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History and the Biblical Worldview

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Chapter 4: History and the Biblical Worldview

Richard Tison

The great American economic historian Charles A. Beard, in his presidential address to the American Historical Society, offered this grim outlook for his discipline:

History is chaos and every attempt to interpret it otherwise is an illusion. History moves around in a kind of cycle. History moves in a line, straight or spiral, and in some direction. The historian may seek to escape these issues by silence or ... he may face them boldly, aware of the intellectual and moral perils inherent in any decision — in his act of faith.¹

As we can see, history had no intelligible or moral meaning for Beard; it was simply irrational to him — and yet, he continued to write and publish as if history had value. For the Christian, of course, history does have purpose and meaning — but only within the intellectual framework of a biblical world and life view. Unfortunately, the academic rules of this discipline undermine the very possibility of doing meaningful history, for the secular approach to knowledge, by definition, disregards the Christian worldview and with it, any certainty of knowledge. This is the awful price of fallen man's independence from God: the loss of objective truth and meaning to his experiences.

But why is historical knowledge — let alone any knowledge — uncertain apart from God's Word? The answer is that we are not sufficient unto ourselves but were made to be dependent on our Maker. It is impossible for us to be self-sufficient in knowledge for only God — by definition — can be self-sufficient; this is why we are commanded to live by every word that proceeds from the Father's mouth (Deut. 8:3). Man as a creature is rationally limited and thus needs to be programmed with basic information about the nature of the universe in order to increase in knowledge and establish dominion over all things; only his Creator — God — who exists outside the created order can furnish this necessary intellectual framework by which man can then make sense of the world around him. It was the Creator who equipped humankind with a set of assumptions about how the world is organized; this is the creature's

¹ Charles A. Beard, *Written History as an Act of Faith*, *American Historical Review* 39, no. 2 (January 1934), 228–29.

starting point for acquiring knowledge. Without this basic worldview, we could not arrive at any knowledge whatsoever.

To demonstrate, let us assume — for the sake of argument — that mankind evolved from unintelligible matter into a state of intelligible consciousness. “Evolutionary Adam” would have no basic framework for acquiring knowledge because no God designed one for him. As such, the world around him would have been rationally inaccessible to his understanding because he would have no built-in presuppositions to guide and structure any of his encounters. Thus, evolutionary Adam could not know from personal experience alone whether he truly exists as a separate, thinking “thing” apart from everything else, or whether those objects in the Garden are distinct from, or are mere extensions of, himself. And, assuming that these objects of nature do exist separately apart from Adam, do they — and Adam — have continuous existence over time? — are these objects the same that he experienced five minutes ago or even five days ago? If the first human was mentally a blank slate as posited by evolutionists — Adam would have no intuitive understanding of causality, natural order, and regularity. And without these presuppositions, he could not organize or classify the data of his observations because he would not be able to identify any intelligent, uniform pattern to his experiences. These fundamental assumptions would already have had to have been present in Adam’s mind before he could arrange the facts of creation and establish a foundation of knowledge for further development. These axioms of knowledge, then, were not first discovered by his investigation because no investigation would have made sense without them.

Now, in contrast to evolutionary Adam, let us consider “biblical Adam” whom God commanded to subdue and cultivate the earth. This ordinance would have been impossible to fulfill unless God first supplied Adam with those necessary intellectual tools enabling him to analyze and understand his environment. For starters, in order for God to communicate to Adam, the latter would already need to know language and speech patterns prior to receiving this special revelation. Indeed, the Bible clearly indicates that Adam was fully functional as a rational being from the moment of his creation in adult form. Thus, he did not have to discover from experience that one must eat, drink, and breathe in order to survive — nor accidentally experience submersion to “learn” that humans cannot breathe under water! Rather, what we find from the first recorded act of dominion is a high degree of rational sophistication in Adam: his taxonomic naming (or

categorizing) the animals according to their unique and fixed attributes that he used to separate them according to their “kinds.” This intelligent act clearly presupposed Adam’s fundamental awareness of the rational and uniform order of creation. He intuitively understood he was a creature distinct from all the rest and that none of the others were suitable companions for him — save for Eve: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Gen. 2:23). Marriage and the social hierarchy that it entails were not acquired habits of human evolution; rather, God created man and woman to complement and serve each other. This truth was not accidentally discovered by the first human couple; it was innate to them.

