

SPECIAL STUDY NINE

THEO-RAMIC PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

Is there an end to temporal history? If so, of what would the climax consist? Plenty for everyone? Satisfaction or selfish desires? Security? Utopian society? Can man's intellect produce such a state? Is there a purpose for man being on earth? Is there any significance in suffering? If there is a righteous God, why do the just suffer and the wicked prosper? Is there a reason why wicked, despotic nations grow and conquer other governments?

The answers to these questions depend upon one's philosophy of history. One's concept concerning the governing force of past and present events directly influences and forms the solutions to these problems.

A growing interest in the nature and ultimate meaning of history among historians, philosophers and people in general has presented itself within the last few years. This subject promises to burst into prominence in the future. The two basic views upon this subject can be briefly summarized and labeled thusly: (1) Those who view history strictly as a product of man, and (2) Those who view history as the working of God in the created universe.

The last few decades have witnessed a renewal of interest in the nature and ultimate meaning of history which is almost unprecedented in modern historical scholarship. Not only historians and philosophers, but people in general, are applying themselves with a dedicated seriousness to the interpretation of history . . . Unfortunately, however, Christian scholarship has failed to give adequate attention to the problem of properly interpreting history from its own theological perspective. All too often it has virtually surrendered this important and strategic area of apologetics to secular scholarship . . . For the Christian, history has perspective only in the light of revealed theology . . . The proper understanding of history can come only from a biblical frame of reference . . . If man cannot know God with some degree of assurance, cannot have knowledge of Him, of His actions and of His will for man in the form of propositional truths, then man can know neither himself as an individual nor the meaning of his own experience in its historical form . . . A meaningful view of history,

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therefore, depends completely on the assurance that the Scriptures are God's trustworthy revelation to man. If he cannot know God with certainty, then man can never really penetrate the mystery of his own existence here on earth; life must, and will remain for him an unfathomable enigma, forever beyond his apprehension. The true meaning both of individual events and of the composite stream of human history is found only in God's interpretation thereof; clues to this meaning are found primarily in the Scriptures . . . Any theology which denies the infallibility of the Scriptures is hard pressed, therefore, to present a meaningful and consistent explanation of the historical process. Equally necessary for the Christian view of history is the biblical doctrine of the sovereignty of God. The Scriptures insist that God is sovereign over all His creatures and all their actions; they are equally clear in maintaining that God exercises this sovereignty to fulfill His own purposes and to manifest His own glory . . . God is the Lord of all, not only of some, history. He does not break into the stream of events merely at certain moments to accomplish certain limited purposes, nor is His effective will confined to one major current such as so-called "holy history" in the swirling tides of secular and seemingly uncontrolled events.¹

To lump all who advocate the first view of history and label them with a single name would be an egregious error demonstrating ignorance. There are many who adhere to the view. The Deist believes God to have created man, set him on earth, and then abandoned him and His creation, depending upon man's ingenuity to care for and preserve it. This makes history dependant upon man's intellect. This first view also presents itself in another more prominent form. The philosopher Hegel set forth a philosophy of history that was undeniably naturalistic. He held that every event in history was the synthesis of two opposing concepts. This became known as the dialectic process. His philosophy of history had neither a real beginning or ending, its only goal being the progressive continuance of events according to the dialectic process. Essentially his concept is an evolutionary system based upon his evolutionary concept that man is continually improving himself and society. In this view, once again man is enthroned as the cause of history. Events occur in a random, chaotic order depending upon the goodness or degeneracy of man. This view reached the peak of its popularity around the turn of the century, but began to lose some of its prominence

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in the early part of this century. Following the two world wars, the rosey, optimistic cries of the liberals concerning man's progressive nature lost their lustre and men began to once again search for the nature and ultimate goal of history.

Opposing these naturalistic philosophies of history in the Biblical view of history. Simply stated, it says that God created man with an ultimate goal in mind for him and that God is working in the universe to accomplish His plan for man. It is the opinion of this writer that the prophets of the Old Testament portray such a picture of history. Their writings disclose several beliefs harmonizing with this view of the nature of history.

Amidst the confusions and complexities of man's bewildered struggles down the ages, and his desperate efforts for solutions to the perplexities of life, there arises the strident voices of God's prophets of old, boldly proclaiming the sure word of the Lord. These men of God saw beyond the chaos and clamor to the blessed assurance of God's grace and guidance. With unhesitating zeal and confidence they dared to defy every adversary, and stand alone but secure on the Word of the Lord. They knew that their God had absolute authority. They knew He held the world's destiny in His hand. They knew He would triumph in the end.

But the prophets knew more than this. They knew that their message pointed primarily to the one supreme solution to all of man's perplexity—the coming King. They knew also that this glorious event would be the grand climax of the ages and the focal point for all of man's activity and endeavors down the ages. It may well be said that they knew that "all history is His story"—for so it is.

