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A Biblical View of History and Historians[1]

1. Introduction - History and Postmodernism

'Past Times' is a chain of shops which in the past few years have expanded in High Streets and Shopping Centres across England. The shops offer an authentic postmodern experience of history. The goods are drawn from every period of the past; there is no sense of the integrity of any one period or style, or of any one story to be told. You can pick and choose and rearrange the pieces in any order or way that you like. It is the commercial equivalent of the way in which, as Beverley Southgate says, some 'historians roam freely over the past, mingling "fact" with "fiction".'[2] 'Past Times' encapsulates the postmodern approach to the past.[3]

This is not a new phenomenon, however. The playwright Samuel Beckett said in 1937:

> I am not interested in a 'unification' of the historical chaos ...What I want is the straws, flotsams, etc., names dates, births and deaths, because that is all I can know... the pure incoherence of times and men and places is at least amusing.

His biographer notes that 'In practice this meant that Beckett liked chronologies, loved tiny, verifiable details of individual human lives and had no time for broad sweeping analyses of motives or movements.'[4] It is 'broad sweeping analyses' which are out of fashion.

Progress, Marxism, historicism, all these 'broad sweeping analyses' of the recent past seem discredited. This is why some historians now are prepared to join the Beckettian chorus and to say, in Keith Jenkins' words, that history is not 'a subject discipline aiming at real knowledge of the past, but...a discursive practice that enables present minded people(s) to go to the past, there to delve around and reorganise it appropriately to their needs.'[5]

Yet Christian theology gives a 'broad sweeping analysis' of history, a framework of providence inside which we can orientate ourselves and place our own historical moment within the flow of time. As David Lyon has noted, the postmodern mood gives a new opportunity:

> Today, the human is being displaced, decentred, and the grip on the future seems once more up for grabs. While this opens the door to everything from Foucault's play of power to the Age of Aquarius, it also renders more plausible the possibility that Providence was not such a bad idea after all.[6]

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[1] Originally given as a paper for SGCH Student Conference, Cambridge February 22nd 1997.
[2] B.Southgate *History: What and Why?* (London 1996) p.x.
[3] On 'Past Times' see R.Samuel *Theatres of Memory* (London 1995) pp.86-7. cf. p.95 for his conclusion on the phenomenon of 'retrochic' the chain represents.
[4] James Knowlson *Damned to Fame: the Life of Samuel Beckett* (London 1996) p.244
[5] K. Jenkins *Rethinking History* (London 1991) p.68
[6] D.Lyon *Postmodernity* (Buckingham 1994) p.86.

I want to take up this reflection of David Lyon's.

Much present thinking about history echoes the apparent hopelessness of postmodernism, and even those with a desire to promote a 'conventional' view of history find it hard to justify, as in Joyce Appleby's recent book *Telling the Truth about History*. In this paper I want to contrast this hopelessness with what I believe is a biblical view. Recently, as we might expect in the light of comments such as Beckett's and Jenkins', the idea that there might be a 'biblical view' of anything has come under strong attack; after all, the bible itself is not a single book but a library, drawn together over many centuries. In an age which prefers 'straws, flotsams, etc., names dates, births and deaths' it can be hard to maintain that there are basic core values which hold the disparate texts together.

Nevertheless, the Christian tradition has for centuries held the view that scripture does speak with a single voice on many issues. This is not to say that single theology of history underlies all the biblical writings on the subject, simply that there is a convergence of view on a number of key points. The emphasis may differ in different texts, but there will be a coherent core to the view of history.[7] I would suggest, then, that a biblical view of history might start with the following four convictions:

- History matters; we must take seriously the events of the past.
- History moves: it is a dynamic process which heads towards the future.
- History is muddled; though it matters, and it moves, it is often hard to see what it means, or what God is doing.
- History is mastered by God. Though history seems muddled, nevertheless the biblical writers are clear that, whatever the temptations to believe otherwise, God is in control of it.

These four convictions can provide us, I shall suggest, with a path through the competing philosophies of history, and a means of measuring (from a Christian perspective) their effectiveness.

