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The Rise and Fall of Nations: How Far Can Christians Interpret History?

by Michael Schluter

*'History is not a chaotic, disorderly, fortuitous flux of events,
in which there is no pattern or rhythm.'* Arnold Toynbee

Summary

In an earlier Cambridge Paper (*Reflections on Providence: Can We 'Read' Events?* - Vol.2 No.2), Mark Dever raised the question of whether it is possible to move beyond seeking God's hand in our personal circumstances to 'reading history' in the rise and fall of nations. This paper addresses that question.

Christian empiricists, we shall argue, seek to understand historical events through processes of cause and effect, but find the key explanatory factors in biblical moral law. The rise and fall of nations, in political or economic terms, can be traced at least in part to the impact of relational factors in a society's culture, and specifically to the way organisations operate. This puts the onus onto Christians to contribute towards the reform of the society to which they belong.

Interpretations of History

Three main approaches among historians may be distinguished to make sense of the past: the historicist, the individualist and the empiricist. These three provide a helpful framework for considering what may be learnt from biblical teaching about the rise and fall of nations.

The historicist is one who believes history has some hidden purpose, and that some special insight holds the key to its interpretation. This may be derived from divine revelation, philosophical speculation or scientific observation. For Hegel and the German nationalists there was a mystical Spirit which drove events, while for Marx it was the inexorable laws of dialectical materialism which governed progress from one 'epoch' to the next. The danger is that once a person believes they understand the secret of history, they may believe they can manipulate it. Historicism has too often been the instrument of tyrants.

A second school of historical interpretation might be termed the individualist. Carlyle, for example, in his book *On Heroes*, focused on the role of the individual genius, arguing that his or her significance cannot be understood entirely in terms of the historical circumstances surrounding their emergence. They make a decisive difference to the direction taken by history. Obvious candidates are Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar and Josef Stalin. The world would have been different without them. The danger is that people become politically passive, believing that change must await some Messianic saviour. They cease to take responsibility for their own destiny.

A third approach to historical interpretation is the empiricist. No eternal or supernatural plan is at work in the world, it is argued, or if there is, it is inscrutable. And while individuals do have influence over historical events, so does technological advance, the distribution of natural resources, and the weather! However, the rational

coherence which the scientist discerns in data derived from the natural world, and depending as it does on complex chains of cause and effect, can also be observed in social affairs. This falls far short of the kind of all-embracing pattern believed in by the historicist. Gibbon in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* focused on the structure of social institutions as the key to understanding the rise and fall of Rome. Toynbee also was reluctant to speculate beyond the boundaries of factual data although he clearly believed history 'made sense'.

Biblical teaching gives some endorsement to each of these approaches. The prophets claim a hidden knowledge of where history is going. Amos speaks of God's overruling providence in the affairs of nations other than Israel (e.g. Amos 9:7ff). Isaiah similarly insists that there is a divine, hidden purpose controlling history. Such inside knowledge of history's meaning, of course, was given only to the prophets, so that it is available to us only at second hand. With hindsight we can see that the Christian historicist Bossuet, writing with the confidence of an Isaiah about events in European history, overestimated his ability to discern the hidden purposes of God.

There is biblical endorsement, also, for the emphasis on the role of the individual. Isaiah sees in Cyrus an individual that God would raise up to accomplish extraordinary historical feats. Cyrus is totally unexpected. So, too, Christians understand the person and work of Jesus. The incarnation is not the result of socio-economic forces, and Jesus changed the course of world history.

While acknowledging the role of these first two approaches to a Christian understanding of history, it is the third which is discussed here. This paper argues that God deals with societies in an orderly way which can be discerned without prophetic inspiration. The rise and fall of nations can generally be understood as a reflection of their conformity to God's moral law.

Israel's Law as a Social Vision

God is seen in the Old Testament as the creator not just of the human person in the singular but of human society as a collective entity. Human beings are made in God's image. In the moral and civil dimensions of the laws God gave to Israel, after taking into account both the specific historical and covenantal context, the will of God is expressed for the ordering of a society of fallen human beings. God's purposes for social, economic and political life have been revealed, albeit in one specific historical context.

Such a view does not require, or even suggest, literal transposition of individual laws. Christopher Wright has described Israel's law as a 'paradigm', which he defines as a model or example for other cases where a basic principle remains unchanged, although details differ.¹ To move from a thousand years BC to two thousand years AD there is clearly need for careful historical and contemporary social analysis, as well as creativity in identifying underlying principles or norms. However, Christians are encouraged to do so because Jesus regarded the Law as having permanent validity (Matthew 5:17-20). It is technical knowledge and its application, rather than divine or human nature, which have changed over the centuries.