"The prophets showed the meaning of contemporary events and pointed the directions of history to the end of time. Detail by detail they built upon the Coming One who should redeem the world and bring the affairs of the world to consummation. One after another the Old Testament prophets called out warning and promise, terror and blessedness and the Day of the Lord."²

The *Prophets' philosophy of history* had as its focus one Person; one Force, which was behind all events. That Person was God who constantly moves and acts in history. Thus, history is not a detached succession of events; nor is it a deterministic, fatalistic, repetitive cycle of general principles which occur over and over again, impersonally and uncontrolled. The Bible reveals to us that behind every event is a mighty God who controls, acts, and directs history to its final consummation. We want to consider three aspects of God in history.

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In order to understand God's activity in history, we must first acquaint ourselves with God's concept of history. From the Prophets we get a glimpse of history from God's viewpoint and standpoint. To God, history is not a time-oriented succession of events, but rather time is absent from His view of history. He looks upon past, present, and future as blending and evolving into one. He views the present in the light of the future, and the future in the light of the present. Even so does the Prophet as God's spokesman.

The Prophet, as preacher, views the present in the light of the future; as foreteller, the future in the light of the present. He points out present sin, duty, danger, or need; but all under the strong light of the Divine future. He speaks of the present in the name of God, and by His direct commission; of a present, however, which, in the Divine view, is evolving into a future, as the blossom is opening into the fruit. And when he foretells the future, he sees it in the light of the present; the present lends its colors, scenery, the very historic basis for the picture.³

The prophet is the medium of Divine communication. When he preaches, he does not merely refer to the present; nor yet when he foretells does he refer exclusively to the future. He occupies, with reverence be it said, in a sense, the Divine standpoint, where there is neither past, present, nor future.⁴

Thus we have considered God's concept of history.

The next aspect we wish to consider under the heading, "*A Person Behind History*", is the sovereignty of this Person in history. The Prophets speak of God as being completely free in history to work His will. There is no realm in which God does not work. He is the Dynamic behind daily events as well as historic happenings of world-wide import. If the Prophets teach one thing, it is that God's sovereignty in history cannot be challenged. Though evil empires may rise, still God controls. Though world-shaking events transpire, still God controls. His ultimate victory is inevitable.

Parallel to God's sovereignty is man's responsibility. If God is sovereign in history, then man has a responsibility to carry out God's will. Man does not know unlimited freedom. He is only a creature of his Creator, subject to Him who made man in His own image. He owes his allegiance to the God of history because God is greater than he, and because God controls where man is powerless. From the very

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beginning, man has been responsible to God; and that is as it should be. It is laid upon man to accomplish God's will. This responsibility is not general, but specific. God not only deals with nations and peoples, He also deals with individuals. Thus we see God moving in history, His sovereignty unchallenged, accompanied by man's responsibility to Him.

Not only do the Prophets speak of a Person behind history, their philosophy betrays a *progression in history*. History is not a long line of chance events, but an orderly, systematic chain of events obviously progressing to an end. God is pushing history to fulfillment. His working in history is marked by an unmistakable unfolding of events, which progress, not digress; until they culminate in a full revelation of God's plan. From the prophets we see that the fundamental ideas are the same in every case, but God acts specifically in each event.

The fundamental idea does not change, but it unfolds, and applies itself under everchanging and enlarging circumstances, developing from particularism into universalism; from the more realistic preparatory presentation to the spiritual which underlay it, and to which it pointed; from Hebrewism to the world-kingdom of God. And lastly, this Messianic idea is the moving spring of the Old Testament.⁵

Throughout this progression of history, there is a recurring theme, a motif which runs parallel to events and action. That motif finds its expression in three ideas; Sin, Judgment, and Hope. Man invariably sins, which brings God's judgment down upon him. In the midst of all this, however, God has injected hope—hope that transcends current situations and temporary dilemmas—hope that detects the ultimate victory. Sin, Judgment, and Hope are the threads on which run all of history.

Perhaps the most significant concept observable in the prophetic philosophy of history is the *purpose in history*. History is not chance, but plan; not fate, but God. History is purposeful. There is a design and a Designer in the course of events. We wish to consider two main questions concerning the purpose in history. They are: What is the purpose in history?, and How is that purpose accomplished? First of all, what is the purpose in history? If there is a God active in history, there must be a purpose. If there is a logical progression in history, there is obviously a purpose in that progression. When one studies the Prophets, he cannot but help cry out with the hymn writer of old, "Faith is the Victory!" What is the goal of history? It is: Redemption! Man has sinned, but through history God is effecting redemption. With

every event, God is bringing history to a logical conclusion. His goal and His purpose is immutable. Though world powers come and go, they shall never deter God's purpose; that being to effect redemption, and to establish forever His supremacy. "Prophecy views also the detailed events in their relation to the Divine plan, and this latter has for its purpose, the absolute establishment of the supremacy of Jehovah in Israel and eventually on the entire earth."⁶ It is evident then, that each event is not a separate entity in itself, but is an integral part of the whole course of events. Prophecy views events in their relation to the total Divine purpose.