So, as we can see from Scripture, mankind did not start off intellectually brutish nor did the Fall reduce them to primitive cavemen; quite the contrary, Adam’s progeny very quickly established urban civilization, being skillful in farming (Cain), animal husbandry (Abel and Seth), music and metal-forming (Lamech and Tubal-cain). None of these rational activities would have been attempted apart from the crucial assumption that nature exhibits reliably consistent patterns, for why else would Cain have undertaken farming unless he knew prior to this experience that planted seeds of a certain kind will always yield produce of the same kind in due season? How could Abel have surmised from experience alone that animals always beget their kind and that selective breeding will produce a more desirable flock? How would Tubal-cain have known that metal ores from the earth would be useful, and that they could be forged into bronze and iron instruments? None of these men were forced to endure a long process of trial and error in order to learn that nature is orderly and therefore amenable to planned cultivation of her resources. Rather, the intellectual foundation for all these talents could only have come from God who first made the universe in wisdom (Prov. 3:19–20) — and then equipped man with the cognitive ability and desire to understand this rational creation so as to labor and manage it intelligently according to the Creator’s original command.

Based on this biblical evidence, then, the Fall did not deprive man of his ability to reason, but it did pervert his right use of it. Man has replaced God’s authority by substituting his own, thereby making himself the ultimate judge of truth. The unbeliever will not subordinate his intellect to the authority of God’s revelation; this then forces man to be what he is not: autonomous and independent of God. Because of this, there is a logical impasse within the natural man’s worldview. On the one hand, he believes that physical nature is all there is — just matter moving

in void space; yet, how can unintelligent matter on its own acquire consciousness? On the other hand, the natural man assumes the existence of immaterial principles of reason and justice that permanently stand above all his variable experiences. But if evolution be true, then reason itself is a product of the physical world it purports to understand; mind and reason, too, are evolving (changing). Therefore, if nature is all there is, and it is ever developing into new forms, then there is nothing permanent or unchanging that transcends this universe; there can be no certainty, no truth, no lasting purpose to life in a world undergoing random evolution. In short, there is no fixed reference point for finite man to hold onto — not even onto man himself who “appears for a little time and then vanishes” (James 4:14).

Thus, what the unbeliever claims as true is contradicted by how he actually lives. For instance, notice that Beard continued to write history even though his rational system of thought could not make sense of it. That he still considered it worthwhile to order the facts of history even though his worldview deprived history of any intrinsic meaning demonstrates that the natural man cannot escape the knowledge of God. All men know God because they are confronted with the truth of God who is “clearly perceived” (Rom. 1:20) in the natural order. All mankind have “inalienable knowledge” of God and His creation. Because created in God’s image and bearing His “likeness” (Gen. 1:26), the natural man cannot help but use his mind to know things. As such, human knowledge is possible only because the natural man has his Creator’s knowledge of the natural order — a knowledge that goes unacknowledged by the sinner. Yet, in order to preserve his illusion of intellectual freedom, the natural man willfully suppresses this truth in his unrighteousness (Rom. 1:17-18), denying any knowledge of God or rational dependence on Him. Biblically speaking, the unbeliever is self-deceived due to a self-inflicted hardening of his heart (Eph. 4:18).

Thus, humankind — including historians — in their very core refuse to think God’s thoughts after Him even though they cannot avoid living and thinking within His rational system imprinted on us all. It is in Him that we live and move and have our very being (Acts 17:28). There can be no objective foundation for knowledge or a true basis for human learning apart from the eternal Rock of Ages — the Alpha and Omega — who first established the universe and our manner of knowing it. It is for this reason, then, that the unbeliever is genuinely a “fool” (Ps. 14:1) — a fool because he does not understand that his rational and moral arguments

denying the existence of God can only have intelligible meaning so long as God exists; thus, he must rationally rely on God in order to reason against God, thereby proving the existence of God even in his rebellion! In short, the unbeliever “lives and moves” within an intellectual framework — stolen from Christianity — yet employed against the very One who makes logic, reason, and morality possible.

