

THE BIBLE ON HISTORY

MARK O'BRIEN OP

READERS FAMILIAR with the broad outlines of modern biblical study would be aware that there has been considerable debate about the historical *reliability* of the Bible. Does it record what really happened? The good news is that the jury of biblical experts is more or less agreed on this one and its verdict is: 'not guilty'. By this it means that the Bible does not record history like our scientific historical records, whether of nature or humanity, and should not be accused of failing to do so.

Paradoxically, believers in the Bible owe Charles Darwin and Enlightenment critics a vote of thanks for freeing it from false accusations and some shoddy defense and for enabling it to resume its primary function which is to help us do theology—to think about God and our relationship with God and in the light of this to make responsible decisions. It does this in the accepted literary conventions of its days: telling stories (about Israel, about Jesus), preaching homilies as in the Prophets and in John's Gospel, memorizing proverbs and parables, singing songs and proclaiming laws.¹

But while the Bible is not a history book it is a book about the *meaning* of history.² It is a carefully considered faith claim about the purpose and destiny of humanity, assembled by dedicated storytellers, singers, lawyers, teachers, scribes, princes and prophets, mums and dads, individuals and communities over many centuries. We believe this motley band was inspired to leave the Bible's extraordinary claims for us to ponder. The 'all in together' nature of its authorship means that is not a particularly tidy product. Indeed, the Greek term for it is *ta biblia*, 'the books'. Thanks be to God for arranging this! The variety of literary forms and viewpoints provides rich fare

for listeners and readers; imagine being stuck with the one type of text and one human author for the whole Bible. It would be like reading a tediously long version of this article—perish the thought!

By the same token the Bible is not there principally to entertain and stroke its readership. Humanity is too serious a project to treat lightly and the Bible does not balk at tackling the difficult questions that have arisen and continue to arise in human history—the relationship between the universal and the particular (*e.g.*, Israel and the nations; Jesus and humanity), transcendence and immanence (*e.g.*, is God involved in the detail of life?), creation and humanity (the environment), good and evil, the beginning and end—in short the meaning of human life.

A Biblical Framework for Interpreting History

This article will attempt to present the Bible's view on some of these questions but readers need to remember that it is my interpretation, informed as far as I can manage by reputable scholarship. My main focus will be the Old Testament, with reference to the New Testament where appropriate.

The first point to make is that the Bible's understanding of history operates within a theological framework or, to put it another way, is based on a number of principles. Key ones are that there is one God YHWH who is Lord of creation and history, that YHWH is a just and merciful God, and that our actions operate within what scholars call the Act-Consequence framework or principle that is part of the order of creation established by YHWH. Simply put, good actions have good consequences while bad actions have bad ones.

These, of course, are all faith convictions and so they cannot be demonstrated to the satisfaction of modern scientific analysis (which operates within its own belief system). All our knowledge emerges from reflecting on or interpreting experience; as intelligent beings we need to make sense of our experience but we cannot take into account all the phenomena associated with our own experience, let alone that of the wider world. We are limited and have to select what we judge are significant moments; for a lot of the time we do this almost instinctively (the patterns of life that become familiar). For other times we may have to assess as much phenomena as we can and make an at times difficult decision.

An interpretation of certain experiences may lead some to conclude there is a God and others to conclude there isn't. It may lead some to conclude there is a connection between things that happen and human life has a purpose, others may see it as all chance. The various stances that people adopt are all acts of faith or belief. One who is convinced there is no God is as much a believer as one who is convinced there is a God. The question for human beings, whether ancient or modern, is not whether faith but what kind of faith? We are all people of faith in some form or other: our limited creaturely condition means that we can't live without it.

The Bible's interpretation of experience (its faith claim which believers accept as inspired) is that God is present to all things in creation and to every moment in history without being confined by either in any way. Such is divine transcendence and immanence. God's lordship of history does not disempower human beings or determine their actions, rather it is what empowers them and enables them to act freely (within the context of a finite creation).

Likewise God is always just, which means that God is intolerant of evil and is resolved to eliminate it from creation. There is no true justice without mercy which means that God's just elimination of evil is always for the benefit of creation, and particularly humanity. God



Fr Mark O'Brien lectures in Old Testament studies. He has taught in theological institutes in Melbourne, Adelaide, Oxford, Karachi and Sydney. He has now resumed teaching in the Melbourne College of Divinity.

is for the other. God's just and merciful governance of creation and history provides the context, according to faith, in which human beings are able to assess the justice and mercy of their own actions. Good actions—those in tune with the will of God as contained in the Torah—will have good consequences while bad actions will have bad ones.

