question whether a divine purpose is at work which leads to a specific, final goal. Granted that the biblical writers do not have a cyclical view of events, do they see events as moving towards some kind of goal or terminus? In the OT this view is largely absent, and the writers are more concerned with the immediate future, but there does develop the idea of a golden future when there will be peace generally, when righteousness will triumph, and when the elements opposed to God will be destroyed. The hope is that this period of peace and prosperity will not again be broken by human rebelliousness and sin. In the NT this hope has become much more clear and definite. While there is a prospect of wars between nations and violent persecution of God's people, yet there will come an end to history as we know it with the parousia of the Lord and the final establishment of God's kingdom or the arrival of the age to come which is everlasting and transcendent in character. History comes to an end, and it is followed by the new age, whose power is already secretly at work in the experience of Christian believers.

Consequently, especially in the NT we can trace a belief in a series of events taking place in history and leading up to this consummation. God is seen as active in the period of promise in the OT right up to and including the period of John the Baptist who stands as a bridge between promise and fulfilment. Then there is the coming of Jesus and the creation of the Church which may be regarded as the fulfilment of the promises. And finally, at the end of a process during which the Lord reigns until he has subdued all his enemies, there comes the consummation when God is supreme and his will is perfectly done. This series of events may be regarded as a line or strand of sacred history or salvation-history which can be identified within the historical process and which ultimately becomes the only strand.

I trust that this is a fair summary of an understanding of history which is shared by the biblical writers. Let me recapitulate its essential features:

(1). The belief that the significance of past history and the course of future history are revealed to the prophets.

(2). The belief that at least some events in history are to be understood as divinely activated.

(3). The belief that a moral process can be traced in history.

(4). The belief that an on-going purpose leading to a goal is to be seen in history.

It is obvious that this way of understanding history would conflict with Troeltsch's principles, as he applies them. As I have already said, the boundary between that one might call natural events understood as acts of God, and supernatural events is rather a fluid one. One may refer to Acts 12 where the deliverance of Peter from prison and the sudden death of Herod Agrippa are both ascribed to 'an angel of the Lord', but whereas the first angel is very visible and palpable to Peter, the second angel is no doubt completely outside the realm of sense-perception, and the writer is saying nothing more than the moral illness of the king was ultimately part of God's plan to bring judgement upon him. In both of these cases, however, it would be illegitimate for a consistent secular historian to speak of the hand of God, or even worse the angel of the Lord, as being at work.

I do not share Troeltsch's assumptions which to my mind are quite inconsistent with a biblical and Christian belief in the living God who became incarnate in his Son, Jesus Christ.\* Nevertheless, it is still necessary for us to probe into the nature and validity of this biblical view of history. I am concerned with two questions, first whether this is a proper account of the biblical understanding, and, second, whether we can understand contemporary history in the same way. Some very difficult questions arise when we undertake such an examination, and I must apologise in advance if I give the impression of raising problems rather than of supplying answers.

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\* For an important discussion of Troeltsch which concludes that his principles can be applied in a way which he would probably have regarded as perverse but which is consistent with orthodox Christianity see W.J. Abraham, *Divine Revelation and the Limits of Historical Criticism*, Oxford 1982, ch.5.

1. First, there is the problem of who is qualified to interpret historical events or to prophesy the future. We do not have prophets today who are capable of giving interpretations of contemporary history which are based on direct revelation from God rather than upon rational deduction or sheer intuition. It must be allowed that in some circles it is cleaimed that the charisma of prophecy is still present with the church, but, even if this is the case (and I am not necessarily denying it), it must be allowed that prophetic interpretation of contemporary history is at best on the fringe of the life of the church. From the second century down to the present day there have been no prophetic revelations of any serious consequence about the character of present history which have been handed down to us.

The effect of this consideration may be to raise a question about our original premise, which was that prophetic utterances in the Bible were based on what I have called direct revelations. Far from denying that such revelations did on occasion take place, I should want to affirm my belief that the phenomenon of prophetic visions and auditions is a firm part of the biblical scene. But the question needs to be raised whether in many cases when a prophet uttered a revelation with the preface 'Thus says the Lord' he had come to this conviction other than by means of a direct revelation. Did the prophets not brood on events until the interpretation of them broke in upon them with such a sense of conviction that they had no hesitation in believing that it was the Lord who had shown the significance to them? No doubt this is what happens in many modern examples of what we call divine guidance. It would also appear to have happened in the case of the writers known to the Jews as 'the former prophets', the writers of the historical books in the OT, men who do not claim that they had had divine visions or auditions but nevertheless felt able to record history in terms of the working of God. If this is the case, then we may be able to claim that an extension of the phenomenon of prophetic interpretation of history into the present day can be justified. To be sure, there is one vital differentiating factor. The writings of the biblical prophets form part of Holy Scripture because there was a concursive action of the Holy Spirit so that their writings, produced by ordinary human processes, were nevertheless the Word of God in a unique and normative sense. The utterances of modern-day prophets can in no way be elevated to the level of the canonical Scriptures, although this is not to deprive them of all authority. We may refer to the analogy of preaching. Paul was quite sure that what he actually said in the course of his evangelism was not just the word of man but also the Word of God, and this shows that it is possible to have a Word of God which has not been canonised in Scripture. So too the contemporary preacher can surely claim that the Word of God reaches his congregation through his preaching, despite all its imperfections and inadequacies. In the same way, then, it may be possible for the modern Christian historian to attain an insight into the mind of God and to offer an interpretation of events which reflects, however fallibly, something of the divine understanding of what is taking place.