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[7] See J.Goldingay *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids 1987) pp.42-3, 48-55 for a helpful discussion of this issue, and the fine consideration in V.P.Long *The Art of Biblical History* (Leicester 1994) which concludes with the hope that the author will see 'further reflections on the Bible's own *theology of history*.' (p.226). This paper is, in part, a response to this desire.

2. History matters

i) History matters because God has acted in it.
The central affirmation of the Christian faith is that in Jesus Christ God has shared our human history and changed it for ever. Luke dates the birth (2:2): at the time of the census decreed by Caesar Augustus. Matthew (2:1) tells us it was in the time of Herod the Great. This is no mythical birth, told in legend separated from the humdrum events of the secular world; as John (1:14) says 'The word became flesh and dwelt among us.' In old age, looking back, the tone of amazement remains as John writes
(1John 1:1) 'That which was from the beginning, we have heard, seen with our own eyes, looked at and our hands have touched.'

Jesus' death too is historical, surrounded by the paraphernalia of Roman and Jewish legal procedures, Pontius Pilate's red tape and the politics of first century Israel. The situation is recognisably our world, our common history. It is here, in our world, that the biblical writers say God is active. He is there in the manger, he is there on the cross. And he is there too in the garden, risen from the dead. The NT is unequivocal that Jesus Christ is a historical figure, and that the events of his life took place in our world and our history.

The centrality of history is summed up by Paul when he speaks to the Corinthians of the gospel message he received (1Cor 15:3-6):

> What I received I passed on to you as of first importance; that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter and then to the twelve. After that he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living.

Paul is using a historical argument here. If you could prove that any of the three statements here were not true (that Jesus did not die, or was not buried, or was not seen again alive) then Paul's argument would fall.

What a fragile basis this is for a faith that changed the world! Yet Paul pins his faith on these three statements above anything else. This is a measure of how much history matters to Christian faith.[8]

Jesus is at the heart of biblical affirmations about God in history, but the role and importance of history is by no means confined to him. Almost a third of the OT is devoted to specifically historical books, telling the story of Israel from Joshua to Esther. History is, too, a major feature of the early books, Genesis, Exodus and Numbers, while many of the prophets tie their words to specific situations, which become history.[9]

Herbert Butterfield saw the people of Israel as those who invented the concept of history: In Israel, he wrote;

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[8] cf. Long *Art of Biblical History* Chapter 3 'History and Truth' for a broader discussion of this issue.
[9] cf. Long *Art of Biblical History* especially chapter 1, and the conclusion that 'the Bible, though not a history book *per se*, is a book deeply concerned with history.' (p.225).

> There emerges a people not only supremely conscious of the past but possibly more obsessed with history than any other nation that has ever existed. The very key to its whole development seems to have been the power of its historical memory... Everything hung on men's attachment to a single event that could never be forgotten.[10]

The single event was the exodus from Egypt, when Yahweh acted to bring his people out of slavery. Other ancient cultures spoke of their gods intervening in history, but failed to find meaning or direction in these events because polytheism led them to see rival plans and purposes as the deities struggled for control in the heavenly realms. The fiercely monotheistic faith of the Jews, defined and deepened through the desert wanderings and in the revelation at Sinai gave them a unique understanding of a single direction to history, a unity of purpose: it was the character of Yahweh himself which allowed them to break through to a concept of history and historical process which had eluded even the highly developed neighbouring Egyptians. Other ancient history is often written as an apology for a particular king. The emphasis on Yahweh as lord of history also emancipated the historians of ancient Israel from uncritical admiration of their political masters and gave a sense of objectivity to their work. The Israelites were unafraid to record David, for example, warts and all, because of their prior commitment to God. In the ancient world devotion to a monotheistic faith encouraged a critical objectivity.