Human life and history has a purpose and will, if it obeys God, fulfill that purpose. For ancient Israelites an important barometer of this unfolding purpose was the quality of life in the land but they knew that, like all things, their assessment of the quality of life could not fully explain the richness or mystery of their relationship with God.

We all make use of the Act–Consequence principle but it cannot be demonstrated as fail-safe because we cannot access or assess every instance. We have to make a selection and this is open to debate and dispute. One can see this in the difference between such OT books as Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes, and in a number of psalms. The book of Proverbs promotes the principle with confidence whereas Job and Ecclesiastes challenge it. However, they are not able to replace it with anything more certain or reliable. In the fictional book of Job the wager between God and the satan is whether Job will 'fear God for nothing' (1:9).³ God is willing to take the bet such is God's confidence in Job (who represents any human being). Will we believe in a just and merciful God when the Act–Consequence nexus doesn't seem to work?

Prophetic Application of the Framework

Discerning the connection between acts and their consequences became particularly acute for Israel at the national level. As a tiny nation occupying a sliver of land along the fertile crescent between the superpowers of the west (Egypt) and the east (Assyria, Babylon, Persia), life could at times be precarious. How did the actions of the superpowers fit into a theology of YHWH as Lord of history and Israel as the chosen people? As in our modern world, politics was a hotly disputed arena and, unlike our modern world, always involved religion. Victory and defeat, expansion and retreat, bounty and deprivation had to be explained in relation to one's national god otherwise one's theology/ideology would be regarded as bankrupt. Faced with doubt and dispute, which only heightens the need to know, Israelites and their Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) neighbours did something analogous to what we do in sport, they appealed to the umpire—God, particularly as voiced by the prophet. The prophet was believed to have access to the divine perspective on things. Like our TV umpires in the box high above the field of play, God was believed to see it all and make definitive pronouncements. In effect this is the argument from authority and there are times when we all need it. Notice how we have been coached to accept the verdict of our modern TV umpires, otherwise our enormous sporting industry would implode in endless disputes.

As noted, the Bible proclaims that YHWH is immanently present to all creation and history but this does not mean that prophets were able to see it all and explain every moment of history as it had unfolded, was unfolding in their day, or would unfold in the future. Though inspired they still operated in our limited, human realm. Their claim was that God had identified for them which particular event or course of events revealed the divine purpose. God as Lord of history could do this for any moment of history without impinging on human freedom within history. It was a faith

claim, it was limited and it could only have authority among those who accepted it in faith. Hence it was as open to dispute as the Act–Consequence principle itself. The disputes became particularly intense as prophets vied with one another to interpret the power of Assyria in the 8th century and Babylon in the 6th century BC. One has only to read Isaiah 7–8 (in relation to Assyria) and Jeremiah 26–28 (in relation to Babylon) to see that this was the case. Like our modern spin doctors, prophets disputed and debated with one another and the people had to make of it what they could.

To illustrate the prophetic understanding of history—the orthodox one because it is preserved in the Bible—I will focus on the event that came to be seen as the definitive validation of its claims, namely the Babylonian exile of 587 BC. The conviction that YHWH is Lord of all history meant that the machinations of Babylon, the superpower of the day, must be under God's guiding hand not that of Marduk of Babylon or any other ANE deity. This, coupled with the prophetic critique of Israelite society as corrupt and disloyal to YHWH, led the true prophets to conclude that God was sending Babylon to exact divine punishment on Israel. Whereas YHWH had led Israel to conquer nations and gain the land in the days of Moses and Joshua the tables were now turned: God was sending a foreign nation to conquer Israel. Consistency in Israel's theology of history was thereby maintained. As well, God's justice or intolerance of evil was universal and applied equally to Israel as to the nations.⁴ By definition, divine punishment could not be chaos. As in the flood story all would unfold according to God's creative command.⁵ The purpose of the enemy invasion would be to remove evil from a polluted land (exile of the people), hence it was an integral part of God's saving purpose for all creation. In a word, it was a just and merciful action. If Babylon or any nation overstepped its divine brief and created chaos it would be punished in its turn (cf. Jeremiah 50–51). Israel's pun-

ishment would only be for a certain period (70 years according to Jer 25:12) after which God would return the people to the land. The one nation chosen from all the nations would not lose its status or its mission to be the mediator of divine blessing. This cemented the integral relationship between the universal and the particular in God's purpose and undergirded the theology of a merciful God.