What I am claiming, then, is that an understanding of historical events in terms of the divine purpose which is fulfilled in them, can be achieved not only as a result of a direct divine revelation but also by means of the rational and intuitive working of a mind which is so nourished on the Word of God that it has some real insight into the purposes of God. This point is important not only for our understanding of biblical revelation but also for our understanding of contemporary history, since unless there is some continuity between historical understanding in the Bible and historical understanding today, our topic is wholly academic.

2. The second question which is raised by the account which I gave of the biblical concept of history is concerned with the problem of determinism. From our sketch of the biblical view one might very well draw the conclusion that all events are considered to be determined in advance by God, so that there exists in effect a sort of divine timetable for history, extracts from which are periodically revealed to the prophets, like a random page of Prestel or Ceefax, so that they can see how what is happening now is part of the divine plan or how what will happen in the future is also foreordained by God. From such a verse as Pr. 16:33 ('The lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is wholly from the Lord') the conclusion might be drawn, and often is drawn, that all that happens is planned and purposed by God and is the work of His hand, so that a divine plan embracing all human history can be recognised insofar as God reveals portions of it to His prophets.

At first sight it may seem attractive to think of human history in this way, and one might conclude that the biblical presentation demands such a theory. History would then be like a drama written out in advance by God and then acted out on the stage by actors who unconsciously do exactly what the script required of them. In various works D.M. Mackay has shown that this kind of model is a logically possible one, explanations of phenomena in history being possible on two complementary levels, one being that of the free choice of individuals, and the other being that of the divine causation which goes on simultaneously (*The clockwork image*, London, 1974). Mackay has successfully used this type of model with reference to the different complementary levels of explanation at which one may understand mental activity, but there are some very real difficulties in understanding history in this kind of way.

First, there is the problem of the evil deeds of mankind. If we are thinking of a divine plan which embraces *every detail* of human history, then it is surely impossible to fit evil deeds into it. We do not want to say that God himself purposed them, nor can we even say that God had foreknowledge of them, since this would again imply that they formed part of a web of actions predetermined by Him. The whole point of describing actions as evil is to say that they are contrary to the will of God.

Second, there is the problem of the part played by God himself. Our difficulty is that in the particular drama we have in mind, the Writer himself becomes one of the characters who takes part along with the others. But if so, this means that not only does God plan and foreordain what human beings do, but He also plans and foreordains what He himself is going to do. God, as it were, writes out in advance a script which embraces not only what people will do but also His own actions both in causing them to act in these ways and His own individual actions in which He responds to them personally. The result is that the actual run-through of human history imprisons God in the script which He has already created and He himself is no longer free to do as He pleases. It then becomes difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between the script and the performance.

I find it impossible to conceive of God acting in this kind of way, so that human history is entirely the product of a process akin to script-writing. The concept of God determining in advance not only what we shall do, but also what He will do, seems to run into logical impossibilities precisely because in this case it is one of the actors who is writing a script which involves His own part. For if the actual run-through of the script is divinely fore-ordained, then so too is the writing of the script something that what was divinely foreordained, and so too the foreordination of the writing of the script must in turn have been foreordained, and so *ad infinitum* in an infinite regress. The objection that God stands outside time and that therefore the writing and performance of the script may be regarded as simultaneous is not convincing; God is involved in time since He is taking part in a performance in which events take place in a chronological sequence, and within that sequence His planning also takes place. It may be possible to argue for the complementarity of explanations of purely human actions in terms of divine foreordination and of free human choices, but it is surely impossible to argue for the complementarity of explanations of divine actions in terms of free divine choices preceded by divine foreordination. The idea of complementary explanations at two levels in God's mind is either tautological and thus in effect nonsensical, or else it is logically impossible.

But if the model breaks down on the conceptual level, it is an equally serious objection that it breaks down on the hard facts of the biblical evidence. Here we face a number of difficulties:

(a). We are told that God can change His mind or be sorry for what He has done (Gn. 6:6). Surely if God had known in advance that He would be grieved by the sin of man, He would not have done things the way He did and then repented of what He had done. I am aware of the objection that God is unchanging and in one sense cannot be said to 'repent' in the sense of changing His mind. That, however, is how the Bible portrays God's reaction in a way that is humanly comprehensible. If we say that God was grieved to His heart



at what happened, then we face the problem that God foreordained that men would be wicked (or forordained that He would permit them to be wicked) and foreordained that He would then be grieved about it and would blot them out except for Noah. But for God to foreordain that He would be grieved is surely to rob His grief of its reality or to make a statement that is plain logical nonsense.

(b). We are further told that some prophecies are conditional. This again suggests that God can change His mind if human beings alter their ways. If it is objected that the prophecy was merely a device to encourage the people to repent and that God knew (or foreordained) that they would repent if He threatened them with judgement, then we face the logical difficulties again regarding God foreordaining His own actions, and we also face moral difficulties as to why God let His threats of judgement work only in some cases and not in others. Either we must say that the reason why the people did not repent was because of their sin - in which case we are admitting that some things lie outside God's plan - or that it was because God did not foreordain that they should repent, in which case we make God into an arbitrary and capricious tyrant.