So - to the Biblical writers history matters because God has acted in it. Let us now consider briefly two further points under this heading.

ii) Because history matters, accuracy is important

The historical books of the OT were originally classified as prophecy, that is an interpretation of events which is basically theological rather than chronicles or annals which were all that had existed before. They are nevertheless deeply concerned that the events described did happen. Meir Sternberg, a contemporary Jewish biblical scholar, reminds us that 'Were the narratives written or read as fiction, then God would turn from the lord of history into a creature of the imagination.'[11]

The OT historians refer to the chronicles which were their sources (e.g. 1Kings 14:19, 29 etc). They place a high value on accuracy. Yet there has been a consistent emphasis in OT study in the last century and a half to discount the truth of these narratives, based on the discrepancies between archaeological finds and the text. This is a problem for Christians, and has been a major stumbling block which has caused many theologians to abandon historical study for purely literary approaches to the OT. Yet there is a counter movement inspired not by Christian commitment but scholarly accuracy which is beginning to suggest that the problems of OT history may stem from miscalculated chronologies of the ancient world, and bear out the OT's substantial accuracy.[12] Because history matters, it should be truthful and accurate within the technical limits of the time.

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[10] H.Butterfield *The Origins of History* (London 1981) pp.80-1.

[11] M.Sternberg *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington 1985) p.32

[12] John Bimson prefigured this revisionist approach with his PhD published as *Redating the Exodus*

iii) Because history mattered, Israel gained its sense of identity
In the ancient world which surrounded Israel harvest was a time for celebrating creation and the powerful nature deities which had again produced what was needed to survive the winter. In Deuteronomy 26:5-10, however, we see that in Israel, exceptionally, harvest was a time for affirming history rather than nature. The nation's identity came from its historical roots and its relationship with Yahweh. We do not know who we are unless we know where we come from. National histories have
shared this aspect of the biblical view. A shared and agreed view of 'public' history is important in any group of humans.[13] We might note that one of the difficulties which we in this country are experiencing is because our national story has grave difficulty comprehending a place within it for Europe as anything other than an enemy. This version of history speaks of Britain (or perhaps better, England) as an independent entity, and fails to echo Deuteronomy in seeing its roots in a relationship with God. As such it neglects the wider question of God's purpose and becomes introverted. There is a need perhaps for reflection on what God's call is (and was) to this nation.[14]

Into the continuing story of Israel was woven a belief in Yahweh as the ruler and guide of history. This was a reasonable belief to hold through the great days of empire, of David and Solomon, but in the latter days of the monarchy, as one king followed another and the neighbouring power blocs of Assyria and Babylon threatened, it became increasingly difficult. Finally, with the destruction of Jerusalem in 587BC and the exile of the people to Babylon it seemed impossible to hold. It was in this situation that that a great flourishing of prophecy occurred. As the psalmist wept 'How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?'(Ps 137:4) the prophet Ezekiel was already seeing that God would rescue his people in a new exodus, as also did the prophet of the second part of Isaiah (40-66). It was among the exiles that the strong sense that history moves towards a future which is beyond the material sphere developed.

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and Conquest (Sheffield 1978), and he has continued to argue for it in a series of articles in the years following. Substantial recent treatments by neutral scholars are P.James et al. *Centuries of Darkness* (London 1991) and D.Rohl *A Test of Time* (London 1995). cf. also Long *Art of Biblical History* pp.142-9.

[13] cf. D.Carr 'Narrative in the Real world' *History and Theory* 25 (1986) p128.

[14] This issue is taken up in W.Pannenberg *Human Nature, Election and History* (Philadelphia 1977) Part II.

3. History moves

In ancient Israel history mattered, but it also seemed to grind to a halt, evidenced by the petering out of the story of Israel recorded in the OT with Nehemiah and Esther. The overall aim of history often seems to be the establishment of the nation in its promised land. And though the later prophets see that God has a purpose for the whole of the world, this is still seen in fairly narrow national terms, as the nations of the world come to Jerusalem to worship. Nor is there any clear sense of how this might happen.

The significant element which the NT reintroduced was the notion of movement. Israel by the early first century had settled on a sacred history which seemed to be at an end, and Judaism had become a static religion, waiting for the end of time with no real expectation of God' s strong involvement in the present. For the Jews of Jesus' day, says the OT theologian John Barton 'Contemporary events never belong to the sacred history.'[15]

The early Christians added the events of Jesus' death and resurrection to the series of sacred events, and in so doing, in Barton's words again, they 'were taking a radical step and breaking the mould they were using. Very recent events, which fell entirely outside the sacred period to which the holy scriptures belonged, were set alongside, indeed said to be greater than, the traditional sacred history.'[16]

The events of Jesus were not so much interpreted in terms of what had gone before; it was rather that the past was interpreted newly in terms of the present. The exodus was no longer a foundational event to look back to; it became a foreshadowing of Jesus and as such a station on the journey insted of a destination in itself.