Such was the way prophetic theologians sought to make sense of what, from a purely human point of view, was a disaster and fit it into the existing normative theological framework. But it was limited, as is every attempt, even an inspired one, to interpret experience. For example, it did not address the question of innocent civilians who are the victims of war, although parts of Jeremiah and the book of Lamentations show that Israelite society was well aware of the terror, death and deprivation of war. To try and address these and other pressing issues of war would have robbed prophetic preaching of its rhetorical power and sweeping interpretation of history.⁶

The conviction that YHWH is Lord of history and Israel's acceptance of the prophetic explanation of the exile (an inspired move because it is in the Bible) fueled hope that Israel and the world could, with God's help, overcome failures and their consequent disasters. If this was not the case then the theology being propounded was a fraud. Hence we find prophecies, probably proclaimed in the wake of the exile, that the nations will all, in God's good time, go on pilgrimage to Zion to worship YHWH and learn God's law (cf. Isa 2:2-4; Micah 4:1-4). Assyria and Egypt will, like Israel, become a blessing 'in the midst of the earth' (Isa 19:24). War and conquest will disappear; nations will be won over by the innocent suffering of 'my servant Israel' rather than the force of arms (Isa 49:3).⁷

But such hopes were sorely tested by post-exilic realities: the monarchy was not restored, except for a brief violent period under the Maccabees the state never regained its independence, and there was ongoing dispute

within Israelite society over its relationship to foreigners. The prophetic voice seemed to have been stilled; at least we have no significant prophecies in the post-exilic period to match those of Isaiah, Jeremiah or Ezekiel.

Contribution of Apocalyptic Literature

The absence of any clear signs that human history was about to realize its divine destiny (perhaps better to say the absence of any inspired and accepted identification of same), coupled with ongoing struggles about issues of justice and mercy, prompted the emergence of apocalyptic writing. This was a scribal contribution that drew on aspects of prophetic and wisdom literature. In highly imaginative yet carefully constructed visions attributed to a sage of antiquity such as Daniel, history was divided into distinct periods with the final one yet to come. It was at once an assurance to readers that all was unfolding according to the mysterious divine plan and a call to keep the faith no matter how bad things may seem.

In the apocalyptic 'vision', the culmination of human history is to be preceded by a violent conflict between good and evil. God will of course be victorious and will then execute a final judgement in which divine justice and mercy will be manifested in a definitive way to all peoples of all ages. Only then it seems will the prophecies about nations seeking God be fulfilled. These are the righteous ones among the nations. Israelites who remain faithful throughout their trials will also enjoy everlasting blessing while the wicked will be consigned to 'shame and everlasting contempt' (Dan 12:3). By the time of Apocalyptic writing, Israelite thinking had come to accept eternal life. Earlier generations had a vague notion of an abode of the dead called 'Sheol', a truly 'dead' place; what mattered more to them was that one lived on in one's children.

With the advent of apocalyptic literature the OT had developed a three-stage application of the theology that a just and merciful YHWH is Lord of creation and history. There

is the articulation of this theology in Israel's foundational story—the exodus and occupation of the promised land; there is the prophetic application of it to Israel's history at strategic points, above all the exile; and there is apocalyptic literature which applies it in a universal and very schematic way to the culmination of human history.

There are two intriguing things about this arrangement. The first is that readers of the Bible fall between the second and third stages. That is, we read in prophetic literature that this theology (according to the faith claims of the Bible) was shown to be true in Israel's own history, particularly that of the exile, and we read in apocalyptic literature that we are moving towards the culmination of human history that is yet to come but sure to come (in God's good time). The second is that, as pointed out, there is no prophetic literature that interprets Israel's post-exilic experience in anything like the same sense as in the lead up to the exile.

Does this gap signal that all subsequent history will conform to the pattern established in the Pentateuch and interpreted by the prophets? It is irrevocably set and there is no need for anything further to be said. Or, and this is my preferred interpretation, is the Bible leaving things somewhat open ended? That is, the Pentateuch/Torah and Prophets are meant to provide the guideline or framework within which we are to ponder and then decide where we believe God's purpose is manifested in our own history.

To recall a statement earlier in this article, the Bible is meant to help us do theology for our time. A factor in support of this position is the variety of views and debate within the Bible itself: it is in a sense unfinished business.