We have seen that history's purpose is the ultimate redemption of man. It remains for us to discover how that purpose is being accomplished. God utilizes two primary methods of accomplishing His purpose. They are: Judgment and Redemption. "These are the two motifs that run through all of Biblical prophecy as well as history."⁷

God accomplished His purpose through judgment. From the Prophets we see that the reason for the prophetic preaching of judgment is the presence of sin (Micah 3:8). The central purpose of the prophetic preaching of judgment was repentance. Tragically, in many instances, there was no repentance. "The prophetic preaching takes on the concrete form of prediction of what God who acts will do when His people refuse to hear and so despise His word to them. His judgments take on the external form of a national experience of calamity, of conquest, of captivity."⁸ The purpose with the judgment is chastisement, not destruction, and the divine goal is "still a penitent people that will truly seek the Lord."⁹ God's purpose accomplished through judgment may be summarized as follows:

There is a prophetic reminder that God is not mocked, that His kingdom will come; that the final victory in the conflict between good and evil will be His: Each judgment act becomes as it were a peak in a mountain range that rises even higher and higher, until it seems to point forward to a greater and a final judgment to come.¹⁰

Parallel to and projecting beyond the motif of judgment is the motif of redemption.

God moves towards the goal of history, the redemption of man; by redemptive acts, or acts of deliverance.

"From one point of view, of course, redemption may be regarded as the very goal of history; but from the prophetic viewpoint it is also a divine activity that is always present in history, and which leads to the goal."¹¹ Two of the most significant redemptive experiences in

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the Old Testament are the Exodus and the return from the Babylonian Captivity. These external redemptive experiences were types of the spiritual redemption which is through Jesus Christ. The whole Old Testament, especially the Prophets, points to the Messianic age when *Christ shall come as the Redeemer of man*; the means by which God's purpose will be fulfilled.

This supreme revelation is the keynote of prophecy as John Milton has written: "All prophecy has one central focus . . . God's redemptive purpose and activity in history which heads up in Christ."¹² It is by no means surprising that it should be so, for this is the most stupendous event of all time. Naturally all else that men might do must pale before this great fact, and the prophets be compelled to center all in Christ. Indeed, whatever else they prophesied, all would culminate in this, and thus it is that: "A study of the gradual unfolding of the plan of God will lead us directly to Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecy."¹³

G. Campbell Morgan, in his "Unfolding Message of the Bible" lays much emphasis on the Old Testament as preparatory to God's answer to the world's needs. Sin demanded a Savior, anarchy—an authority, and ignorance—an interpretation to life's quest. Christ came as priest, king and prophet to meet these very needs. No wonder the prophets seem so unimpressed with other matters when compared with their expectation of the coming Christ.

Furthermore, the prophets are not nearly as concerned with the political problems and progress of their nation and the surrounding world, as they are with their religious development and their direct relationship to God's plan and purpose. "Israel as a political entity is not the significant thing in prophecy: the focus is on Israel as a religious community, which God has chosen to call 'my people.'"¹⁴

Unless we accept this view of the Old Testament, and primarily the prophetic revelations, we shall naturally be disappointed in their historic worth.

Kirkpatrick explains it thus:

The Old Testament viewed as a history of the nation of Israel, tantalises by its disappointing fragmentariness. It gives little or no account of many of the most important periods of national development. It affords little or no insight into many of the most instructive features of national life . . . But when it is viewed as the record of the divine training of the nation which was chosen to be the recipient of a special revelation, its peculiar characteristics receive their expla-

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nation. When it is viewed as the record of the revelation made to Israel and through Israel, in itself preparatory and imperfect, but ever looking forward to some future fuller manifestation of God to men, ever yearning for a real 'fulfillment,' its many voices are found to combine in a true harmony."¹⁵

We need to regard the message of the prophets therefore not from the standpoint of men—confined to our proud and selfish involvement in our own development, but rather from the standpoint of God who sees from eternity to eternity and views all things in the light of man's ultimate destiny. The prophets are thus the agents of God to express this purpose of God to mankind, and impress upon men the necessity for effective action to meet God's expectation. "The prophet's work concerned the past, the present and the future. The prophets were the historians of Israel. They regarded the history of the nation from a religious standpoint. They traced the direct control of Jehovah over the fortunes of His people, in mercy and in judgment. It was their function to record and interpret the lessons of the past and the future."¹⁶ What God had done in times past thus bore directly on what He yet would do.

