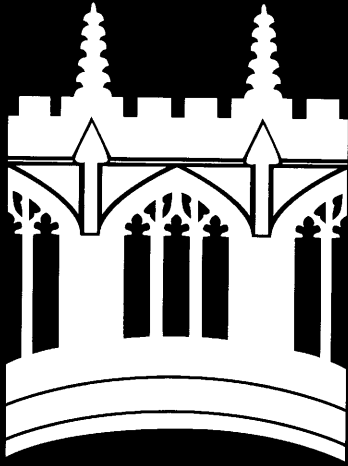


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PAPERS

towards a biblical mind

Reflections on Providence: Can We 'Read' Events?

by

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Summary

There is an assumption in society, and increasingly in the church, that the events of our lives cannot be placed in a larger context of meaning. This paper considers the obvious moral problems raised by Christian claims to meaning, and suggests some biblical guidelines which may help us to 'read' events.

'... meanings or patterns discernible in "history" ... are clearest for each of us in the periods he has studied least.'

C. S. Lewis, 'Historicism' in *Fern-seed and Elephants*, p.52.

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The Question Set

'AIDS is the judgment of God.' This is one of those statements which is best known by its denial. No sooner is it uttered today, than the speaker is surrounded by people denying it, albeit for various reasons. One of these is a reason which would deny that people are able to discern the hand of God in the events of history at all. This objection is found not only in the expected places - the statements of the philosophical sceptic or the religious cynic - but in the pulpits of even the most conservative Christian churches. What is the root of this hesitancy? What does the Bible have to say about it? Can we 'read' the purposes of God in the events around us?

These days such a question may sound strange. For the last three centuries, academic institutions have increasingly answered the question 'why?' only as if it were the question 'how?' As experiment and observation in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries discovered the regularity of nature, a decreasing number of occurrences seemed to be inexplicable. Therefore, recourse to explaining events by the absolute power of God came to be seen, as the late seventeenth century Anglican divine John Wilkins put it, as 'the Receptable of Lazy Ignorance: which any industrious Spirit would be asham'd of,' (*Mathematical and Philosophical Works*, [London, 1708] pp. 98-99. The God of the universe seemed to shrink to the 'God of the Gaps', and then, by the early nineteenth century, to no more than a largely privatized, subjective deity relevant only to the happenings of the inner soul, and not to the world around. As the natural sciences were reconstructed on an empirical basis, so too history began to move from rhetoric to science. 'Meaning' in history began to go the way of fabulous beasts and legendary heroes.

The History of 'Reading' History

Yet, though the hand of God in history does seem to have become faint to the point of having faded away altogether, there is no doubt that this idea of 'reading' history has been prevalent in the past. Traditionally, people assumed that the events of one's own life, and of the world around them, were to be read as one would read the words of a novel. Just as the letters on a page are not simply arbitrarily formed spots of ink, so, too, it has been assumed, the events of history are purposeful. To the discerning eye, there was significance beyond that which first appears.

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In the past, to assert the existence of a god was meaningless without an assertion of this god's action in the world. The pagan shipmates of Jonah clearly assumed that the storm that threatened their lives demonstrated the anger of an offended god against one of the people on their ship (Jonah 1:7). The pagans of ancient Rome ascribed her destruction in 410 A.D. to the anger of their gods at the rise of Christianity. Augustine's response was confidently and meticulously to trace the hand of the one true God in the rise and fall of Rome. Whatever differences earlier generations of Christians had with their pagan contemporaries, the willingness to discern a divine hand in the events around them was not one of them.

Much closer in time to the present day, John Foxe chronicled the hand of God in English religious history in a way which was formative on perhaps every generation between his and our own. Foxe's heirs watched with bated breath as the fate of Protestant Europe seemed for a time to hang upon the actions of Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden. Each victory of Adolphus' forces over the Emperor's was seen as the judgment of God on the Church of Rome. The puritan minister Thomas Beard, and his one-time student Oliver Cromwell, powerfully presented this reading of history as essential to the Reformed understanding of England. At the same time, Roman Catholic observers in Europe were no slower to see God's hand in every reversal in the fortunes of the Protestant forces. Thus, storms and invasions, plagues and wars were all regularly interpreted in the past as 'acts of God' conveying particular divine lessons for humans.

Nor should we think this simply the preserve of a few religious enthusiasts from the long-gone days of religious wars. In the most recent edition of *Hymns Ancient and Modern* the words of nineteenth-century hymn-writer W. E. Hickson are still present, asking God in the national anthem to 'scatter our enemies, and make them fall; confound their politics.' Do we think that when the 'politics' of our national adversaries are 'confounded', that this is the action of God?