(c). Yet another objection is that the biblical narrative is simply not presented in this way. The Bible does not suggest that everything that happens is a divine action or a divinely-caused action. On the contrary, it presents God as often responding to human actions, and nothing suggests that the response is other than real and genuine. After the incident of the golden calf God said to Moses that He would destroy the people. But Moses besought the Lord on their behalf, 'And the Lord repented of the evil which He thought to do to His people' (Ex. 32:14). Can this possibly mean that previously God said something like this to himself as he composed the script: 'I shall not blot out the people if Moses intercedes for them, and therefore I foreordain that he will intercede for them and that I shall accept what he says. But of course all this presupposes in its turn that I shall allow them to sin in the matter of the golden calf and then pronounce my judgement against them'? I cannot conceive of a God who behaves in this manner. Rather, God deals with people as persons and not as pre-programmed robots, and it does not make sense to say that on one level God deals with people as robots and on another level as people.

I conclude that there are insuperable difficulties in the way of arguing that *all* history is foreordained by God. The concept of a single divine masterplan embracing everything that happens comes to grief because (a) it cannot cope with the problem of evil: (b) it causes logical impossibilities when we consider the part of God in His own plan, and (c) it goes against the biblical evidence which presents God as dealing personally with persons.

The problem arises because we do have two sorts of information in the Bible which cannot be explained away. On the one hand, we do have statements where God predicts through His prophets what will happen, and which show that God's plans are fulfilled. Events which can be explained on one level as due to human purpose can be explained on another level as the fulfilment of God' purpose. The classical example is Isaiah 10 where the Assyrian ruler is the unwitting instrument of divine judgement against Israel, but when he boasts of what he has done and lifts himself up in pride against God, then he too comes under judgement and is destroyed by God. Freely-willed human actions, even those of evil men acting wickedly, can be used by God according to the prophets. On the other hand, we have statements which show that God deals with people as persons, engaging in dialogue with them, which to every appearance is real and genuine. God is portrayed as responding to the cries of His people, and not going through a sham process in which He causes His people to cry to Him and then takes pity on them because of their act of penitence which He himself caused them to carry out.

There is a tension here, and the question is whether it is an acceptable one. I offer one or two suggestions which may help to explain it, although I recognise that we cannot in principle hope to explain fully the relation between divine and human causation:

(a) We should think of divine action in history as being interventionist, in the sense that only some events in Scripture are said to be directly willed by God. It is impossible to think of the disobedience of Israel and the resultant judgement of God as both being willed by Him in the same sense, although there are cases where the sin of God's people is because God gave them up to it as a judgement on their previous sins, which presumably they had freely chosen for themselves.

(b) In general, the evil acts of people are not regarded as being due to divine foreordination. It was not the fact that Assyria acted as God's scourge on Israel that brought the nation under judgement, but the fact that Assyria acted in a cruel and proud manner. One might object that when Jesus suffered at the hands of sinners it was by the deliberate counsel and foreknowledge of God that He was handed over to them (Acts 2:23). But while God did hand Jesus over to sinful men, he did not plan the sin which they committed against Him. Is it fair to say that God could foresee what would happen to Him, granted the depraved state of mankind, but did not plan precisely what would happen? Or have we to allow that in the particular strand of history surrounding the death of the Saviour there could be a more specific foreordination by God?

(c) The references to conditional prophecy and to God's repentance suggest that there is not a detailed advance plan for human history worked out in advance. Our tendency is to think of human history as being comparable with running through a computer a complete programme which is already stored in its memory, or like

playing a pre-recorded cassette tape. A different model is preferable. If we think of a computer that is programmed, for example, to play chess, then the situation is that the actual moves of the human opponent are not known in advance, but the computer has the resources to deal with whatever the opponent tries to do and even to take the initiative in forcing a win. God, we may say, has the resources to deal with every conceivable situation and to win in the end. To deny that he has foreordained every detail of history is not the same thing as denying his sovereignty and omnipotence.

The problem is how we may be sure that God, the master chess player, will triumph in the end. Why has the game gone on so long without victory being achieved? It is at this point that we must bring in the role of Christian faith. In the end, every aspect of our Christian understanding of the world is dependent upon faith, and our problem is to define, if possible, the place of faith in our scheme of thinking. My suggestion is that the Christian interpretation of history depends upon the insight of faith that the decisive move in the 'game' took place in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Although spectators in general may not recognise it, in fact this was the decisive divine move which must lead to final victory in the same way as there can be a move in chess after which the experienced player knows that, although the game may go on for a few moves, he is bound to win in the end unless he does something stupid. It is faith which recognises this move by the master player as the crucial move. Presumably faith could be wrong, but the character of faith as faith is to believe that this is the case, and then to proceed on the basis of this belief. Hence we can say that Jesus is the key to history.

(d) A complicating factor in the situation is whether in addition to the divine actor in history there is also a supernatural power of evil which can influence people in order to gain its ends. This factor is present in the Bible, but it is appealed to less commonly than is sometimes thought. The fact of Satan or the devil as the motivating force in human evil is scarcely present in the OT; in the NT the function of the devil is to act as tempter and on occasion to take possession of those who yield to his influence (such as Judas). The idea of an evil force predetermining people to rebel against God does not seem to be present. Rather we have an evil force which tempts people to do evil and which causes suffering and disorder on a cosmic scale.

