

# God and history: A biblical perspective

By Siegfried J. Schwantes

*For Bible-believing Christians,  
history is not a perplexing  
puzzle but the outworking of  
God's purposes in the context  
of human freedom.*

**H**istory is a cyclic process, argues Socrates. History is linear, leading to a goal of God's own choosing, proclaim the biblical prophets.

History is no better than "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." Thus said Shakespeare. History is where we see "behind, above, and through all the play and counterplay of human interest and power and passions, the agencies of the all-merciful One, silently, patiently working out the counsels of His own will."<sup>1</sup> Thus said Ellen White, seeing an overarching divine design and purpose in history.

Between Greek philosophy and biblical prophecy, between humanism and revelation, we have a dichotomy regarding what history is all about. As Christians, it is imperative that we be fully informed of the biblical understanding of history. The Word of God affirms that God rules over the affairs of individuals and nations. Indeed, divine sovereignty in history is a deeply embedded biblical truth. Moses argued: "When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he divided all mankind, he fixed the boundaries for the peoples according to the number of the sons of God" (Deuteronomy 32:8, NIV). Isaiah spoke about Cyrus as one chosen by God for freeing Israel from Babylonian captivity (Isaiah 45:1). Daniel underscored that God "changes times and seasons; he sets up kings and deposes them" (Daniel 2:21, NIV). The Apostle Paul believed that the coming of Jesus was within God's reckoning of time in history (Galatians 4:4). He further argued that the chief end of national and individual existence on this earth is a religious one: "He [God] made from

one every nation of men to live on the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him" (Acts 17:26, 27, RSV).

## **God and the nations**

Did God grant to every nation and civilization a "time of grace," an opportunity to seek after Him and find Him? Ellen White's comment on Paul's Acts 17 speech leaves no room for doubt: "Every nation that has come upon the stage of action has been permitted to occupy its place on the earth, that it might be seen whether it would fulfill the purpose of 'the Watcher and the Holy One.' Prophecy has traced the rise and fall of the world's great empires—Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome. With each of these, as with nations of less power, history repeated itself. Each had its period of test, each failed, its glory faded, its power departed, and its place was occupied by another."<sup>2</sup>

Consider Babylon. Its religious speculations led it to an ever-deepening morass of superstition and obscurantism. Babylon might have known God. Indeed, the Lord even placed it in contact with His people during the captivity. But Babylon failed to see God's workings in history.

Egypt presents no better picture. Despite the promising glimmer in the days of Ikhnaton, when people's search for truth led them to the idea of one supreme divinity, rank polytheism held Egypt captive. The powerful priests of Amon in Thebes crushed the budding religious aspirations of the Amarna Age.

At Ikhnaton's death the court returned to Thebes, and the religious insights of Ikhnaton bore no fruit.

On the other hand, history shows that God's "allotted periods" were not entirely fruitless. In Persia, in the seventh century B.C., Zoroaster distinguished himself by remarkable insights into religious truth. He replaced the conflicting claims of Persian polytheism by a belief in Ahura Mazda, the god of truth and light. Zoroastrianism recognized a protracted struggle in which the forces of good would eventually prevail, in the final judgment.

In the dimness of such light and in the brightness of biblical revelation, God's role in history is clearly recognized. Ellen White, in perfect harmony with biblical writers, endorsed the providential view of history: "In the annals of human history, the growth of nations, the rise and fall of empires, appear as dependent on the will and prowess of man. But in the word of God the curtain is drawn aside, and we behold, behind, above, and through the play and counterplay of human interests and power and passions, the agencies of the all-merciful One, silently, patiently working out the counsels of His own will. The Bible reveals the true philosophy of history."<sup>3</sup>

#### History as unfolding of God's work

Eusebius (c. 260-c. 340 A.D.), bishop of Caesarea and first historian of the Christian Church, argued that the broken threads of humanity's past could be woven into a meaningful whole if history was seen as a preparation for the gospel. Only thus could the incongruities of history with all its woes and unfulfilled hopes be interpreted as meaningful within a divine plan. Deriving his main inspiration from Paul, Eusebius recognized in history an intelligible pattern. To him, history moved not haphazardly, but toward a goal of God's own choice.