The life of Jesus gave a thoroughly new twist to the direction of history, best reflected in the book of Revelation. There John repeatedly alludes to the OT, connecting his writing to the interpretation of history found in the prophets. He uses the Exodus story to point to an eternal pattern in history, ordered by God. And he points his readers to the end of the world, thus using eschatological language to assert that 'history has an end and therefore a meaning.'[17]

This view gave to history a universal significance. History is generally held to have developed from Greek models; Herodotus and Thucydides are considered to be the 'fathers of historical method'. But while these writers were the first to develop a systematic method of 'inquiry' (*historia*) they had no story of universal significance to tell. Herodotus began his *Histories* thus:

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[15] J.Barton 'Preparation in History for Christ' in R.Morgan (ed.) *The Religion of the Incarnation* (Bristol 1989) p.67.
[16] ibid.
[17] G.Caird *The Revelation of St John the Divine* (London 1966) p.292.

> In this book, the result of my enquiries into history, I hope to do two things: to preserve the memory of the past by putting on record the astonishing achievements both of our own and of the Asiatic [non-Greek speaking] peoples; secondly, and more particularly, to show how the two races came into conflict.[18]

In other words, Herodotus's concern was to record achievements, and to remain with the past, rather than to place his story within a broader and overarching narrative setting. which would lead to the future.

Later historians in the classical tradition, such as Livy, Sallust and Tacitus, each tell a particular story which is self-contained. They are narrating what is essentially an episode in history, but they do not have an overall framework in which to place their work. Their work refers back to abstract moral qualities, but does not engage with a sense of dynamic movement in history as the biblical writers do. Indeed, they are rather more inclined to bewail the decline from the heroic virtues of their ancestors (Livy in his preface declared that one of his aims was to 'turn my eyes from the troubles which for so long have tormented the modern world.'[19]).

We may note that postmodern approaches to history share this sense. 'Past Times', to return to that example for a moment, provides a comforting nostalgic sense of the past as a familiar place to which one can retreat, to avoid facing the uncertainities of the future. The effect of the classical approach was to see history as little more than a branch of literature, where style and a well told tale were more important than accuracy. Sallust is a good example of this effect; a historical handbook of the second century AD noted that 'People say that Sallust ought to be read not as a historian but as an orator.'[20] The emphasis on literature is also a hallmark of postmodern approaches to history; but the biblical view of history saw it not as literature with the aim of diversion or entertainment, but as prophecy or theology which had the ability to instruct.[21]

As the Roman empire faded, so there was less and less need to write its history. The reason why history survived the collapse of Rome was that Christians were able to set the fall of the empire in a greater context; from Eusebius who as an apologist for Constantine had shown how he believed the Emperor to have fulfilled not simply a political end, but a divine one, the line of Christian historians provided a universal perspective from which to view history.

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[18] Herodotus *The Histories* tr. A.de Selincourt (Harmondsworth 1954) p.13.
[19] Livy *The Early History of Rome* 1.1 tr. A.de Selincourt (Harmondsworth 1960) p.17.
[20] M.Grant *Roman Literature* (Harmondsworth 1958) p.94
[21] cf. Long *Art of Biblical History* pp.152-3.

However, the decisive turn at the Renaissance and Enlightenment was increasingly to see humans as the creators of, a turn which gave philosophical grounds for human understanding of the past without reference to Christian theology. This meant that the biblical affirmation that God makes history move lost its power. This fundamental shift was signalled by Giambattista Vico, who argued that historical knowledge could be reliable because the historian, as a human being, could reconstruct events by analogy with his own human experience, 'since historical events are produced by men.'[22]

Today it is hard to uphold a sense of movement in human terms, as the Enlightenment faith in humanity fades in the face of twentieth-century horrors. This opens the door to the kind of de-centred and motionless postmodern historical narratives of which Beckett talked in 1937, and raises the question of whether history as a discipline can really survive without a sense of movement. In biblical terms it clear that it is God who moves history; nevertheless the human experience of history is that it is frequently muddled, and only rarely can we see the direction in which it is moving. This is particularly so in contemporary experience, in the aftermath of the idea of progress.