I have suggested in this section that rather than supposing God to have programmed the whole of human history in every detail, so that what happens is like the playing through of a pre-recorded complete programme, it makes better sense to think of the model of a computer containing a programme which is capable of dealing with whatever data it is required to work on, and that Christian faith holds that the divine programme will eventually be successful.

3. This leads us on to a consideration of the third and fourth aspects of the biblical view of history which I shall consider in close conjunction with each other. Is there a moral process going on in history, and has God a programme which leads to a final goal? It has already been suggested that the idea of God's final victory is not in doubt for those who believe that the cross and resurrection of Jesus constitute the decisive divine act in history. There would appear, therefore to be justification for identifying a salvation-historical line in history, a set of moves within the total drama of history which can be seen as God's actions leading towards the consummation of His purposes, just as in a game of chess one particular set of pieces on the board and the moves made with them can hold the key to victory, while the presence or absence of other pieces and the moves made with them may be of no great importance so far as the final result is concerned.

However, this raises a fresh problem which I have delayed posing until now. The problem is that we have been talking about a moral process in history affecting the nations and human societies. Not only Israel and Judah but also the other nations come under divine judgement for breaking the covenant or simply for acting in unjust and cruel ways. The great empires are all doomed because of their godlessness and immorality. Similarly in the NT the fall of Babylon, a symbol of godless civilisation, is announced. Granted that all opposition to God will be ultimately overcome, can we also see a moral process in the shorter term? Would it be right to see the fall of Nazi Germany as a divine judgement on its sins? Is it true in practice that all who live by the sword will also die by the sword? And what form does temporal judgement take? Sometimes the engineer is indeed hoist with his own petard, but what about the cases where the judgement is apparently not directly the consequence of the wrongdoing, as when Israel turned to idols and therefore the Lord sent the Midianites against them?

There is a bundle of complex issues here. First, it is clear that in the Bible God addresses and deals with societies, be they families, small communities or kingdoms and empires. His purpose was to have a covenant people, not a set of covenant persons, and that this people should bring light to the Gentile nations. But the difficulty is that communities exist only for a short time and then cease to exist. The Philistines and the Assyrians may have lasted for centuries, but they no longer exist, and their successors have also disappeared. Now if the biblical concept of the destiny of the individual requires the concept of resurrection and final judgement leading to condemnation or salvation, it seems very difficult to think of a comparable process involving communities unless somehow these too can be identified and resurrected. This is perhaps hinted at when Jesus prophesies that the people of Chorazin, Bethsaida, Tyre and Sidon will fare in the judgement (Lk. 10:13), or when the Seer says that the nations will walk in the light of the heavenly city and the kings of the earth shall bring their glory into it, and the leaves of the tree shall be for the healing of the nations

(Rev. 21:24; 22:2). It is extremely difficult to envisage such a judgement, but perhaps the problems are no greater than in the case of the judgement of individuals by their works in order to determine whether or not they bear witness to a faith in Christ as the ground of justification. But the question still remains whether these statements are perhaps metaphorical. Does not 'Chorazin', for example, really stand for the individuals who composed it, some of whom may well have believed in Jesus while the majority did not? Surely the real point is that we are involved in the creation of a structural sin, and we are also affected by the temptations caused by the structural sin, and these are both factors in how God assesses us as individuals. When the biblical writers speak of the nations participating in the new world, surely this means that the individuals who compose them will do so as members of God's new people, the Church. God's purpose is that His new people should somehow take up into itself and into the life of eternity what is of lasting value in the communal life of the world as part of the communal life of his people in the new world.

I have been offering suggestions rather than firm statements at this point. Where it comes to the question of the judgement of the nations within history, the same reticence may be advisable. However, perhaps I can refer to the strong faith expressed in the classic discussion of the topic, *Christianity and History*, by H. Butterfield. He argues that a process of moral judgement can be discerned in history, provided that we are prepared to adopt a proper timescale so as to see events in their 'divine' perspective and provided also that we do not make the mistake of assuming that there is a neat separation between the 'baddies' who suffer judgement and the 'goodies' who are unconditionally praised and rewarded. History is more complex than that.

In some cases this process can be plainly discerned. But there are two points to be made. First, this philosophy of history is too simple to do justice to the complex facts, and Butterfield rightly recognises this when he goes on to talk of vicarious suffering, tragedy and other elements which must be taken into account. It is not the case that the facts of history fail to conform to the simple principle of evil being judged and virtue being rewarded, and that therefore we are wrong to interpret a moral interpretation of what is going on. Rather the pattern is a more complicated one, but the criterion by which human deeds are judged remains a moral one - and this applies to societies as well as to individuals. The principle, therefore, can be formulated that history can and should be seen from a moral point of view.

This leads directly to the second consideration. We are sometimes told that historians should not moralise and pronounce on the moral rectitude or otherwise of what they record: the historian is not to act as a judge. In fact it seems to me that historians frequently do this, just like literary critics, and that they cannot help doing so. My point is that, if we are working as Christian historians, it is proper and necessary for us to take the moral dimension into account and indeed to work within a Christian frame of reference. We may not have prophetic insights of the traditional sort which will enable us to interpret contemporary events, but we may have an insight, based on our familiarity with the biblical understanding of history and our own insights into the historical process, through which the Christian understanding of history can come to expression. We shall of course recognise that our interpretations can never be absolute and unconditional, but will rather reflect our own ignorance, bias and lack of spiritual insight. Nevertheless, I believe that the point is valid that we are under obligation to carry out our interpretation of history from a moral and Christian point of view, and that we cannot honestly remain amoral and uncommitted about it.