As a result, it was not so much the events themselves that mattered most, but the underlying principles and lessons to be learned through these events. The prophets often called attention to the past failures and sins of the people and the resultant judgments of God—that they might know God meant what He said and would deal similarly with them for future sins. Nevertheless they also offered the hope of redemption for repentance and obedience. These themes of Judgment and Redemption recur throughout Biblical prophecy and history, and are the real basis for its structure. History itself is woven around them.

"The battle lines in human history are drawn now as they always have been in accordance with the simple preview given in the Protevangelium, when God said, 'I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel' (Gen. 3:15)."¹⁷

This conflict of the ages persists yet today, and, hence the message of the prophets is invariably as applicable to us also. To all people in all times, therefore, the prophets have a vital message from the Lord.

"They throw light upon our own day and our own situation by announcing the eternal principles of divine providence which will always operate whenever similar conditions are present. It is a truism to say that in God's plan the same things are true today that were true

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in the Old Testament age. If we are guilty of the same sins we can be sure of reaping the same punishment. It is indeed easy for us to get the Word of God for our day if, capable of analyzing our own situation, we go to the prophets to find their statement of God's prescription for a similar condition."¹⁸

The biggest step, after admitting the existence of God, is the admission of a sovereign God. An omnipotent God would surely be able to control His creation. Jeremiah seems to assume that God has control over everything. After being ignored, plotted against, and persecuted, Jeremiah asks God to manifest His omnipotence against his enemies. Jeremiah 18:19-23 (Revised Standard Version)

The prophet in no way doubts God's power. The prophets depict God as omnipotent, Ruler and Governor of His creation. They recognize no limit to His power. In other words, GOD IS ABLE TO CONTROL HISTORY! The power of God in executing His plan can only be limited by the restrictions He imposes upon Himself. Thus, God is unable to overwhelm man's will and force him to perform as the proverbial puppet: reacting only when motivated by some external stimulus. This is not because God lacks the power, but because He has endowed man with the privilege to choose and to direct his own life. Hence, God has restricted His own power by His own limitation.

A second basic belief inherent within the doctrine of the prophets is that God is working in the world. The prophet Daniel declares the fact of God working in the world when interpreting a dream for King Nebuchadnezzar. The king dreamed of a tree that was seen all over the earth. Its leaves were fair, its fruit abundant, the birds dwelt in its branches, the animals found shade under it and all flesh ate from the tree. Then a heavenly being came and cried that the tree should be cut down, and the leaves and fruit should be stripped from the branches and the beasts and birds should flee from the tree. The stump was to be left amid the grass of the field bound with a band of iron and brass. Then the angel stated that his lot would be with the beasts of the field, he would eat grass, and his mind would be changed from that of a man to that of a beast. Daniel's interpretation of the prophecy indicated that Nebuchadnezzar was the tree. He grew and became strong and his greatness grew even to heaven and he had dominion over all the earth. The decree of the heavenly being meant:

this is the interpretation, O king; It is a decree of the Most High, which has come upon my lord the king, that you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field; you shall be made to eat grass like an

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or, and you shall be wet with the dew of heaven, and seven times shall pass over you, till you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men, and gives it to whom he will. And as it was commanded to leave the stump of the roots of the tree, your kingdom shall be sure for you from the time that you know that Heaven rules. Daniel 4:24-26.

History records that the prophecy of God came to pass even as it was spoken by the prophet Daniel.

The book of Jeremiah is full of predictions of coming events which are ascribed to the hand of God. One of the most emphatic and lucid statements is Jer. 25:5—"They said, Turn ye again now every one from his evil way, and from the evil of your doings, and dwell in the land that the Lord hath given unto you and to your fathers for ever and ever." Such phrases as the following indicate that God is working in history: Jeremiah 22:6-7; 25:33; 27:5-7; 30:10-11; 46:8b; 49:2; Isaiah 10:5-16; II Chron. 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-4; Ezek. 28:6-7; 30:10; Daniel 2:37; 44; 5:17-31, etc.).

The entire book of Daniel shouts with certainty the fact that God is working in history. Practically every prophetic breath of this courageous man exudes this humbling and reassuring concept.

Third, "Does God Control History Now?" This is perhaps the most controversial and the most unconsidered area of God's dealings with men. Some make a great play out of interpreting all present events and attempting to predict the future in the light of Bible prophecy. Others, of course, do not even recognize that God has any control over any present events.