This kind of interpretation of events seems to be encouraged by the Bible. Two Old Testament books are particularly important in this regard - Deuteronomy and Proverbs. Deuteronomy presents numerous blessings and curses which are to follow from the actions of God's covenant people. The prophets, expounding the Deuteronomic view of history, present an account of God's dealings with his people collectively in history, as they neglect his laws, suffer the consequences and experience his grace. Similarly, the book of Proverbs presents many of these same directions from God in aphoristic form, with particular consequences flowing from particular actions.

The Problem with 'Reading' History

The problem, of course, raised by a simple correlation of events with divine meaning - whether it be that someone's contracting AIDS is the judgment of God on them, or that the prosperity of the United States is a sign of divine approbation - is the problem which Job's friends faced. Informed by proverbial wisdom, they reasoned backwards from Job's trials to the sin which these trials evidenced. Yet, in the end, Job's friends were confounded, as God declared their readings wrong. Job was not suffering because of his sins, but ironically because of his righteousness. The story of Job, then, raises the problem of 'innocent suffering' as it is often called, and thereby sets a question mark against an automatic association of wealth and virtue, of poverty and sin.

This clear lack of a perfect correlation between events and desert disturbs us. In Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel *The*

Brothers Karamazov, Ivan questions his brother Alyosha, a novice monk, about the cruelty which Alyosha's God allows in his world. Ivan recounts a story which he had heard of the atrocities the Turks were committing in Bulgaria:

'They burn, kill, violate women and children, nail their prisoners' ears to fences and leave them like that till next morning when they hang them, and so on . . . These Turks . . . seemed to derive a voluptuous pleasure from torturing children, cutting a child out of its mother's womb with a dagger and tossing babies up in the air and catching them on a bayonet before the eyes of their mothers.'

Dostoyevsky continues with even greater horrors, scarcely imaginable though that may be.

Don't such actions make a mockery of attempts to discern the will of God in events? How can anyone maintain that there is a God of justice ordering a world where such things occur? In the modern age, this has led people to question whether there can be any meaning - any God - at all. In the ancient world, similar observations led people not to atheism, but rather to question the just character of God. This is the question which is put to God repeatedly in the Bible (see Ezekiel 9:9, Malachi 2:17, 2 Peter 3:4).

Can we say then with certainty, as so many Christians have seemed to in the past, that a particular event has happened as judgment for particular sins? Yet, if we can't say that 'X' is the judgment of God, can we say that 'Y' is the blessing of God? In the end, the believer is apparently left on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, there must be a meaning to history, to the events of our own lives and the world around us, if life is to have a point at all. In that sense history must be able to be 'read'. On the other hand, to attempt to ascribe meaning to events in our own lives, and in the world around us in any coherent way would seem to prove difficult, to the point of being impossible. What can deliver us from this dilemma?

Clues to the Mystery: Five Biblical Statements

Faith is essential to deliver us from this dilemma, because faith is essential to any biblical perception of meaning in events. As the writer to the Hebrews said, 'faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for' (Hebrews 11:1). He then goes on to give numerous examples of those who believed God's promises for the future, and so rightly assessed and acted in their present situations. We believe, then, in order to understand. Thus, we know that should we, for example, miss a train by frustratingly few moments, God 'In all things . . . works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose', (Romans 8:28). We might not know how God is using this to further his purposes, but have faith according to his self-revelation in Scripture that he is. The alternative is to have a faith-less and therefore fundamentally meaningless and necessarily self-centred existence. To affirm meaning in events, then, is certainly a statement of faith. But it is an affirmation to which our faith by its nature, calls us. The five statements of biblical truth outlined below may put us in a position to think about this problem more carefully.

(i) God is sovereign, acting purposively in history.

No amount of incomprehension of how God can use events should shake us from the clear statements of Scripture on this. God created all things, and by his power, all things are continuously sustained, (Nehemiah 9:6; Hebrews 1:3). More specifically, while Scripture is clear that

humans are responsible for their actions, it is also unambiguous in asserting that God is sovereign even over human actions, (e.g. Romans 9). 'In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps', (Proverbs 16:9). 'The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases', (Proverbs 21:1). However obscure God's intention in allowing certain things to occur may be, our present perceptions are not the final verdict. There are no chance encounters nor simple coincidences. Scripture speaks of God's having 'determined the times set for them [every nation of men] and the exact places where they should live', (Acts 17:26). Even the crucifixion of Jesus is described in prayer to God as 'what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen', (Acts 4:28).

(ii) Ultimately, God will vindicate himself; evil will be punished.