I conclude, therefore, that the biblical writers claimed an insight into what God is doing in history, that they saw a divine purpose being worked out in the historical process, and that Christian historians should be guided by their insights so that their historical writing is indeed *Christian* historical writing.

D.W. BEBBINGTON

## HISTORY FOR THEOLOGY AND MISSION

In the Cambridge University Library index to the reference section, under the heading 'Historical Sciences' there appears the entry 'Demonology and Witchcraft'. By choosing to hold a symposium today on 'History and the Christian Faith', the Victoria Institute shows that it does not share such an estimate of history's associations. History and faith necessarily impinge on each other. Previous papers have explored other dimensions of their relationship, but this one concerns itself with some implications of recent developments in history. It offers a survey of two contemporary trends in the theory and practice of the subject, examines considerations shaping a proper Christian response and then engages directly with the question: what is the value of history for believers today? Much has been written about the use of history: does it have an Christian use? Can history subserve Christian theology and mission in the contemporary world?

The first of the two broad trends is the decline of Church history, at least in its traditionally accepted form. Church history was commonly regarded, and even more commonly organised, as a discipline distinct from history. The story of the Church was separable from the history of the world and was the concern of a race apart, Church historians, whose task was thought to have undoubted value for the believing community. Nineteenth-century theological colleges normally had only three or four tutors, but one of them was sure to be a Church historian. Many of them, it appears, spent their time chiefly in teaching heresies. But that is entirely understandable: they were explaining to candidates for the ministry what to avoid - that is, they were doing something self-evidently *useful*. A view of Church history as a distinct discipline along these lines still lives on. In volume three of *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, published this year, there appears a passage discussing the growth of Wesleyan foreign missions.

"The theologian may be permitted to see here the activity of God . . . At the same time, the Church historian will point to the vision and initiative of one man, Dr. Thomas Coke . . . The secular historian will not fail to mention other factors . . .

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Even though, in this case, the subject-matter is the same, it is assumed that there will be entirely different approaches appropriate to the theologian, the Church historian and the secular historian. If the Church historian contrasts with the theologian, there is just as sharp a contrast between the Church historian and the secular historian.

Such an estimate is receding. Historians of Christianity are taking a broader view. Any account of Christian developments, it is increasingly felt, must take note of 'secular' factors. The barriers between 'ecclesiastical' and 'general' history have been broken down, so that the subject-matter of traditional Church history has been allocated largely to the history of ideas or to social history. Thus it is recognised that doctrine has been affected by external influences. 'Nearly all important theological developments', Sir Richard Southern wrote in a review last year, 'are brought about by pressures, social or otherwise, from outside the theological system . . .'.<sup>2</sup> And a work published five years ago argued that the pattern of Church growth since the eighteenth century in Britain was the effect of external constraints far more than of decisions taken by ministers, evangelists or church members.<sup>3</sup> There is room for debate about the relative weight of factors in bringing about any change, but a new consensus is emerging in support of the premise that secular forces must be carefully analysed in any study of the history of the Church.

At first sight the Christian might feel that this is a disturbing trend. There is less emphasis on religion as religion, and it might be suspected that this is nothing other than a secularisation of scholarship in the wake of the secularisation of society. Certainly the Christian would be likely to suspect that the idea of the *usefulness* of the story of the past for believers today had been allowed to evaporate. To that point we must return, but here it should be recognised that there are substantial gains from the reintegration of Church and secular history. First, the primary perception leading to this shift is surely valid. The separation of the religious from the secular is artificial. 'Church history' is very much of an abstraction: 'churchmen' have been people of their age, 'the Church' subject to all the pressures of the times. Religion is not separate from life today; it was no more separate in the past. Christian people were also producers, consumers, political animals. Hence to see Christians as part of their world is to take a step towards the truth. Secondly, the word 'Church', and worse the word 'ecclesiastical', accurately represent a historical practice that has been heavily institutional in its concerns. The very terminology has a deterrent effect on the intended audience. The Christian public, and especially the Evangelical public, know that vital Christianity is not embalmed in institutions, but historians have used descriptions of their task that encourage the impression that the Christian religion is to be identified with its institutional expression. Too often the label has been all too accurate. Ecclesiastical history has often focussed on hierarchies and bureaucracies to the neglect of popular currents in Christian life. It is far harder for the newer historical approach to neglect the weightier matters of the gospel. Thirdly, the separating-off of Church history was damaging to ordinary history. Except perhaps for the Middle Ages and the Reformation, most periods were described by mainstream historians with the religion left out, or tacked on in the manner of an appendix. How



often school history books have relegated Christianity to a tiny 'culture-and-religion' chapter near the end. The effect has been to neglect the Christian presence in the past. The demolition of the barrier between Church history and secular history means not only that the secular is given its place in the account of the Church, but that the Church is allowed to take its due place in the secular. Such a trend is to be welcomed.