We have seen the amazing and intricate working of God in the days preceding Christ, and we know of the culminative day of the return of Christ. But what about the present? We understand that the processes of nature are upheld and controlled by His power. ". . . upholding all things by the word of His power . . ." (Hebrews 1:2). ". . . He makes His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. (Matthew 5:45)

Jesus himself said that His Father was still working (John 5:17). Whether Jesus was referring specifically to history is a little difficult to determine. But, yet, this meaning cannot be discarded because the Old Testament definitely declares that God is working in history. ". . . He gives to all life, and breath, and all things . . ." and "He made from one every nation, etc." Acts 17:25-27. Is this the only area of God's control? Or is He at present shaping the events of history toward

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the end and Christ's return? Have the principles of justice by which He acted in the past been reserved until the final judgment? Or does God judge and control nations now? Did it make a difference in God's dealings after Christ came and ushered in a completely unworldly, spiritual kingdom? What would be the results if God were to let go of the world and suspend it only by the thread of his control through the voluntary actions of His followers?

Romans 13:1 seems to be one of the clearest scriptures about God's present control over the whole of men's affairs. "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God." So God, by permissive and purposed events, is in actual control of the present. The principles by which God operated in the past are still in operation. God is still concerned about carrying out his plan, and the recognition of his authority in the world. History since the days of God's dealing with nations through prophets has shown that God controls nations on the same principles now. Justice is not always immediately rendered, but neither was it in the Old Testament days. Judgment, however, is inevitable, and none can hope to escape. The nation which exalts Christ as Lord and follows His teachings is the nation which is upheld.

Not only are the principles of prophecy thus widely applicable, but even predictive prophecy need not necessarily be confined to just one fulfillment. As in the case of the prophecy of Jer. 31:15—not only was this fulfilled in Jeremiah's day, but it was again distinctly fulfilled in Matt.2:17-18. (An interesting sidelight here is the significant prophetic element in the very history of the Israelite nation—as in this reference to Rachel, and most strikingly in comparing the wilderness wanderings of the Israelites from Egypt to Canaan with the conflicts and blessings of the Christian life. Again the power of God's revealed principles is manifestly evident).

The relation of prophecy to fulfillment is thus as a seed to the flower: the basic, inner idea is essential, rather than the resultant form displayed which stems from it. The form may vary, but the vital principle must be present and constant.¹⁹

Primarily this "form" is found in the immediate application of the prophecy, and we should not become so involved in the extensive ramifications of applications that we fail to regard the initial direct fulfillment. John Milton appropriates the term "times—coloring" for this immediate context, and regard it as the husk to the wheat—not essential to the real value, but yet a temporary, necessary adjunct.²⁰ For this reason he advocates a keen awareness of those circumstances.

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"The function of the prophet was first of all that of a preacher and teacher of the will of God . . . The message of the prophet reflects and reveals something of the historical situation to which it is directed. It clothes itself, as Ed. Riehm has so well said, in 'local color' or 'times coloring' . . . It may have a significance that goes far beyond the immediate situation; but our first task in interpretation is to ascertain what it meant for the faith and hope and religious life of those who lived within that historical situation, and to whom the prophet was sent as a spokesman of God. Even the predictive element must be interpreted from within this framework of a religious message relevant for the day and the situation."²¹

Beyond this, however, and relevant to the total plan and purpose of God, is the prophets' obsession with the covenant God had made with Israel, and its anticipated fulfillment. Thus they interpreted the present and future in the light of this covenant from the past. Constantly they sought to impress upon the people that their God was not some fickle, capricious, vacillating deity who fluctuated in his attitude and actions towards them according to every personal whim and fancy—but their God was a true and faithful God who kept His Word despite all their own frailty and failings. They revealed God's constancy throughout their history in spite of all their evident sins, and they challenged their people to turn to Him afresh that their future might become a history of conquest and success.

Thus their prophetic utterances for the future were more than haphazard predictions to amaze the multitudes with their powers: the prophets were intent on conveying a vital realization of God and His purposes.

"The prophets were not predictive sharpshooters, who sought merely to satisfy human curiosity with respect to the future. They were preachers, who sought to renew faith in the ultimate fulfillment of the promises stated and implied in the very making of the covenant with Abraham and with Israel."²²

Nor did these predictions refer only to God's provision and blessing in the land of Canaan and this life, but rather they looked forward—for the faithful—to the new heavens and the new earth when God's ultimate glories would be made manifest and the true Israel of God would rejoice for evermore. Then, and only then, would the covenant of God come to final fruition and the climax of the ages be attained.

As the prophets sought to see ahead into this unfolding purpose of God, they saw indeed the unmistakable realities of His promises, but they often failed to see the relationship between these. Each revela-

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tion appeared as it were a mountain-peak, and range after range of these seemed to merge with each other. What immense valleys might lie between, they could not tell, but they knew that God who commanded history and could control the very destinies of men would bring all things to their fulfillment in His own time. "The ideas in the prophecy are definite, but the time element is not: the near and the distant, and the constantly recurring events are all blended in one picture, after the manner of mountain peaks and ranges when seen from a distance. The sequence of purpose alone is clear."²³

This purpose of God is specifically concerning His chosen nation of Israel. This is not to imply that the prophets were oblivious or unmindful of the developments and destructions of other nations. "They saw the judgments about to fall upon the surrounding nations, but these GENTILE JUDGMENTS ARE IN VIEW ONLY AS THEY ARE RELATED TO ISRAEL."²⁴ Thus the prophets referred Israel to God's dealings with others that they might learn not to transgress themselves but to trust and follow God.

