

## *Some Aspects of the Biblical View of History*

### **I. Howard Marshall**

[p.54]

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.

[p.55]

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.

[p.56]

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

[p.57]

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.

[p.58]

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.

[p.59]

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.

[p.60]

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

---

\* 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.

deduction or sheer intuition. It must be allowed that in some circles it is claimed 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.

[p.61]

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.

[p.62]

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

[p.63]

at what happened, then we face the problem that God foreordained that men would be wicked (or foreordained 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.

[p.64]

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's 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

[p.65]

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.

[p.66]

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

[p.67]

(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.

[p.68]

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

I. Howard Marshall, "Some Aspects of the Biblical View of History," *Faith and History* 110.1, 2 (1983): 54-68.

---

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.

---

© 1983 I. Howard Marshall & The Victoria Institute. Reproduced by permission.

Prepared for the Web in June 2009 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

---