[22] G.Vico *The New Science* (tr. Bergin & Fisch) (London 1968) p.96. For an understanding of Vico's pivotal significance in the development of history as a modern discipline, cf. W.Pannenberg 'Redemptive Event and History' in *Basic Questions in Theology* I (London 1970) p.40ff.

4. History is muddled

Postmodern approaches to history emphasise the broken nature of knowledge; Simon Schama's celebrated *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations*) (1991) deliberately deals with 'broken bodies, uncertain ends, indeterminate consequences.'[23] In his slightly earlier work on the French Revolution, *Citizens* he spoke of the need to tell the story in all its 'chaotic authenticity.'[24]

This broken perspective is shared by the biblical writers who, while they recognise that history matters, and that it moves, nevertheless are clear that it is often muddled and confusing, as humans experience it. Two brief examples of this can be seen in the OT books of 1&2 Samuel and 1&2 Kings (originally one book written on four scrolls), and in the NT gospel of Luke and its sequel, the Acts of the Apostles. We will briefly consider these writings in turn.

i) Samuel-Kings
In 1&2 Samuel and 1&2 Kings we find an account of the rise, decline and fall of the monarchy of Israel. The first point to notice is not so much the actual account as the questions which the writer feels compelled to ask in the first place. He is concerned to show the sovereignty of Yahweh in real events going back over five centuries. The whole work was probably put together in its final form among the exiles in Babylon around 550BC, from material preserved in the captured archives of Israel and Judah. It seeks to answer those who asked what had happened to the promises of God in a world which he was supposed to control. The writer makes his answer clear: national disgrace has resulted from national sin. The story is told from this theological perspective, and the writer selects the important points in his story, while referring his audience to other sources if they wish to know more (e.g. 1Kings 14:19, 29 etc, referred to above).

This narrative is no crude story of mighty miracles. It is a sophisticated narrative in which God's activity is usually implicit in the organisation and presentation of the narrative. A remarkable example of this is the 'Succession Narrative' (2Sam. 9-20 and 1 Kings 1-2:46), a source probably written soon after the last of the events it describes, perhaps about 950 BC. This narrative tells the story of David's kingship and the
struggle amongst his sons for the succession. It contains only three explicit theological judgements (2Sam. 11:27, 12:24, 17:14), and no miraculous events. God is at work, though his action is veiled. The three points at which he appears actively in the story help to show the unfolding events in the light of his underlying purpose. The commentator John Gray notes that the writer

> emphasized the working of God not through direct intervention, miracle, special agents, human or supernatural, nor through sacred institutions, but through ordinary personalities and their individual idiosyncrasies in the secular sphere, where every man has his part to play.[25]

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[23] S.Schama *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)* (London 1991) p.321
[24] S.Schama *Citizens* (London 1989) p.xvi
[25] J.Gray *I&II Kings* (London 1964) p.26

This is stunningly sophisticated work for 950BC, half a millennium before Herodotus, the ‘father of historical method’[26] began to write.

(ii) Luke-Acts

In the preface to his gospel, Luke writes that though ‘Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have taken place among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word,’ he has himself ‘carefully investigated everything from the beginning’ and written ‘an orderly account.’ (Luke 1:1-4) Luke here implies a consensus on the historical events he is about to relate, as well as underlining how he has himself checked the accounts he has received, and incidentally suggesting that from the beginning of the Christian tradition there were some whose job was to keep the communal memory as ‘servants of the word’.[27]

The gospel itself is fairly straightforward; it is Acts which engages with the question of the muddle of history, once Jesus has left the earth. Luke sets out his conviction that Jesus has not vanished in the preface to Acts: there (Acts 1:1) he tells Theophilus that the gospel only told the story of what Jesus began to do and teach, implying that this sequel will tell of what he continued, by his Spirit, to do. Acts is to tell the story of how the disciples fulfil the promise that they will be 'witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth [i.e.Rome]’.(Acts 1:8)