This view of biblical law opens up some intriguing possibilities. If the underlying pattern of Israel's social institutions has general validity, then a normative framework exists within which to develop a social vision. Such a vision is urgently needed in Western democracies, many of which appear to be in an advanced state of social disintegration. For the so-called 'developing countries', the principles of the Law offer guidelines to help evaluate social policy and prioritise development objectives, urgently required at a time of rapid social and technological transformation.

However, many theologians would not accept the initial premise that Israel's law has contemporary validity. Israel had a unique covenant relationship with God which forms the context of the Law, for which there is no contemporary analogy. So the correct use of the Old Testament law in the New Testament period, they would argue, is to interpret the experience

and to order the life of the church which is the true people of God. New Testament support for this understanding cannot be denied. The church is described as 'a holy nation' (1 Peter 5:9), thus drawing a parallel between Old Testament Israel and New Testament church; Paul, too, describes the Galatian church as 'the Israel of God' (Galatians 6:16).

All this seems straightforward, so why the query? The New Testament never suggests a literal parallel between Israel and church; indeed in some New Testament teaching Israel and church are contrasted. To take one example, Old Testament Israel was a *political* unit, a state, or civil polity. The church was not to be a political entity. So the rules governing the political structure of Israel cannot be expected to apply to the church.

In other significant respects the nation of Israel is unlike the incipient church. God's legal provisions cover cases of murder, theft, adultery, rape, incest and bestiality. As Paul says, such laws are intended 'not for the just, but for the unjust' (1 Timothy 1:9), emphasising that these laws are not primarily for the church (although one case of incest is recorded in the early church in 1 Corinthians 5). Divorce, too, while permitted by Moses was not part of God's original design, as Jesus points out. It was included only due to 'the hardness of your hearts' (Matthew 19:1-11). The divorce provision was appropriate as a standard of conduct for Israel as a sinful nation, but not for the church as God's elect.

So perhaps the primary analogy lies between the true Israel in the Old Testament, defined as the *faithful remnant* within Israel, and the true church of the New Testament. Jesus emphasises that it is spiritual rather than physical descent from Abraham, which counts before God (John 8:34ff). Paul often makes the same point. The true Israel are not those with the outward sign of circumcision, but those spiritually circumcised (Romans 2:29); it is the 'faithful remnant' rather than the nation as a whole which prefigures the elect (Romans 11:3-6).

So there is no simple and literal parallel between the nation of Israel and the church. To apply the Law only to the life of the church is to ignore an important dimension of its relevance, just as a reduction of *Romeo and Juliet* to a tale of romantic love would miss out much relating to other themes. The rest of this paper will now consider how the church might apply those many passages, or aspects of passages, which do not find their primary fulfilment in the life of the church.

Defining the 'Rise and Fall' of Nations

A secular understanding of a nation's rise or fall would generally be measured in terms of material prosperity, specifically economic growth and political influence. The categories provided by biblical law are similar, but wider in scope. They are listed towards the end of the book of Deuteronomy, especially in Chapter 28. The rise and fall of nations correspond broadly to what the writer describes as blessings and curses.

Extracting the principle from the detail of the text, obedience to God's law in a society may be said to result in economic prosperity and political status. The blessings listed in Deuteronomy cover livestock and crops, town and country, weather patterns and health. They extend to international relations so that the obedient nation will be in a position to lend, and not require to borrow - what is called in modern parlance a 'balance of payments surplus'. In political terms, the obedient nation will have significance and status, described in terms of being the head and not the tail, the top and not the bottom, and being 'set high among the nations'.

Conversely, disobedience to God's law results in curses in national life, many being the mirror image of the blessings. A society which turns its back on God's law will experience confusion and rebuke. It will be scorned and ridiculed by other nations and will suffer military defeat. Citizens will find themselves overtaken by immigrant communities. There will be widespread frustration and an inability for citizens to enjoy what they have worked for. In particular, there will be acute suffering at the hands of invading armies.

¹ Christopher J.H. Wright, *Living as the People of God*, IVP, 1983, p.43.

These experiences are to act as a 'sign' to succeeding generations, sending a clear signal that the rise or fall of a society can be traced to its response to the God of Israel and to his law (Deuteronomy 28:46). Possibly, the severity of the consequences may be linked to the privileged covenantal relationship which Israel enjoyed with God. However, the thesis of this paper is that the results of obedience and disobedience outlined in Deuteronomy are not due entirely to intervention by God from outside the socio-economic order, but arise in part intrinsically, from within the system, as it ceases to function as God intended it should.

