

HISTORY, PROPHECY AND GOD

By
ROBERT RENDALL



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DEDICATED
TO THE REVERED MEMORY OF
EDMUND HAMER BROADBENT
AND
DOROTHY BROADBENT
WHOSE FRIENDSHIP AND COUNSEL INSPIRED
AND WHOSE ENCOURAGEMENT SUPPORTED
THE WRITING OF THIS BOOK

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“Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer.” Psalm 19: 14.

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FOREWORD

THE AUTHOR OF THIS BOOK IS A MAN OF MANY PARTS. He has already made a name for himself as poet, naturalist, archaeologist and critic; here he shows himself a careful surveyor and illuminating guide in the fields of Biblical theology and the philosophy of history.

A good book does not need a commendatory foreword, and a bad book does not deserve one. This is the kind of book that does not need one, but I am glad to write one for it, as I have followed its development with keen and sympathetic interest for the past seven years.

I first realized that Mr. Rendall was interested in this subject when I read a paper of his on "Old Testament History: Its Nature and Unity," which appeared in *The Evangelical Quarterly* for October, 1946. This paper excited widespread interest, and made it clear to competent judges that here was a man who had thought long and deeply on the character of the Biblical revelation and had something worthwhile to say about it. It therefore seemed a plain duty to encourage him to pursue this line of study, although he himself has had modest misgivings about his work, and has confessed that, but for this encouragement, he would not have persevered with it to the end. His readers will be glad that he allowed himself to be encouraged to finish it.

The subject of the book is one that has been treated in recent years by such well known scholars as Christopher R. North (*The Old Testament Interpretation of History*) and Oscar Cullmann (*Christ and Time*). Mr. Rendall has gone his own independent way, which in various features differs from the academic way. He pays little attention, for example, to questions of historical and literary criticism. But his theme is one which is but little affected by such questions as these. His study affords strong confirmation of the Christian interpretation of world history, which sees the solution to its problems in Christ, manifested "at the consummation of the ages." It brings out the essential part played in the Biblical revelation by history and prophecy, both alike fulfilled in Christ. It points to the Cross as the decisive place of world-judgment, in which "all human history has been accomplished and sealed up." It proclaims the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ to be the Lord of history, primeval Creator and final Judge, who directs and overrules the universal process "in accordance with the loving design which He planned from the first to carry out in Christ—the establishment of a

New Order when the times were ripe for it, when He would make everything, both in heaven and on earth, centre in the Christ." And it confronts us with the personal challenge presented to each one of us by this unveiling of God's eternal purpose.

I hope that *History, Prophecy and God* will find many readers, and that it will help them to understand more clearly the unity and meaning of the Biblical revelation, and to respond wholeheartedly to its challenge.

F. F. BRUCE

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

THIS BOOK SEEKS TO SHOW THAT THE JOINT-WITNESS OF Biblical history and prophecy to Christ points to a Divine purpose within and behind the flow of human affairs, and that this purpose gives spiritual significance to life. It is therefore in some sort a theological interpretation of history.

The Bible speaks to us as men: using everyday language, it refers to people under familiar vocational titles, like Zenas the lawyer, Luke the physician, Erastus the city chamberlain, Alexander the coppersmith, and Herod the tetrarch. All men alike share in the ultimate issues of life, so that it need not be wondered at if on occasion others than professional theologians should seek an explanation of the why and wherefore of the sum of things in human history. For the same reason the common man may also be willing to consider a fresh approach to a question in which all of us are so intimately and personally involved: and even those who have pondered the problem more deeply may find something here to confirm faith or remove doubt, or even, it may be, to give second thoughts upon a matter already considered settled in quite a different direction.

In pursuing my reflections I cannot hope to have escaped the perils of human fallibility. Readers will doubtless find conclusions with which they cannot concur, and supporting arguments which to them may appear inconclusive. I seek their indulgence, for despite such inevitable differences of opinion on details it remains my firm conviction that the central thesis of the book conforms to the general tenor of Holy Scripture.

For the most part Scripture quotations (all in R.V.) are given in full, as are original sources in any serious study. So that if the commentary be not convincing to any they may the more readily consider the language of the Word of God, which in its native force is unmatched for producing firm convictions in the mind.

In the early stages of the book I owed much to the counsel and encouragement of the late Mr. E. H. Broadbent, author of *The Pilgrim Church*, and to Mrs. Broadbent, particularly the latter, who read the MS. of *Section I* most carefully and gave me some valuable criticism. I also wish to express my deep indebtedness to my friend, Mr. F. F. Bruce, M.A., Senior Lecturer in Biblical History and Literature in Sheffield University, for having read the complete MS., and for much critical advice on points of textual interpretation. The points of view expressed are my own.

Extracts from the book have already appeared in article form in *The Evangelical Quarterly*, and certain paragraphs have been used in *The Witness*, but this is the first presentation of the material as a whole.

That the book may, under the blessing of Almighty God, contribute something to strengthen the Christian tradition, and to supply fresh confidence in the validity of Christian experience, is my earnest prayer; above all, that it may evoke praise to Him from whom, and through whom, and to whom, are all things: to Him be glory for ever. AMEN.

Kirkwall, Orkney.

R. R.

INTRODUCTION

HAS HISTORY BEHIND IT A PREDETERMINED PLAN? OR, ON the contrary, is it conditioned by chance? This question is of profound practical value. Archaeology has opened up our horizons and demonstrated with conspicuous realism the continuity of civilization. By way of cultures now dead and buried the living present is linked with the remote past. Is there, then, within and above this extraordinary natural development, now covering a period of several millennia, a single directive Will, governing the course of human affairs? If so, it follows that upon our knowledge of this ultimate basis of history hangs a secure and contented attitude to life.