The problem Job's counsellors had in trying to 'read' Job's history was that they assumed that because the truth of proverbial wisdom was usually obvious, that it was always obvious immediately. The truth of proverbial wisdom's proscriptions and prescriptions are evident: tragedy does follow sin, blessing does follow wisdom. But, it may take some time for the blessings or misfortunes to be worked out. Indeed, the absolute truth of proverbial wisdom is not ultimately undermined by the story of Job, but is shown to be true only by God, and only at the end. Therefore, the simple fact that God's reasons for acting are inscrutable at present does not mean that God is unjust. He will make the meaning plain, though perhaps not as soon as we might desire. It is interesting to note that in the cases mentioned above (recorded in Ezekiel, Malachi and 2 Peter) when God was charged with moral indifference, his answer was never to explain why each apparently unjust thing happened, but rather to say simply, 'Wait, you'll see.' Good will triumph visibly ultimately.

(iii) In the meantime, any adversity must be viewed in the light of the end.

Biblically, there are no good people. Everyone's nature and actions put them ultimately under God's judgment. 'The day of the LORD is near for all nations. As you have done, it will be done to you; your deeds will return upon your own head,' (Obadiah: 15; cf. Amos 4:4-13). Therefore, difficulties which befall the believer in this life are to be seen as coming from a loving Father, who has his process for bringing us to our goal, (Romans 8:28; Hebrews 12:1-11). On the other hand, the adversities experienced in this life by those who do not repent are rightly seen as the beginnings of the outpouring of God's wrath on them which they will one day experience in its fullness.

(iv) In the meantime, any good must be understood as God's gracious blessing.

If we deserve God's wrath, then any good which we experience, however apparently ordinary, must be seen as a gift – undeserved – from God, not as an inherent right. Even the food which we have, Scripture teaches, comes by God's particular providential goodness toward us (Psalm 145:15). As Augustine said, the genuine Christian 'ascribes whatever there is that may be pleasing in himself entirely to the mercy of the God whom he fears to displease, offering thanks for faults amended, and pouring out prayers for the amendment of faults that still remain', (*The City of God*, V.20).

(v) Full judgment and blessing will come only finally.

The events of our lives are passing. They are significant, yet they are only faint indicators of what is to come. As Jesus clearly taught, those who do not respond to the word may live now, but they live under his wrath, and they will die (John 3:16-19, 36; Matthew 13:40-43, 47-50). The tares will be burned, and the good wheat will be gathered into the barn, (Matthew 13:30). The present state of sheep and goats may look similar, but there will come a separation (Matthew 25:31-46). The unredeemed are passing out of the realm of whatever relative prosperity they have known, and into a woe which is unimaginable. Those who have been redeemed by Christ are experiencing only purging trials in this life, and are increasingly gripped by the reality of the God in whose company they will dwell forever.

... nothing is less befitting than that we should estimate the wrath of God, according as any one is afflicted in the world, as nothing is more absurd than to take hold of the transient blessings which we enjoy, that we may from them form an estimate of God's favour.' (John Calvin, in his comments upon 1 Thessalonians 1:10).

The best and worst of times lie in the future.

Reading in the Meantime

Apart from this finally revealed 'reading', can we in the meantime further 'read' the meanings of events which are complex, apparently ambiguous, even horrifying? Certainly there are many examples of providences having been 'read' in the history of the church – from Augustine's conversion by hearing snatches of a child's conversation while playing a game, to the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, perhaps even to some interpretations which readers of this paper have given to events in their own lives. Yet we obviously have limited ability to 'read' such events as hearing phrases of others' conversations, the outcomes of military struggles, and even the occurrences of our own days or dreams of our own nights. Certainly there are disanalogies between this image of reading and the believer's perception of the hand of God in events.

First, the simple fact that events 'have meaning' need not be evident to all in order for these events to be authentically meaningful. The clearest example of this is found, of course, in the cross. In the death of Jesus God's judgment on sin and his gracious love meet in the most mysterious providential happening of human history. And yet, even that event – central to God's plan for the world – has no 'meaning' self-evident to those who witnessed it, or to those who have heard of it since – beyond the simple fact of the crucifixion itself. The meaning of this event is only understood as God himself explains it to us through the testimony of his Spirit *via* witnesses and the Word.

There is a second disanalogy between reading, and the believer's perception of the hand of God in events. Unlike a written message, such events, even if being taken as providing a message from God, need not be taken as speaking univocally to all. For example, one can imagine a well-timed lightning bolt, which is judged to be an 'act of God' in an even more precise fashion than an insurance policy might suggest. Through this lightning bolt, God could authentically speak messages which were appropriately different, yet not ultimately contradictory to a bishop being consecrated, a Christian minister wrestling with some sin, a sceptical journalist, a devout executive of a local construction firm, and a young Christian convert. These could be respectively tested, rebuked, shaken, encouraged and confirmed – all by the same lightning bolt.