The Law's Requirements for Social Organisation and Personal Morality

To give a central role to biblical law in the ordering of society is not to follow the route of the theologians. The ceremonial dimension of each of the Laws was for Israel in its covenant relationship; these requirements have been fulfilled in Christ. Sacrifices, Sabbaths and food laws, for example, were part of a system to show Israelites how to approach God and make their lives distinctive from the nations round about. However, the principles underlying the civil and moral dimensions of the Law have application to all societies (Deuteronomy 4:8), with the caveat that the sanctions imposed for specific breaches of the Law may have been appropriate for the strong family ethos prevailing at the time, rather than representing what is just under all circumstances.

The theme which gives coherence to the Law, Jesus says, is not economic or financial but relational. All the Law and the Prophets 'hang' on the two commandments of loving God and loving neighbour (Matthew 22:34-40). Love is a quality of relationships. Jesus is emphasising that quality of relationships between God and the individual, and between people, is the key interpretive principle in understanding the Old Testament. It is the basis on which to evaluate public policy as well as personal lifestyle. This emphasis on relationships should hardly be surprising to the Christian: 'The fact that God is Trinity shows that personal relationship is basic reality, that is, that there is nothing more ultimate than personal relationship. Being, carefully considered in itself, is an abstraction. Ultimate, true and real being is and always has been, being-in-personal-relationship'.²

Here we can pursue just four areas of application of the insight that quality of relationships is the key to social organisation because it is the foundation of obedience to God's law:

(i) Land is not primarily an asset but a source of roots.

The contemporary Western view is that land, like any other resource, is worth what you can do with it. In contrast, biblical law recognises that families need roots in place for cohesion and survival. A close link between land and community is institutionalised through the Jubilee legislation (Leviticus 25). Land was not to be owned by individuals, but jointly owned by the family subject to certain inalienable community rights (Deuteronomy 23:24-25). Patterns of property ownership play a crucial role in shaping relationships within families and communities: a Cambridge historian has argued it is individual property rights which lie at the heart of English individualism.³ High rates of population mobility associated with the free market approach to economic development tend gradually to a breakdown in community relationships which runs counter to biblical norms.

(ii) Financial resources should be deployed in a relational context.

An earlier Cambridge Paper (*The Ban on Interest: Dead Letter or Radical Solution?* - Vol.2, No.1) has examined the problems associated with an interest-based financial system, where the flow of financial resources occurs in impersonal money markets and not primarily on the basis of personal relationship. The Old Testament ban on interest, which would have limited debt finance as we know it today, was not just a concern for the poor; all interest-bearing loans were prohibited except those to foreigners

(Deuteronomy 23:19-20). The ban is reinforced by the seventh-year debt remission, further discouraging lending outside the family and community context. The relational overview given by Jesus suggests that the primary purpose of the ban was to maintain financial interdependence as a form of bonding within families and neighbourhoods. For if you had surplus funds in Israelite society, and could not lend them at interest, the alternatives were either to invest them yourself or lend them to a friend to invest on a profit-sharing basis. A further consequence of the ban would be to ensure economic power did not accumulate in a few hands, for one side-effect of an interest-based financial system is to funnel funds to those who already have the greatest wealth, and who thus appear to offer the greatest security.

(iii) Political power, like economic power, should be widely spread.

The distribution of political power in a society impacts on the economic system through the size and culture of the Government's bureaucracy. Government allocation of income and expenditure, the degree of urban bias in economic policy and the level of commitment to family and community self-reliance. While centralising political power often has advantages in international relations and trade, the Law is strongly committed to decentralisation both in the Deuteronomic code (e.g. Deuteronomy 17:14-20) and in the prophetic tradition (e.g. 1 Samuel 8, 1 Kings 21). Diffused political power gives much greater opportunities for direct and indirect participation in decision-making, strengthening local solidarity and inculcating a sense of responsibility and civic duty among the citizenry. At the same time, it acts as a key constraint on the arbitrary use of power by a head of state, which surely has been one of the greatest curses of society down the ages.

(iv) Public behaviour is determined by private morality.

The Ten Commandments may be regarded as the summary of these norms; they are specified in greater detail elsewhere in the Law. They include a demand for personal honesty and integrity and detailed rules to govern sexual relations, patterns of respect and even personal attitudes within the family. These laws, both of social organisation and personal morality, are closely bound up with the relationship which the individual, and wider society, has with God himself. Love for God and neighbour is tied explicitly and constantly to rejection of idolatry; the vertical cannot be separated from the horizontal.