In the early chapters of Acts it is clear that God is active in miracles and deliverances, in the remarkable unity of the early Jerusalem church, and in the flood of those becoming Christians. The first dam-burst of the Spirit's activity is almost overwhelming in its intensity, an intensity repeated at crucial stages in Samaria (chapter 8) and amongst the gentiles (chapter 10). Yet later on there is a change of pace, and after Paul's arrival in Jerusalem and his arrest (chapter 21) new questions arise. In chapter 12 Peter is delivered from prison by an angel; no such deliverance awaits Paul. The last seven chapters of Acts are dominated by an incredibly detailed narrative which tells of
Jewish plots and Roman procurators, trials and imprisonment, and finally of the long journey to Rome, the shipwreck en route and the dangers of snake-bites on Malta. It seems curious after all that has gone before that the story should end in so prosaic a way.

Yet the subtext is that in this apparent muddle of events, God is still there. Henry Chadwick notes of Acts 27 that

> The story occupies a quite disproportionate amount of space, and one asks why St Luke thought it so important...The answer is surely that the story is there to underline the extreme improbability that the apostle would ever reach Rome...For the author of Acts the preaching of the apostle of the Gentiles in the capital of the Gentile world is a supernatural fact.’[28]

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[26] R.G.Collingwood *The Idea of History* (Oxford 1946) p.28.
[27] cf. N.T.Wright *Jesus and the Victory of God* p.135.
[28] H.Chadwick *The Circle and the Ellipse* (London 1959) p.16. cf. J.Stott *The Message of Acts* (Leicester 1990) pp.401-405.

The forces of evil, which try to thwart the purposes of God, are seen in these chapters at the end of Acts in the plots of men, and in the unruly forces of nature, the wind, sea, storm and poisonous snake. Yet through all this Luke draws the slim thread of the purpose of God in all the confusion and chaos of the storm. Here, as emerged in the review of the Succession narrative, God is hidden, yet undeniably present.

The confused nature of history which postmodernists draw to our attention is clearly reflected in the biblical material. But unlike postmodernists the biblical writers do not assume that because we as humans cannot make sense of history, then there is no sense to be made of it. For they also claim that history is mastered - but not by us; only by God.

5. History is mastered by God

For the biblical writers, then, history matters and moves, but also often seems to be broken and muddled. The solution to this lies in the final of our four biblical affirmations about history; that history is mastered by God.

The tension between the muddled experience of history and the more obvious theme of God's rule and his kingship gave rise to apocalyptic writing, especially in the aftermath of the exile to Babylon. Throughout the Old Testament, particularly in the Psalms, God had been recognised as king, the one who reigns. Whatever Israel's liturgy said, however, God's present kingship became an increasingly problematic concept. As Dick France has written, 'Theology may declare that God is king, but experience begs to differ.'[29]

Thus there arose a future (eschatological) hope for the end of the world, when God would vindicate his sovereignty. This eschatological hope gave an apocalyptic vision of the world where the kingdom of God has fully come, where every tear shall be wiped away, and the dwelling of God will be with his people. It is found both in the Old Testament, particularly in Isaiah and Daniel, and in the New, particularly in Revelation. This hope for the future vindication of God, the revealing of the hidden king, was split in two in the early Christian understanding by the coming of Jesus. His message was, 'The time has come, the kingdom of God is near (or, at hand)'. (Mark 1:15) The early Christians saw the hope being realised in the present. For them the resurrection of Jesus was the sign that the new age of the kingdom had come, with the overcoming of death itself. In the cross the confusion of history, the chaos of evil, reached its height. Yet it was defeated by the hidden purpose of God, working even in the agony of 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mark 15:34)

The Resurrection, Pentecost and the life of the church were, however, only the first instalment of the kingdom of God (cf. Ephesians 1:14). Some people have helpfully explained that the situation which the NT writers envisage is rather like what happened at the end of the Second World War. After D-Day in 1944 victory was assured; the decisive breakthrough had occurred. But some of the hardest fighting still remained before the significance of that breakthrough could be shown fully, almost a