The second broad trend can be summarised as the decline of the idea of value-neutrality in history. Its nature can perhaps best be understood by breaking it down into two separate, but closely-related, developments. The first has been an increasing stress on the conceptual in history as an element alongside - and in some measure determinative of - the empirical. Instead of regarding their task as being largely an empirical one of fact-finding, with generalisation based on the facts as the concluding stage of the operation, historians have come to see it as an exercise in creating and defending conceptual schemes by means of empirical support. Conceptualisation, or 'model-building' as it is often called, precedes or at least accompanies the process of assembling data. It is no longer seen as merely the capstone of the edifice. This shift rests in part on doubts about the existence of 'facts'. Whereas in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, historians, like most other people, believed that there were such things as independent facts waiting to be discovered, the notion of autonomous and discrete facts, hard building bricks for the historian's structure, has been undermined. 'Facts', it has been noticed, depend on the conceptual scheme of the person relating them, whether in the past or in the present. One man's 'execution of rebels' is another's 'judicial murder of freedom fighters'. Values are embedded in the very language used, so that unimpeachable 'facts' can hardly be propounded. This perception was hidden from the compilers of *The Concise Dictionary of National Biography*, an epitome of one of the great monuments of late nineteenth-century scholarship. Thus it describes Alfred's peace with the Danes, the treaty of Wedmore in 878, as the occasion when Guthrum, the Danish king, 'became a Christian'.<sup>4</sup> It is highly dubious if a political and military compromise, shortly afterwards abrogated by Guthrum, was the stimulus to his spiritual awakening. The doubt is not over whether Guthrum submitted to Christian baptism, an empirical matter; it is rather over the meaning of that act, including questions over the *ex opere operato* efficacy of baptism, a conceptual matter, that doubt arises. The mental scheme of the writer of the *Concise Dictionary of National Biography* article determined his account of the past. It is increasingly believed that this is always the case with historians. Their conceptualisations embody values; and those values shape their writings. Facts are not sovereign.

The second aspect of the trend is the acceptance that a historian legitimately has a point of view in his studies, a position that entails the rejection of objectivity as traditionally understood. This follows from the first aspect. If history is

conceptually conditioned to a high degree, then each historian, possessing a different conceptual understanding from his fellow, will write history that reflects his own personality. The historian is not passive before material that speaks to him of the past, but plays an active part in constructing his account. His mind has a bias that is unavoidable. It may even help his history if he has a empathy for those about whom he writes. A worker for a political party in the present, for example, may be more able than another historian to appreciate the frustrations of those in the past responsible for maintaining voluntary activities in the community.<sup>5</sup> Committed history, as it is coming to be called, may reveal more than the exploration of a researcher dedicated only to the ideal of objectivity. But it was true even when, in the later nineteenth century, it was generally supposed not to be, that eminent historians injected a point of view into their work. E.A. Freeman, the historian of the Norman Conquest, for instance, could be carried away by his racial feelings when describing Queen Edith, wife of Edward the Confessor: 'But [Edith] has been charged with far heavier offences than this. She seems to have been in some degree smitten with her husband's love of foreigners'.<sup>6</sup> Written history has never been objective in the sense of reflecting only the past that is studied; it has always reflected the present too, for it has been shaped by all the forces moulding the historian's mind. What is new is to regard this not as something to be regretted and minimised, but as just and proper.

The decline of the idea of value-neutrality in Anglo-Saxon countries over the last quarter century or so is a consequence of other developments in the discipline. First, there has been the actual practice of committed history. Since the 1960s historians have been more confident in openly flying their colours. A landmark in this development was the publication in 1963 of E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, an analysis of the processes by which (allegedly) a unitary working class was forged by about 1830. Thompson, though writing as a scholar, was loudly on the side of the working people. His Marxism, far less moderate than it has since become, was the spur to the enterprise. Others have followed in a variety of radical causes of which the latest wave is feminist. Yet this practice of writing from a convinced and expressed point of view has not been confined to the left, and those seeking change. In a recent and illuminating work, Maurice Cowling of Peterhouse, Cambridge, has drawn attention to a tradition of conservative (and Conservative) writers, often associated with that college and normally historians, who have challenged the liberal assumptions dominating English academic life.<sup>7</sup> Political commitment was allowed to influence historical writing more openly in this tradition than was normal, and, though of long-standing, this approach has come to the fore more markedly in recent years. From very different angles, political convictions have encouraged historians to voice their point of view.

A second influence in the same direction has been of a more theoretical kind. The most obvious challenge has again been Marxist. All historians, Marxists have argued, are influenced by their class interests. Marxist historians themselves have the discernment to ally with the progressive forces in the world, but most others, while believing themselves to be writing in a value-free manner are in reality producing 'bourgeois' history; that is to say, they are supporting the existing capitalist society. The ordinary British empiricist tradition, supposing itself to be engaged in fact-finding and committed to objectivity, has been guilty of self-deception, for in practice it has been committed to such values as the continuance of liberal democracy.<sup>8</sup> The Marxist case has made most impact, but it has been reinforced by the broad tradition of German historical theory leading in the twentieth century to the sociology of knowledge of Mannheim and the critical theory of Habermas.<sup>9</sup> According to the sociology of knowledge, men of ideas like historians necessarily reflect their society; and according to critical theory, values are so pervasive that history cannot avoid them. Committed history has received both a stimulus and a theoretical justification from these sources.