In the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments is disclosed a prophetic scheme on the grand scale which gives purpose and meaning to history. Originating in ages now far distant, and developed over an extended period of time, this disclosure is consummated in the recorded facts of the death and resurrection of Christ, and in the apostolic doctrines implicit within these facts. The Bible, so viewed, is a prophetic interpretation of the world's history, "declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done" (Isa. 46: 10). The form in which this revelation has come to us is twofold: that of history, establishing a vital contact with human experience; and that of prophecy, securing as real a contact with the sovereign mind of God.

The history is of actual events, narrated by competent scribes, and supported by contemporary evidence. It records, first of all, broad racial origins and the dynastic developments rising out of these; then, in carefully documented chronicles it follows up certain movements within what, for its purpose, is the main stream of human progress; and finally, in the New Testament, it registers a series of events, which, while local in their occurrence, are universal in their significance, and from which the course of all future history is oriented. It has, therefore, organic completeness, is developed as a continuous whole, and exhibits perfect consistency in all its parts. The various histories fit into a single framework, each particular biography, genealogy, state-document, or private memorial, being a fraction within a larger unit, and having a context greater than its immediate setting.

Independent of this narration of historical fact, but intimately connected with it, is a comprehensive scheme of Divine prophecy, rising from simple but pregnant beginnings into a complex but

ordered system, which, like that of the history, displays a remarkable unity of design. This prophetic scheme carries within itself guarantees of its Divine origin. Many of its disclosures are strictly predictive, and therefore beyond the range of human forecast. The accuracy of these has been verified minutely in subsequent history. Again, the later prophecies are so related to the earlier as to have cumulative, or even ascensive, force, thereby expanding, as well as confirming, the earlier oracles. Can this homogeneity of distant and diverse prophecies be purely fortuitous? Or does it indicate the out-working of some tremendous and far-reaching purpose?

These two schemes, moreover, one drawn from actual life upon earth, and the other from the secrets of the Divine counsel, have an unmistakable correspondence with each other, which argues a common source. In the Scriptures they are co-ordinated upon a vast and impressive scale, and within a closely interwoven texture of events. This necessarily brings together the objective realities to which each bears witness, and points to some fundamental and absolute relationship between the supernatural activity of God and the outward development of human affairs. Nor is this relationship merely an academic agreement between prophetic ideologies on the one hand, and the concrete realities of history on the other: for it is based on the common denominator of personality. Prophecy and history alike fulfil themselves through living persons: prophecy and history alike express their values in terms of personality. Truth is here found in its final and absolute category.

This clears the way for the recognition of the fact that in the Person of Christ both history and prophecy have their complete fulfilment, and also their perfect co-ordination. The Divine purpose, disclosed in prophecy, and wrought out in history, is held together, throughout all its parts, in a living Person. All its movements converge upon one solitary commanding Figure. "He is before all things, and in him all things consist" (Col. 1: 17).

If history and prophecy alike move within the realm of personal relationships, and take final values from relativity to Christ, it follows that the rightness of our view of the sum of things, as well as our individual salvation, depends upon our settled attitude to Christ. "What think ye of Christ?" thus becomes a profound and fundamental, as well as a simple and practical, test of a person's spiritual whereabouts.

It is recognized that the position here affirmed rests chiefly, if not solely, upon the authority of Holy Scripture. This does not necessarily invalidate its truth for our present discussion, which

is based upon the self-authenticating nature of the Bible testimony. All that is required at the moment is to show—it is hoped without distortion and with all fairness—what this testimony actually sets out to say.

If it can be shown that the writings of Scripture so combine as to form one Divine whole; and if, by the ordered arrangements of the parts, each Scripture is seen to serve, not only the immediate circumstances in which it was written, but also an inspired master-scheme, to the purposes of which both it and the other Scriptures are subordinated; further, if within this scheme we have real contacts, through prophecy, with disclosures of the Divine will, undiscoverable by reason; and also, through history, with actual events upon earth; we may well believe that in the Bible, if anywhere, is revealed the hidden purpose, predetermined of God, which is being worked out under the surface of human affairs.

This gives us two guiding points. First, the internal structure of the Bible enables us to test the integrity and trustworthiness of the Book, and thus to confirm on objective grounds the reality of those inward satisfactions that spring from spiritual experience. That is to say, the Bible contains within itself the means of verifying its statements of fact and its judgments of value: and so is self-authenticating. It also follows that the method of synthesis will, in the end, yield more fruitful results than the analytical, especially if the latter leads to an undue emphasis of "differences" or obscures the essential harmony of the whole. This is not to deny, however, that the sober dissection of things that differ—the distinction, for instance, between modes of spiritual administration in different eras, reflected in the portions of Scripture relative thereto—will contribute to an exacter knowledge of the general anatomy of the Book, and of the true relations and particular functions of its various parts. It is rather to reaffirm that Scripture is one, and that any such differences are dispensational, not absolute and final.

In all it must not be forgotten that the secrets of divine revelation are not demonstrable through the wisdom of man, and that they are apprehended by the hands of faith and prayer and by the inner vision of a pure heart, rather than by the acuteness of natural intelligence. Nevertheless, we are not denied the keen gratification which springs from an intelligent and rational appreciation of the purposes of God as these are disclosed to us in the Scriptures of truth. Not without meditation, not without coherence in our meditations, shall we be able worthily to make our own that noble outburst of worship raised by St. Paul when he reflected on the inscrutable ways of the God of heaven.

“O the depths of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past tracing out!

“For who hath known the mind of the LORD? or who hath been his counsellor?

“Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again?

“For of him, and through him, and unto him, are all things: to him be glory for ever. Amen.”

(Romans 11: 33-36.)