[29] R.T.France *Divine Government* (London 1990) p.17.

year later, in the final surrender of Hitler's armies. So, in the cross and Resurrection, the decisive battle for control of the world had been won by Jesus, the victory of the kingdom was not in doubt, but the timing of it was. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 15, talks about how the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised, and 'then shall come to pass the saying that is written, "Death is swallowed up in victory"'. (1 Corinthians 15:54) The kingdom was both already present, in Jesus and the Holy Spirit, yet also not yet complete. God was sovereign *de jure*, but not yet king *de facto*. However, one day, the hidden God would be revealed. In this way the tension between the affirmation of God's sovereignty in the past and the question over its presence in the present was resolved by the hope of its appearance in the future.

6. Conclusions

I suggested, at the beginning of this paper, that the four headings which we have followed might be a means of judging philosophies of history from a Christian perspective. Let us briefly recapitulate the four headings:

- History matters - because God has acted in it; therefore accuracy is important, and history can give identity.
- History moves - it is not a chance or random pattern of events, it has meaning and purpose, cause and effect.
- History is muddled - it is often confused, and we should beware of those who too easily read its meaning, remembering that all human knowledge is broken and provisional.
- History is mastered - the resurrection of Jesus shows that God has power to overcome evil and chaos.

How might we consider various philosophies of history in the light of these four biblical affirmations? Marxist history, for example, would score well in terms of agreeing that history matters and that it moves, but would suffer from being less able to comprehend the muddle of history. Its emphasis on movement is, of course, also suspect, and now that Marxist states have been shown to be hollow in their achievement, the rich potential of Christian eschatology with its now-not yet tension seems perhaps more compelling.

Postmodern approaches to history would score highly in terms of the emphasis on the broken nature of knowledge, but poorly on anything else. For all the cheerful exterior of its champions, like Keith Jenkins, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that 'In the final analysis...there can be no post-modern history,'[30] because of its rejection of significance and movement.

Other, less defined schools of historical thought can also be assessed with the help of the four affirmations. In each case we might wish to ask these questions;

- Why does history matter to the person who is writing it? As noted above in the brief discussion of English identity, history can be used simply to bolster a particular political expression of anti-Europeanism.

[30] J.Appleby et al. *Telling the Truth about History* (New York 1994) p.237

- Is there is a sense of movement in this approach to history? Has it an aim in view?
- Does this view take enough account of the reality of evil and acknowledge that our understanding of history is flawed?
- Is the aim of the process of history described merely in terms of a present good, perhaps justifying the political status quo?

These are the questions which the Christian can legitimately ask of any school of historical thought.

The value of such a comparative exercise is that it begins the apologetic task which faces the Christian historian operating in a secular discipline. As such, it interrogates secular approaches to history with the questions of the gospel, and makes a dialogue about the future of the discipline possible.

The four affirmations, I would suggest, give us a Christian perspective on history, with practical values for the historian. As such they amount to a biblical view of history, and historians.

(5370 words)

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Bibliographical Note

The following books are useful introductions to the philosophy or theology of history. For a comprehensive list of older works, see R.Bauckham & D.Bebbington *History and Christianity* (Leicester 1977).

1. Historiography in general

F.R.Ankersmit 'History and Post-Modernism' *History & Theory* 28 (1989) A radical statement of a postmodernist view.

J.Appleby et al. *Telling the Truth about History* (New York 1994) A useful critique of the postmodern approach from a liberal perspective which ultimately fails to convince.

D.Bebbington *Patterns in History* (Leicester 2/1992) The most signifcant recent contribution to philosophy of history by a Christian historian. It is a broad survey of historiography and has a revision of some sections of Bauckham & Bebbington in its bibliography.

E.Breisach *Historiography - Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (Chicago 1983) A Standard survey of the field by a member of the SGCH's American sister, the Conference on Faith and History.

H.Butterfield *Christianity and History* (London 2/1957) Based on post-war lectures, still full of insights.