This is not to say that history proves

God's role in human affairs. But history in its inevitable march toward a divine goal reveals God to the eye of faith, just as nature in all its beauty and pain reveals God to the eye of faith. Of God's overruling providence in history there is enough evidence to sustain faith, though never so overwhelming as to compel it. Thus history makes sense to the believer, while remaining an obscure riddle to the unbeliever.

The truth of a divine providence guiding the course of events toward an eschatological goal is best sensed when a multiplicity of factors are perceived as contributing toward the fulfilment of a divine purpose in history. Thus the Apostle Paul writes of the "fullness of time" as the critical moment when "God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law to redeem those who were under the law" (Galatians 4:4, NKJV). The climatic moment in redemptive history could not come until preparatory conditions had been fulfilled. The apostle might have had in mind the fulfilment of a time prophecy like that of Daniel 9:24 to 27. But certainly more was included under "the fullness of time." A series of historical trends were paving the way for the coming of the Messiah: the unification of the ancient world that followed the sweeping victories of Alexander (336-323 B.C.); the diffusion of Greek language and ideas from Greece to the borders of India; one common language and culture creating a "global village"; and the increasing evilness of human nature crying out for deliverance.<sup>4</sup>

When the Roman empire absorbed the Greek-speaking world, Roman skills in jurisprudence and territorial administration imposed order and safety within its borders. Roman rule also opened up the arteries of commerce and built a network of roads. Navigation in the Mediterranean was made much safer by the virtual elimination of piracy.

Another "fullness of time" factor that facilitated the dissemination of the gos-

pel was the ubiquity of the Jewish *di-aspóra*. Jewish merchants and synagogues were to be found in most of the major cities of the Roman empire. The synagogues attracted many God-fearing citizens impressed with the monotheistic faith of the Jews and their high moral standards, which contrasted with those of the Gentiles. These proselytes, already familiar with the teachings of the Old Testament, were much more easily persuaded to embrace the Christian message, as the Book of Acts clearly shows.

That one historical factor might favor the advance of God's kingdom on earth doesn't carry much persuasive force *per se*. But when several factors, as listed above, converge in the same direction, skepticism would seem unjustified.

#### The Reformation in divine providence

Another important event with earth-shaking consequences for religious history was the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. It too bears the tokens of divine guidance of the ongoing historical process. Preparatory trends converged to make the revolution a success—a success hard to imagine in the preceding centuries. Five such trends can easily be identified:

1. Feudalism was losing its grip upon the economic life of Western Europe. With cities flourishing and becoming more assertive in the political arena, and with agriculture becoming less influential, feudalism was gradually waning, and individuals were freer to determine their destiny in both politics and religion.

2. Ruling monarchs in France, England, and Spain were gaining the upperhand in the struggle with feudal lords and the church. There was a growing discontent with church interference in the affairs of the state. The state increasingly resented and resisted the drain of resources by the papal curia.

3. The so-called reforming councils

of Constance (1414-1418) and Basel (1431-1449) failed in their attempt to reform a recalcitrant Papacy, and the conflicting claims of legitimacy by different contenders for the papal throne—at one time there were three rival popes—contributed in no small measure to the loss of papal prestige. The commanding authority of a pope like Innocence III was a thing of the past.

4. The Renaissance, first in Italy, and later throughout Western Europe with its admiration for the riches of Greek and Roman civilization, and its slogan of “back to the sources,” encouraged the study of Christian sources as well. The Bible and the patristic literature were studied more than ever, and showed the glaring discrepancy between biblical religion and the distortions it suffered during the Middle Ages. Writers like Erasmus pressed for a reform of the church in “head and limbs.”

5. Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press (c. 1450) increased the flow of books, especially the Bible, to the common people. For example, before 1500, only 92 editions of the Vulgate Bible were already available. Gutenberg’s moving press catapulted Luther’s 95 Theses throughout Western Europe.

The convergence of these and similar trends paved the way for the success of the Protestant Reformation. Does this not suggest the guiding hand of divine Providence in the affairs of the nations, while allowing for individual decisions? Such an understanding, better than any other, appeals to the unbiased student of history. The unfolding of events may seem slow to the casual student, “[b]ut like the stars in the vast circuit of their appointed path, God’s purposes know no haste and no delay.”<sup>5</sup>

History remains tragic because human alienation from God cannot be overcome by divine fiat. Some appalling tragedies, such as monstrous tyrannies or massive genocides, will never be fully understood by humans this side of the final judgment. Though tragic, histo-

ry—even secular history—partakes of an overall design. God gives human beings the freedom to choose and to act, even against His will.