Thirdly, and for many British historians most importantly, there has been the influence of other disciplines. Sociology, long neglected in Britain, became a force to be reckoned with in the 1960s. Far more alive to analysing its own premises than history had been, sociology provoked theoretical questioning in what was at the very least a closely adjacent discipline. For some analysts it was in truth the same discipline, so that controversy over the relationship between the two roused historians into considering the boundaries and distinctiveness of their subject.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, sociology's characteristic concern for generalisation of findings helped shift the balance within history away from fact-finding and towards conceptualisation. Other disciplines made a similar impact: economics, with its model-building, and anthropology, with its systems of inference, both forced on historians a recognition that classical empiricism was not all. The effect, therefore, was to encourage the tendency for historians to abandon the ideal of value-neutrality.

The Christian response to this broad trend will probably be ambiguous. The Christian is likely to be persuaded by the arguments, or else conditioned by the intellectual atmosphere, into some degree of sympathy for the newer position. On reflection, he is bound to admit, at least in principle, that 'facts' are relative to the conceptual schemes of those who propound them and that written history is made in the image and likeness of the historian. The new position therefore offers a more adequate account of how historians in practice operate. He will be the more ready to make the admission when he considers the origin of the empiricist position which is being superseded. Far from being the product of Christian civilisation, it is the fruit of the secularisation of Christian worldview in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century.<sup>11</sup> He

will shed no tears over the demise of the exaltation of 'facts' when he recalls that they provided an alternative ground of certainty as faith faded in an uncertain world. Consequently the newer position will be appreciated as a shift back towards an understanding of history both more intrinsically just and more in line with the traditional convictions of Christian civilisation.

Yet on the other hand, the Christian is likely to hear alarm bells ringing. He will probably be dismayed by the relativism of the newer position. It appears to make the truth of a historian's statements depend on his subjective perceptions. We seem to lose our grounds for believing that we know about the past. That is worrying for a Christian, whose faith is founded on redemptive events in history. Fears, however, are unnecessary, for the newer position need not lead to the quagmire of unqualified relativism. The reason is that history is not reducible to subjective perceptions. A historical account is the product, not only of a historian's mind, but also of evidence. Documents, memories, archaeological discoveries - these and many other traces of the past exist in the present. Evidence is not unproblematic in itself, but it does give a measure of hard content to history. Historians do change their minds because of evidence: Lord Dacre's second thoughts about the authenticity of the Hitler diaries constitute a celebrated instance. Hence historical conclusions are not a matter of private illumination, but are the result of examining evidence which in principle can be examined by others. There is, therefore, scope for debate on the common ground of the evidence over its proper interpretation. Other practitioners provide a check on the free play of a historian's imagination. What a historian describes may not be 'the facts', but the factual, what the evidence shows, is constitutive of written history. The Christian need not be alarmed by a view of history that he welcomes on other grounds.

The newer view is, in truth, an opportunity for the Christian. The trend is towards a position more favourable to Christian faith, rather than less so. On the older view, a Christian perspective was ruled out of court as an offence against the neutrality of 'objective' history. On the newer view, there is a chance to write history in which a Christian expresses his convictions. Christian history is regarded as a legitimate enterprise. The historian can permit his biblical vision of reality to shape his writing, just as he allows it to shape his life. So it will be useful to set out the Christian convictions that particularly apply to history writing. Two convictions are paramount: belief about God's part in history, providence; and belief about man's part in history, what we can call anthropology.

Providence, it may be suggested, is both general and particular. General providence is the divine guidance of the whole of history from creation to the last day. It is this element that gives the historical process the linear quality, the sense of direction, that dominates western thought but seems so strange to

those who come into contact with the West from, say, Japan. Particular providence is God's intervention in specific events, whether in judgement or mercy. Just as we discern the hand of God at points in our own lives, so we can see it at work in the history of the world. Christian history, as in the past, can be attuned to the ways of providence. Here is a point of view for a Christian historian. But is this perspective available to a writer today? Dr John Richardson of the University of St Andrews has put forward the objection that it is not. He points to the words of Jesus concerning the ignorance of all but the Father of 'that day and that hour', the 'times or seasons',<sup>12</sup> contending that they show that we cannot understand the end of history. If we cannot understand the end, we cannot know God's intentions for the world and so cannot write of his providential activity.<sup>13</sup> This objection, however, can be answered. The words of Jesus are about the *time* of the end, which we do not know, not about the *nature* of the end, about which we do know. Scripture offers us the expectation that every knee will bow to Jesus Christ before He delivers all authority to the Father. The expectation is certain because the victory has already been won, by Jesus on the cross. The nature of the end of history, that is to say, has been revealed in the middle. In the work of Christ we see the archetypal event, mercy being made available to those who trust in Him, judgement being dispensed to those who do not. We therefore know the goal of the general course of history, and the content of particular divine interventions. General and particular providence are alike illuminated by the cross. Hence there is no reason, at least of a theological order (a practical issue is considered later), why we cannot write of providence working itself out.