H.Butterfield *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London 1931) Butterfield's classic, arguably born out of his concern as a Christian for truth and objectivity.

H.Butterfield *History and Man's Attitude to the Past: Their Role in the Story of Civilisation* (London 1961) A brief preliminary statement of the argument of the following.

H.Butterfield *The Origins of History* (London 1981) Butterfield's final (posthumous) work, which emphasises the theological roots of modern historical thought.

D.Cannadine 'British History; Past, Present - and Future?' *Past & Present* 116 (1987) A significant statement asking questions of the future of history as a discipline - but not providing answers.

D.Carr 'Narrative and the Real World' *History & Theory* 25 (1986) Discusses questions of history and identity.

E.H.Carr *What is History?* (Harmondsworth 1964) Famous and forthright discussion.

G.R.Elton *The Practice of History* (London 1969) Elton's response to E.H.Carr.

G.R.Elton ‘The Historian’s Social Function’ *TRHS* 27 (1977) Shorter and more relaxed statement of some issues in the above.

G.Graham *The Shape of the Past: a philosophical approach to history* (Oxford 1997) A philosophical approach to the question of whether the past has a ‘shape’ to it, which concludes that a providential understanding is the most plausible.

D.Hempton ‘Methodism in Irish Society 1770-1830’ *TRHS* 36 (1986) Rigorous scholarship, but which also allows a role for prayer as a factor in the causal chain.

K.Jenkins *Re-Thinking History* (London 1991) Unusually readable postmodern apologia.

D.Lyon *Postmodernity* (Buckingham 1994) Good brief introduction which concludes with a Christian emphasis.

C.Parker *The English Historical Tradition* (Edinburgh 1990) Important recent work which emphasises the Christian underpinning of the English tradition.

R.Samuel ‘Grand Narratives’ *History Workshop Journal* 29 (1990) A socialist seeking a new framework.

S.Schama *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)* (London 1991) A significant work which questions literal concepts of truth (and beautifully written, too!)

B.Southgate *History: What and Why?* (London 1996) Good basic introduction to the present scene.

2. Biblical History

J.Barton ‘Preparation in History for Christ’ in R.Morgan (ed.) *The Religion of the Incarnation* (Bristol 1989) A significant defence of the orthodox Christian view of history, which puts the issues clearly and well.

R.Bauckham ‘The Book of Esther and the Jewish Holocaust’ in *The Bible in Politics* (London 1989) Outstanding close reading of the only biblical book which does not mention God and therefore asks where he is in the historical process.

R.A.Burridge *Four Gospels, One Jesus?* (London 1994) Good semi-popular introduction to the gospels, which argues that they are in the historical genre of ancient biography.

W.L.Craig ‘On Doubts about the Resurrection’ *Modern Theology* 6 (1989) Comprehensive philosophical defence of the historicity of the resurrection.

M.Hengel *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity* (London 1979) Discusses Acts as a historical source against its ancient background.

P.James et al. *Centuries of Darkness* (London 1991) Questions the accepted chronology of the ancient Mediterranean, with Chapter 8 on the history of Israel.

V.P.Long *The Art of Biblical History* (Leicester 1994) Outstanding examination of the issues involved in the Biblical use of history.

J.A.T.Robinson *Redating the New Testament* (London 1977) An argument by a radical scholar for the eyewitness qualities of much of the NT.

N.T.Wright *The New Testament and the People of God* (London 1992) Recent work but already acknowledged as a classic. Much of the first part is concerned with issues of the philosophy of history as applied to the investigation of the NT.

3. Christian Understandings of History

R.A.Markus ‘St Augustine’s views on the "Just War"‘ in *Studies in Church History* 20 (1983) Includes an excellent brief introduction to Augustine’s views on history.

A.Richardson *History, Sacred and Profane* (London 1964) Now dated, but still a good introduction.

A.Richardson ‘History, Problem of’ in A.Richardson (ed.) *A Dictionary of Christian Theology* (London 1969) Masterly (very brief!) discussion of the issues of history and theology.

P.Sheldrake *Spirituality and History* (London 1991) Important (and virtually unique) work on historical evaluation of spirituality