Contribution of the New Testament

The New Testament seeks to establish Jesus as the focus of faith but it does not really alter the stance of readers *vis-à-vis* past, present and future. We read the NT's faith claim that Jesus manifested God's justice and mercy, and God's lordship of creation and his-

tory in a definitive way in his life, death and resurrection. We read that he inaugurated the end time within which we live, but the final manifestation of it is yet to come and is as imaginatively portrayed in the book of Revelation as in OT Apocalypse.

Each Christian disciple is called to model himself/herself on Jesus but each one's life is a unique manifestation of Christian discipleship, never to be repeated on the face of the earth or in eternity, for each life is everlasting. As in the OT, there is a model or pattern but it is not imposed. Rather, each one is called to incarnate it in his or her life in a responsible way. Being Christian does not mean that one escapes the difficulty and uncertainty of discerning the presence of God in one's history or in the history of humanity as it still unfolds in this end time. The Bible teaches us that God is there, present to us at every moment, in every spot, but deciding just when, where and how has caused more dispute and disagreement than it has solved. As a result Christians have tended to confine this process of discernment to the private sphere (God in my life). If we go public, it tends to be in relation to good experiences, not negative ones. Is this a capitulation, a distortion, or a prudent recognition of our limited ability to probe the mystery of God?

What About Hell?

By way of conclusion, it may be worthwhile offering a comment on the devil and hell, that damned life beyond this life. Apocalyptic literature celebrates the inevitable victory of God over the forces of evil in the end time and their banishment to hell. But they are not destroyed, unlike the enemies of Israel which the book of Joshua claims were annihilated. This is in keeping with the Gospels where Jesus never destroys demons; he simply tells them to clear off and leave their victims in peace. In my judgement, this reflects the theological view that God unconditionally loves demons and wicked people, just as God loves good people. God hates their sin but loves them as

sinners. If God didn't love them, they would indeed be annihilated, they would simply cease to exist.

Hence I would suggest that while apocalyptic literature proclaims God's just victory over evil (as it must) it is quite a different kind of victory from the normal human understanding of the term. The key component in the biblical notion is the victory of divine love (or mercy) over all else. Because God loves the devil and his cohort, God will never destroy them and will never impose heaven

on them. The lover never imposes on the beloved. And because the damned hate God (according to the standard theologies of hell), they have no wish to join God in heaven. Their perception of reality is so distorted by evil that this would be anathema. One might therefore say that, in a distant echo of the flood story where God is portrayed grieving over human evil (Gen 6:6), the Bible ends with apocalyptic literature implying that God spends all eternity loving the damned and grieving over them.

NOTES

1. The Second Vatican Council's Document on the Bible *Dei Verbum* urges readers to pay particular attention to its characteristic literary forms (cf. III.12).

2. The Bible has been described as a 'history of salvation' or as outlining the history of salvation. There has been considerable debate about the appropriateness of this term to describe the Bible and it is beyond the scope of this article to enter it. I will therefore refrain from using it.

3. 'The satan' in the book of Job is not the devil (a later theological development) but a member of God's heavenly court, a kind of prosecuting attorney.

4. Just how the nations whom Israel conquered were meant to know YHWH's law or purpose is not spelt out in the Pentateuch, although the prophecy of the foreigner Balaam can be taken as God's message to the coalition that hired him but which rejected it (see Numbers 22-24).

5. The flood story is not about a 'return' to primeval chaos, but the divine resolve to remove human induced chaos. The forces of creation are wielded by God in an orderly manner, the waters rise to a certain level and remain there long enough to ensure the destruction of the sources of evil and chaos before subsiding. Noah's ark is not threatened by any chaotic forces.

6. Those who might be offended by OT theology and turn with relief to Jesus 'meek and mild' only need read Matthew 25:31-46 (among a number of Gospel passages) and the book of Revelation to realize this is quite a distorted interpretation of the NT portrait of Jesus.

7. The Suffering Servant Poems in the so-called Second Isaiah (chs. 40-55), an exilic extension to the 8th century prophet Isaiah's preaching (in chs. 1-39), are identified by scholars in 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9 and 52:13-53:12.

Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation. Therefore 'all Scripture is divinely inspired and has its use for teaching the truth and refuting error, for reformation of manners and discipline in right living, so that the man who belongs to God may be efficient and equipped for good work of every kind' (2 Tim. 3:16-17, Greek text).

However, since God speaks in Sacred Scripture through men in human fashion, the interpreter of Sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words.

—Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Dei Verbum*, pars. 11-12.