#### **History, church, and freedom**

History is neither meaningless nor inconsequential. Even though the divine presence in the historical process is shrouded in mystery, enough glimpses of God’s concern are revealed to make the biblical view credible. Of these intimations, none is as significant as God’s redemptive plan on the cross. Anchored in history, the Christ event makes all history reveal a providential design.

The tragedies of history are the result of human struggle for self-assertion. They should not blind us to the evidence of an overruling providence. Hence the mission of the church as the herald of reconciliation takes on special meaning. But this mission would be hampered if there were no freedom for men and women to make their spiritual choices.

Therefore, every instance of progress toward greater political and religious freedom becomes an evidence of a divine intent to bring about the best climate for genuine Christian decision. In the arena of moral decisions, history must ever surround us with a measure of freedom. Through His guiding providence, God acts toward preserving and expanding the areas of freedom. To reverse this trend would be to defeat His redemptive purpose.

Some scholars have advocated a deterministic view of history, as if event followed event in a chain of causal connections, no different from the chain of cause and effect that operates in nature. But as Isaiah Berlin states, “The evidence for a thoroughgoing determinism is not at hand.”<sup>6</sup> If it were, the laws of historical causation would long ago have been discovered.

The biblical view of history rejects determinism as undermining personal

responsibility, basic to the biblical understanding of the human as a free moral agent. It also rejects the view that history is completely undetermined—that it presents no recognizable pattern. The view closest to the biblical perspective is that history reflects, albeit dimly, God’s eternal purpose.

#### **History and God’s eternal purpose**

A simple illustration may clarify how human freedom and God’s sovereign oversight can coexist. Imagine a ship full of passengers ready to depart to a destination known only to the captain. The general direction of the ship as it crosses the ocean is under the captain’s control. He knows the port of destination and the best route to reach it. At the same time the passengers on board

are free to act and move at will, with elbow room for all. The captain's control of the ship's destination does not interfere with the relative freedom of the passengers. Thus the ship of history moves forward under divine guidance, while plenty of freedom is allowed to every human being to make personal choices. Providence may use any of several alternatives to direct the sequence of events according to a heavenly plan. This divine supervision is admittedly discreet so as not to thwart human freedom, on the one hand, and not to deprive the human necessity of walking by faith, on the other. Though never obtru-

sive, divine providence is as pervasive as the air we breathe.

There are, of course, historians who are committed neither to the deterministic nor to the providential view of history. When confronted with an unexpected denouement in a perplexing plot, they have no other recourse than to appeal to the "fortuitous concurrence of lucky factors." But for a historian to introduce chance or accident as an explanatory principle is to disclaim any knowledge of the real cause.

Speculations on the "ifs" of history are sterile except to stress the element of

contingency in history. At times, events may seem to be trifles. If it had not rained on the morning of the Battle of Waterloo, Napoleon's artillery might have maneuvered to advantage, and the defeat turned to victory. The Christian substitutes "providence" for "fortune" or "accident," and argues that divine providence works to bring together the appropriate alternatives so as to produce the best result coherent with the divine plan.

Harris Harbison, formerly professor of history at Princeton University, well summarizes the Christian view: "Where materialists may see mere blind process, where rationalists may see evident progress, he will see providence—a divine *providing* in both the conscious decisions and the unintended results of history, a purpose partly revealed and partly concealed, a destiny which is religious in the deepest meaning of the word, in which human freedom and divine guidance complete each other in some mysterious way."<sup>7</sup>

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#### Notes and references

1. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1952), p. 173.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 176.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 173.
4. See Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1940), pp. 32-34.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
6. Isaiah Berlin, *Historical Inevitability*, quoted in S. J. Schwantes, *The Biblical Meaning of History* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1970), p. 32.
7. E. Harris Harbison, "The Marks of a Christian Historian," in C. T. McIntire, ed., *God, History, and Historians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 354.