Perhaps another example would be helpful. American television preacher Oral Roberts recently underwent surgery

to remove blockages from his arteries. In a statement released soon afterwards, Roberts was quick to ascribe his survival to God, and interpreted it as evidence that God wanted him to continue preaching his message of healing and prosperity. According to the biblical statements mentioned above, Roberts was right to ascribe his survival to God. His 'reading' of the event beyond that, however, is more open to question. Could it not also be that God had given him life to *repent* of his message of healing and prosperity, or to put in order some personal problems in his life, or even simply to continue to be a husband to his wife? Ultimately, the perfect reading of history implies perfection both in knowledge, and in moral judgment. In one way or another, we need God to read history.

And yet, the realization that we can't perfectly read all events, should not be taken as conclusive proof that we can't read any. Just as Christians in the past have been eager to see the providence of God in their daily lives, so should we. Whether or not we can 'read' events well according to our questions, we can use them as mnemonics, reminding us of God's actions in and agenda for our lives. We can take occasion to remind us to give thanks, and to repent.

One powerful tool which God has given the believer in this task is the conscience, (see Romans 2:15). The conscience often acts as our spiritual ear, or as our eye of faith. In it, we find a part of us which is made to be sensitive to God's pleasure more than our own. In regeneration God awakens the believer to this spiritual sensitivity. God begins to teach us the vocabulary of his concerns, re-orienting us from focusing on ourselves to focusing on him and on others. This has a profound effect on how we understand the happenings of life, whether they are racial tensions (e.g. Ephesians 2:14-18), religious persecutions (e.g. 1 Peter 1:3-2:25), or even death itself (e.g. 1 Thessalonians 4:13).

But most clearly of all, it is in Scripture that God, as it were, both reads history to us, and teaches us how to read. He reads history to us through the tremendous sweep of his actions in the nations, and in individuals, as the stories are recounted in the Bible, and interpreted according to God's intentions. Though we are not to seek to know God's secret will, that is, what he has declared will happen, God has revealed himself and his moral will to us in Scripture. In Scripture, we learn generally of God's standards, and of the meaning of normal events (e.g. Romans 6:23) and more specifically of the meaning of occasions in the lives of individuals (e.g. Acts 12:19-23; John 9:1-3).

Insofar as he has revealed himself, we should seek to

know him. As the Scriptures say, 'The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law,' (Deuteronomy 29:29). Through Scripture, therefore, God also teaches us how to read, though not, of course, as well as he can. Our lack of both the complete sweep of knowledge and perfect moral balance predispose us to perverted, self-centred readings of history. Nevertheless, as we read of his character and will, this revelation of himself is used by his Spirit to re-educate us, to transform our minds, (Psalm 19; Romans 12:1-2). Jesus rebuked the religious leaders of his day for understanding meteorology better than they could 'interepret the signs of the times', (Matthew 16:3). The crowds he rebuked for not knowing 'how to interpret this present time', (Luke 12:56). From what God had revealed of his plans, they should have recognized Christ's coming as the coming of the Messiah. So, too, discrete events in our own lives and communities should take on meaning to us as we learn through Scripture to follow God's finger in faith. God's understanding of our lives, as he reveals his plan for our histories, as he teaches us how to live, (Deuteronomy 30:15, Micah 6:8).

In all of this the significance of some events - like the vexed question of AIDS with which we began - are clearly left to the individual conscience to discern, according to their honest self-knowledge in the light of God's self-revelation in Scripture. That such individual reading can be difficult is obvious, but none the less necessary as God continues daily to weave together the events in human history - those more and less obviously meaningful to us - into the rich tapestry of his providential dealings with the world.

Nevertheless, our responsibility to 'read' history in more than individual lives - in the rise and fall of nations and peoples - would seem to be demanded by God's concern with 'the nations' evidenced from Genesis through the prophets to Revelation. With minds transformed by God's Spirit, re-educated by his word, living among his people, it would seem that Christians today should accept responsibility for declaring God's concerns to the world in which they find themselves, in the light of the actions which peoples and nations take. Objections to this whole undertaking are rampant in the culture at large and even within the church itself. Can we today go beyond the reading of events as they affect individuals to a Christian reading of history? How would one apply the principles of this paper to the larger and more complex events of history around us? That is to be the topic of a future paper.