In all this it can indeed be recognized that in the eyes of the prophets there was and is a vital interrelation and interaction between prophecy and history, each dependant on the other, but both under the direct dominance of God, and geared to the fulfillment of His will.

Inextricably linked to the biblical insistence on the total sovereignty of God is the doctrine of creation . . . In the act of creation, therefore, God brought both man and history into being. This fact is of tremendous importance for any view of history which seeks to be truly Christian; the doctrine of creation is no peripheral adjunct to the scriptural concept of history, but rather its very center. The God of Christianity does not deal with a world that evolved by chance nor does He assume sovereignty over creatures who came into being by some mysterious process over which He had no control . . . To posit man as the product of evolutionary forces may seem, at first glance, to make him a noble creature and possessed of endless possibilities for a glorious future. Actually, however, it destroys his true role in the historical process and reduces him to a passive recipient of the effects of natural and environmental forces . . . It is well known that the dominant force of the evolutionary philosophy in the political and social sciences has engendered increasing uncertainty among historians and the social scientists about the meaning of the human

past and the promise of the future. In fact, some of these men question whether the study of history can any longer be justified as a meaningful intellectual activity . . . A sinful humanity could in no way thwart the realization of the decrees of a sovereign God who makes even the wrath of man to praise Him and the processes of history to glorify Him . . . By the operations of common grace evil rulers and nations, even in the heat of their own sinful rebellion, actually carried out the will of God in regard to the elect and His visible Church. Empires and kingdoms rise and fall according to God's plan; through them He brings judgment upon nations who have forsaken righteousness and through them He brings judgment to bear even on the Church. History is replete with examples of this truth. The Lord used Babylon to execute judgment upon the Children of Israel; Rome was used to judge those ancient empires which had trampled under foot the law of a sovereign God.

His incarnation was the great demarcation, the great watershed between what we call ancient history and all that has since transpired . . . All of ancient history, therefore, must be interpreted in the light of the Incarnation. Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, the Alexandrian Empire and Rome are viewed historically as instruments of a sovereign God to bring about the "fulness of time" into which Jesus Christ was born. Unknowingly and unwillingly, and yet freely, they accomplished His purpose both of judgment and of redemption.²⁵

"Prophecy, therefore, being from the very first inseparably linked with the plan of grace unfolded in Scripture, is, at the same time, the necessary concomitant of sacred history. The two mutually act and react on each other. Prophecy gives birth to the history; the history, in turn, as it moves onward to its destined completion, at once fulfills prophecies already given, and calls forth further revelations. And so far from possessing the character of an excrescence, or existing merely as an anomaly in the procedure of God toward men, prophecy cannot even be rightly understood, unless viewed in relation to the order of the divine dispensations, and its actual place in history."²⁶

Nevertheless, since the view of the prophets is largely the viewpoint of God we need to recognize the limitless scope that is manifest through prophecy, in which history becomes merely a vehicle for expression.

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"History is the *occasion* of prophecy, but not its measure; for prophecy rises above history, borne aloft by wings which carry it far beyond the present, and which it derives, not from the past occurrences of which history takes cognizance, but from Him to whom the future and the past are alike known. It is the communication of so much of his own supernatural light as he sees fit to let down upon the dark movements of history, to show whither they are conducting. For the most part, the persons who live in the midst of events are the least capable of understanding aright the character of their age. But God is elevated above it, and, by the word of prophecy, he so informs the minds of his people in respect to the end that they come also to know better than they could otherwise have done the beginning and the middle."²⁷

We may indeed learn much from history; but we will even learn more from prophecy, for it is prophecy that makes history meaningful for eternity, and it is prophecy that points us to the keynote and climax of the conflict of the ages: the redemption of lost humanity through the Lord Jesus Christ.