Contemporary Experience of Social Change

There is a growing body of evidence today for the central importance of right relationships - both in a personal and institutional context - to economic and political success and environmental stability. Douglass North has been awarded a Nobel prize for his work in this area.⁴ He argues that the economic cost structure in any society is determined partly by resource endowments of land, labour and capital, which determine 'transformation costs', and partly by information and contract enforcement costs which he labels 'transaction costs'. The latter, he estimates, now amount to almost half of total costs in the United States economy.

The main factor influencing the level of transaction costs is the way institutions operate. He defines 'institutions' as the rules - formal and informal - which govern the behaviour of organisations and individuals. As so many of these rules are determined by the culture and are not written down, they are difficult to change quickly and not easily susceptible to political manipulation. Thus, a long-term movement towards or away from biblical values in a society is likely to have a major impact on economic performance and the political structure of that society through its influence on the institutional framework. This suggests it was changes in public morality arising from the Reformation, not simply the work ethic of the Weber-Tawney thesis, which gave rise to the industrial revolution.

Examples of these patterns of performance abound, despite the five caveats listed below. Space permits only one or two examples, with all the

² D. Broughton Knox, *The Everlasting God*, Lancer Books, Australia, 1988, p 130.

³ Alan Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1978.

⁴ For example, Douglass C. North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*, Cambridge University Press, 1990.

dangers of abbreviated generalisations. The relative decline in economic performance and political influence of the United States and Britain can be traced to growing secularization of the culture and its impact on public and private morality. In North's terms, lack of trust, integrity and initiative is raising transaction costs and undermining international competitive advantage. The poor economic performance of Africa, despite full churches, may be linked to the failure to transfer biblical teaching into public life. Power is highly centralised and corruption is rife. There is generally not the trust between ethnic groups, or between individuals beyond the limits of family loyalty, to provide the platform necessary for the capital made available by the West to be employed efficiently. If this analysis is right, it is more urgent for the church to apply biblical teaching so as to transform public and private morality than for the development agencies to pump in further capital. (Capital, however, is still needed, especially for infrastructure development.)

Five Caveats

While a nation's response to biblical law results in either social benefit or decay, the causal relationship is often obscured by a number of factors:

- (i) In Old Testament Israel the prophets constantly threaten God's *future* judgement as a result of the people's *present* apostasy. Indeed, if there were no time lag between apostasy and judgement, so that the two were obviously and directly correlated, a significant element of human freewill would be lost. The same time lags occur today. Often it takes several generations for a capitalist economy to break down traditional family loyalties, as is evident in Japan today. However, the time-frame required for such changes may be gradually declining as technological change accelerates.
- (ii) Where a society has had little Christian influence, obedience or disobedience just to the second table of the Law, summed up in 'love your neighbour as yourself', may well be the key factor determining the degree of national prosperity.
- (iii) The apparently inexorable trend towards social disintegration is not inevitable. There was always the opportunity for national renewal in Old Testament Israel (e.g. 2 Chronicles 7:13ff; Isaiah 58), and there is today for contemporary societies. In Britain we have seen it happen in the eighteenth and nineteenth centu-

ries; it could happen again today.

- (iv) The operation of biblical law does not guarantee a clear interpretation of national or international events. There will always be a measure of inscrutability in human affairs, as the writer of Ecclesiastes reminds us. Nations acting in conformity with biblical law will be more robust than otherwise, but will not necessarily be immune from threats posed by international disasters or dictators.
- (v) Old Testament laws do not prescribe all aspects of culture. Nor does commitment to a biblical social vision determine the priorities and timescale for social reform. Agreement on *principles* for national prosperity does not imply or necessitate agreement on the *policies* needed for their implementation; principles translate into goals, while policy is a matter of means, not ends.

Conclusion

The social pattern given in biblical law provides the basis to interpret the broad sweep of historical development for particular societies. God judges nations within time, just as he judges individuals outside time. The process of discernment is complicated by the five factors listed above, but in many cases history is not impossible to interpret. On this understanding, there is more of contemporary relevance for the preacher to draw out of Old Testament teaching on society than is generally appreciated. Biblical law enables us to understand and critique our society far more effectively than the historical dialectic of Marx or the evolutionary models of social change now in vogue such as those of neo-classical economics and capitalist ideology.

The ability to evaluate a nation's social system by the norms of Scripture is what makes it possible to describe Christians today as being in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets (Matthew 5:11-12). Christians are not to be under the influence of dictators with a determinist view of history, nor passive passengers waiting for a national hero, or even a religious revival, before attempting social reform. Their task is to get on with tackling social and moral decay (Matthew 5:13-16). The factors to which Christians attribute the rise and fall of nations do not just influence how they understand the past, but become an important factor governing how they respond to the social problems of the present. That is why it matters how Christians interpret history.