The other central Christian conviction about history concerns the human condition. A Christian anthropology, as Dr Richardson insists, is an essential link between Christianity and history.<sup>14</sup> Humanity, the Christian holds, is great but fallen. Man was made in the image of God, but has become the prey of evil. It is sometimes objected that this belief is so abstract as to be of no use in understanding the past, but on the contrary it can offer specific guidance to the historian. A friend researching on the Scottish blood-feuds of the reign of James VI was able to treat the irrational propensity to taking revenge (for most historians inexplicable folly) as an entirely understandable symptom of fallenness. Treating it as natural helped him to pinpoint the occasions when it began to be denounced, so that this Christian conviction actually helped his research. Again, a Christian anthropology holds that man is free but determined. Human beings have the ability, in some sense, to take decisions without external constraint, yet at the same time their behaviour is formed by their environment, natural and human. The issue of whether human activity can be described as 'determined' is central to contemporary discussion in the philosophy of historiography. Christians, with different emphases, would wish to affirm both human freedom (because of their belief in moral responsibility) and determinism (because of their recognition of the influence of circumstance). Once more,

there are practical implications for writing history. The Christian will want to give due weight to economic regularities suggesting that behaviour is determined, and yet will recognise the spontaneity of works of art as expressions of the free spirit. A distinctive anthropology, that is to say, can inform history understood from a Christian perspective.

Granted that there is a Christian vision of the past, incorporating convictions about God and man, there remains a practical problem confronting the would-be Christian historian. If he writes Christian history, will it be read? The problem arises over providence. A historian writing of divine judgement on German militarism, as Sir Herbert Butterfield recommends,<sup>15</sup> is transgressing the accepted conventions of his trade. The supernatural is not discussed in serious history, except as a form of mental aberration. There is a solution: it is possible to conceive of history in terms of providence, but not necessarily to write of it there. When producing a book for the community of scholars, the divine hand, though discerned, need not be described. John Richardson objects to this procedure as a form of intellectual cowardice: surely a Christian should write about all he sees?<sup>16</sup> But a Christian writing for historians knows that their consensus is that there is no God active in the world in discernible ways; many do not believe that a God is there at all. It is folly to write with the eye of faith for those who lack it. The enterprise is bound to fail, and it come perilously close to casting pearls before swine. We should conclude that the Christian has an opportunity to frame Christian history. Whether he writes with all his convictions fully displayed is a matter of judgement. In general, he should not do so in history written for the historical community.

When writing for the Christian community, on the other hand, he need not stay his hand. Christian history, of which providence and Christian anthropology are part and parcel, has great value for the believer. It offers guiding principles for theology and mission. For theology, it supplies a worldview, giving content to a way of looking at the whole world and not just the Church. It undermines the idea of progress; the notion that humanity is advancing towards perfection. Christian history can agree that there has been technical advance, but not that there has been moral advance. And it can point to such evidence as the holocaust of the twentieth century as confirmation of the lack of human progress. Likewise, Christian history will set a question mark against the idea that humanity is degenerating, perhaps already in a state of decadence. It will draw attention to the people in the past who alleged that humanity had then plumbed the depths of depravity, and it will reveal that in no field of human activity has there been an unalloyed golden age. The marriage tie, for example, often thought to be held in unprecedented contempt today, he will show to have been even less respected in the seventeenth century. Instead of progress or degeneration, he will advocate a steady realism. He will recognise that there are disasters in history, as in the sixth century, when half Christendom

was overrun by Islam. But, knowing that God is in charge, he will be able to reveal something of His continuing care. Long centuries after the sixth-century Muslim tide, Christian communities remain in Arab lands. The historian can offer evidence that, despite human fallenness, God is guiding history to its final goal.

For mission, the historian's chief function is to illuminate alternative options, enlarging Christian experience from one generation to many. He can recall forgotten strategies of mission, like the systematic village preaching of the early nineteenth century that rooted the Evangelical Revival in the life of Britain. He can offer warnings about mission. In Luther's quinqucentenary year, when his memory is rightly celebrated, it is for the historian to remind us that even so great a man trusted the sword to enforce religious conformity, to the discredit of the gospel. Knowing the extent of human fallenness, he will not flinch from the task. And the Christian historian can help the believing community to understand the world to which Christians are sent. In particular, he can illustrate how different the world is from its state at any time in the past, and so the risks of attempting to transfer past strategies of mission wholesale into the present. In each of these ways the historian can add depth to the fulfilment by the Church of the commission to spread the gospel throughout the world. Christian history is useful.

The conclusion of this survey of current trends in history and Christian responses must be that the two chief trends are complementary. On the one hand, traditional Church history is in decay, and is being replaced by historical studies that make no attempt to insulate the ecclesiastical from the secular. On the other, the notion of value-neutrality in history has declined. Increasingly it is felt that history may, and must, reflect the personality of the practitioner. It follows that a historian can, when it is wise, reveal his Christian convictions. Christian history, entailing a discernment of the way of providence and an exploration of the implications of a Christian anthropology, has become an option in the scholarly world. Remarkably - and here perhaps we can see providence at work - the two trends have been simultaneous. Church history, with its definite utility, has a replacement in Christian history. Furthermore, Christian history can do better what Church history was expected to do, for it examines the whole of history, not merely a part; and it looks through Christian eyes, not aiming for an unattainable neutrality. History in this form has evident value for the believing community. That is why it should be seen by Christians, not as a diversion from theology and mission, but as a vitally important contribution to both.

## NOTES

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15. Sir Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and History*, London, 1949, pp. 49f.
16. Richardson, *op.cit.*, p. 10.



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