"The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy."—Rev. 19:10

It is necessary today to stress the importance of history. Remove from it its historical basis and there is no true Christianity. For the Christian religion is founded squarely upon certain things which God did in history. Remove from it its historical basis and there can be no true study of Old Testament theology. When, however, proper regard is given to the historical basis of special revelation, how rewarding is the study of Old Testament theology! How wondrous were those dealings of God with His ancient people! How gracious were His overtures unto them! Step by step He brought them on their way, ever revealing unto them more about the One who was to come, until, in the fullness of time, God entered the realm of human history in a unique way. He sent forth His Son, and the second Person of the Trinity became man. To Him the kings, and priests, and prophets of the Old Testament dispensation pointed. And in Him was the fulfillment, for He was the true Prophet, the true Priest and the true King, and it was He who by a definite act in history, namely His atoning death and resurrection, healed the breach between man and God and brought salvation to His People.²⁸

THE SOVEREIGN GOD SEEKING FOR HIS OWN

God acts in what He permits. Whatever God permits, He permits for His own purposes in redeeming man. In II Sam 24:1 we are told that God "incited David to number Israel." In I Chron. 21:1ff we are told that Satan "incited David to number Israel." These two are not contradictory but supplementary—for in allowing Satan to incite David, God acted. By way of further illustration, Joseph was able to say to his brethren who had sold him into slavery, "As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive; as they are today" (Gen. 50:20). Whatever evil God permits even Satan to bring about is a part of God's redemptive, disciplinary providence.

It is a fact that the Scripture writers speak of God as doing things which He permits, without distinguishing verbally between His direct action and His permissive action.

One writer has stated, "Unless we wish to reduce the love of God to the frozen wastes of pure speculative abstraction, we should shake off the static ideology which has come into Christian theology from non-Biblical sources, and insist upon preaching the living God of intimate actual relationships with His people. God's immutability is the absolutely perfect consistency of His character in His actual relationships, throughout history, with His finite creation." God is immutable in His purposes and His knowledge. He is not a man that He should repent (I Sam. 15:29; Num. 23:19; Jer. 4:28; Ezek. 24:14; Mal. 3:6; Eph. 1:11; Heb. 6:17) When the word *repent* is used in regard to God it is in a figure of speech, which speaks of him almost as if human; and since his actions toward man vary *according to man's response*, the feeling, which in a man actually causes change (repentance), is attributed to God (anthropomorphically). God does not change (Jas. 1:17); man changes!

If God is immutable, why pray? If we but remembered that God is omniscient and that He has known our prayers and petitions from eternity past, and that His immutability is dynamic, not static, the problem would vanish. God does invite us to petition Him (Phil. 4:6; Ezek. 36:37; I Pet. 5:7; I Jn. 5:13-14; etc.). Parents know how to answer the petitions of our children *in anticipation*. With our limited knowledge we can know something of the future. Take the instance of a mother caring for the fevered little body of a sick child. Before the sun goes down the mother provides the medicine, the drink of water,

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sun goes down the father provides the medicine, the drink of water, and other comforts, knowing that there will be a cry in the night. When the little one cries, the mother does not change her mind. She has already planned the answer. Similarly God has anticipated our prayers before the foundation of the world. He has built the answer to our needs into the very structure of the universe. He knows we need to be answered with discipline and trial and test at times; He knows that at other times we need deliverance. He knows that we will pray and that we will pray in a spontaneous manner as a child cries to his father. God has put the universe together on a principle of personal relationships in which He answers prayer, and we can, in a measure, understand His loving provision only on the basis of His omniscience.

God is immutable, but God acts. God does not change, but He acts. His immutability makes Him act always the same, consistently and constantly. The reason He acts in different manners at different times is because man has changed one way or another.

But what about evil? If God is all-powerful and all-holy, why is there evil? Why doesn't God do away with evil? Or, perhaps God can't do away with it—then He is not all-powerful! But if evil is to be explained by the assumption that God cannot prevent it, then we are led to a hopeless pessimistic view of God and the universe. If the present situation is the best He can do in infinite time, then evil must be more powerful than good and there is no hope for the future. Evil has come about through the voluntary self-corruption of the creature; but in order to bring into actuality His power, His name, His wrath against sin, His ability to save, His glory in the salvation of His people, God chose to endure with much long suffering the sin and corruption of man. To show that the fact of evil existing is inconsistent with the omnipotence of God one would have to show that a world in which evil could not come into actuality would be richer in moral and spiritual values than a world in which moral freedom may be actually exercised and the exceeding sinfulness of sin may be known in the concrete.

We quote here from Charles Hodge: "The decrees of God are free in the sense of being absolute or sovereign. The meaning of this proposition is expressed negatively by saying that the decrees of God are in no case conditional. The event decreed is suspended on a condition, but the purpose of God is not! It is inconsistent with the nature of God to assume suspense of indecision on his part . . . whatever God foreordains must certainly come to pass. The distinction between the efficient (efficacious) and the permissive decrees of God, although important, has no relation to the certainty of the event. All events embraced in the purpose of God are equally certain, whether He has

determined to bring them to pass by his own power, or simply to permit their occurrence through the agency of His creatures . . . some things He purposes to do, others He decrees to permit to be done. He effects good, He permits evil. In a context of God's revelation of His using Cyrus, Persian emperor, to be His "servant," Isaiah also writes, "I am the Lord, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I gird you, though you do not know me . . . I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe, I am the Lord, who does all these things" (Isa. 45:5-7). Whatever God does, He certainly purposed to do. Whatever He permits to occur, He certainly purposed to permit. Nothing can occur that was not foreseen, and if foreseen it must have been purposed. The Scriptures teach that the providential control of God extends to all events, even the most minute, and thus they teach that His decrees are equally comprehensive. God is not only the Creator of all things, but He continuously sustains, rules and preserves all His creation (Heb. 1:3; Col. 1:17; Neh. 9:6-7; Job 12:7-10; Psa. 104:27-32). Preservation is that omnipotent energy of God by which all created things animate and inanimate, are upheld in existence, with all the properties and powers with which He has endowed them. The external world, rational and irrational creatures, things great and small, ordinary and extraordinary, are equally and always under the control of God.

The story of Job and the references we have cited throughout this article are sufficient to show that God has not abdicated His sovereignty to anyone—including Satan or any world emperor. The book of Daniel plainly shows that God foreknows, purposes, permits and acts in history constantly. God uses the evil, rebellious schemes of great world rulers and empires to serve His purposes—at the same time permitting these rulers to make their own choices! Read in this connection, Isaiah 10:5ff! The first chapter of Ezekiel is a vision given to the prophet to assure him (that he may assure the chosen people in captivity) that God still rules in all the events of history and mankind to carry out His purposes. The cloud out of the north represents the judgment of God upon the chosen people through Babylon. But the cloud is fringed by dazzling brightness which represents the "silver lining" of hope behind each cloud of judgment which is the ultimate purpose of God in judgment after all. The four living creatures shows God using a living creation to carry out His purposes on earth. The wheels with life and eyes shows even inanimate creation being used by God with a spirit of life in them. This shows the connection of God's Throne to all that is on earth. He controls the whole universe and uses any part of it

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He deems necessary to fulfill His purposes. The platform ("firmament") shows that the Throne of Heaven is the "Control Room" for all that is portrayed in the vision Ezekiel is being given. The rainbow symbolizes the ultimate purpose of God which is to fulfill the covenant made with the chosen people. So that out of the judgment of captivity under the Babylonians will come the eventual fulfillment of God's covenant (through a people rid of their idolatry and prepared for the Messiah).

One might write on this subject filling volume after volume. Perhaps the one scripture which sums it all up is found in Romans 8:28. There is now good textual and manuscript evidence to indicate that this passage should read, "God works all things together for good to those that love Him and are called according to His purpose." We leave you now, hoping that you will give this subject more study and contemplation, and that your soul will be thrilled with the revelation that God reigns, acts and that His purpose for your redemption will be fulfilled in spite of all that men, nature or Satan may attempt. God's purposes are certain—He will not change! It all depends upon you, whether you change or not! Speaking of the foreknowledge and immutable purpose of God, Paul write in Ephesians 1:10 that God is pleased "to sum up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth." Some day God is going to draw the line of eternity under all the long list of events of history and they are all going to be summed up. Do you know to what they will add up? Do you realize that every minute historical event and personage, when they are all added up, will total out to the glory of God and His Son Jesus Christ and His Church?! Indeed, everything that has ever happened or ever will happen is ultimately destined to serve to glorify God. Every man is going to eventually serve God to glorify Him—where man spends eternity to the glory of God depends upon man's choice in this probationary existence of life.

FOOTNOTES

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3. Alfred Edersheim, *Prophecy and History*, (Grand Rapids, 1955), p. 127.
4. Alfred Edersheim, *Prophecy and History*, (Grand Rapids, 1955), p. 126.

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5. Alfred Edersheim, *Prophecy and History*, (Grand Rapids, 1955), p. 135.
6. "Prophecy," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, p. 2464.
7. John P. Milton, *Prophecy Interpreted*, (Minneapolis, 1960), p. 32.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
13. Yates, Kyle M., *Preaching from the Prophets*, Broadman Press (Tenn. 1942), p. 1.
14. Milton, op cit., p. 26.
15. Kirkpatrick, A. F., *The Doctrine of the Prophets*, Macmillan (London 1897), p. 6.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
17. Milton, op cit., p. 51.
18. Yates, op cit., p. 1.
19. Kirkpatrick, op cit., p. 16.
20. Milton, op cit., p. 11.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
24. Chaper, Lewis Sperry, *The Kingdom in History and Prophecy*, Sunday School Times Co., (Pa. 1922), p. 26.
25. C. Gregg Singer, "The nature of History," Carl F. H. Henry, ed., *Christian Faith and Modern Theology* (New York, 1964), pp. 228-231.
26. Fairbairn, Patrick, *Prophecy*, Carlton and Porter, (New York, 1866), p. 43.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
28. Edward J. Young, *The Study of Old Testament Theology Today*, (London, 1958), p. 31.

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