In order to demonstrate the irrational consequence of the secular worldview, let us examine the logical outcome of human rational autonomy and its dire significance for doing history. If finite man defies God, insisting that the fragmented perspective of the creature is the historical measure of the totality of all things, then there can be no objective “facts” of history because the historian’s experiences are always in the present. The facts of history cannot speak for themselves but, instead, require an interpreter who will assign meaning to them. Ignoring God’s Word as the transcendent frame of reference, man is now “free” to assign his own meaning to history, based on his limited understanding of life. But there are no “neutral” historians. One either approaches the historical facts of God’s universe as a Christian or as a non-Christian; no other option is available. For the unbeliever, then, history is not objectively “discovered” so much as it is subjectively “constructed.” Uninformed by God’s Word, historical interpretation is hopelessly personal and slanted — a slave to the beliefs and values of the moment (historicism) as each generation of historians provide its own meaning to the events of the past — determining on its own authority and limited understanding what has “permanent value” in the flux of nature and human experience.

Seeking objective unity to his fleeting existence, the secular historian will turn to natural causation for an objective, scientific foundation to his discipline. But human experience of cause-and-effect relationships via the scientific method can never rationally prove the uniform regularity of the natural order; this is because the reliability of scientific method first requires that all natural events exhibit a uniform pattern at the very outset; causal sequences in nature and the scientific method that uncovers them can be true only if nature already operates uniformly over time. Thus, one cannot scientifically prove the uniformity of nature because one must first presuppose that uniformity in order for the scientific method to be a valid means of acquiring truth. Furthermore, it is logically impossible to prove the uniformity of all natural occurrences only by our limited experiences of cause and effect relationships because no one has ever experienced all past sequences nor can anyone experience future

ones either. All arguments, then, based on our experiences in the present proceed on the assumption that the future will always be like the past and the present. However, to assume that the future will be like the past and the present is to beg the fundamental question: “How can we rationally know from our finite experiences alone that all of nature and all of the occurrences therein have always been and will always be regular and uniform throughout time?” As it stands, we can only presuppose — but not rationally demonstrate — the uniformity of natural events. Because no human can observe the totality of natural occurrences, the unbeliever’s knowledge of the natural order — the uniform patterns and scientific laws — in the end has no rational basis underlying it because it is severed from a biblical framework of knowledge. Only a special revelation from the One who first created the natural order and then providentially ensures its regularity (Gen. 8:22; Jer. 5:24, 33:20, 25; Prov. 3:19–20, 8:29) can furnish that necessary foundation that gives rational meaning to all the historian’s intellectual encounters with — and within — the natural world.

As we can see, apart from Scripture, history is rationally uncertain and incomprehensible to the non-Christian. For in the unbeliever’s worldview, man can be nothing more than a higher order of matter in motion, which means even his thoughts, sentiments, and cherished beliefs are likewise physical/chemical side effects. Thus, his experiences have no inherent value or purpose nor are any of his actions truly free because they are rooted in the unalterable, random interactions of natural forces, which explains Beard’s predicament. The unbeliever is forced to choose between two mutually exclusive perspectives: natural determinism (material causation/no human freedom from natural forces) or cultural relativism (subjective experiences/situational ethics). Yet, in spite of his worldview, the unbeliever lives his life as if there really are universal norms: objective truth, right and wrong, inherent human worth, etc. His commitment to evolution notwithstanding, the unbeliever behaves as if life has value — as if he was specially created in the image of God and not the unintended byproduct of primordial pond scum; like the psalmist, he intuitively understands that he was fearfully and wonderfully made (Ps. 139:14). This is why he seeks peace and justice — not “survival of the fittest.” This is why he still does history: because he cannot avoid knowing God (Rom. 1:21) and the purpose for which God made him due to the image of God in him.

Thus, Beard was correct in acknowledging the role of faith in his interpretation of history — faith for him being a blind, irrational leap

in the dark, hoping that somehow, there is truth and certainty behind all his encounters in a universe that is indifferent to him. Faith, indeed, is paramount to the discipline of history — that is, a Christian faith grounded in and informed by the eternal, unchanging, and inerrant Sacred Historian who made the world and everything in it. It is He who established universal rules of reason and moral boundaries — who regulates all things yet ensures human freedom because both matter and consciousness have their origin in Him. Because His Word is Truth (John 17:17), the Bible is necessarily the Christian’s historical compass.

Part 2: A Theology of History

At Cedarville University, we reject the ultimacy of human experience, and submit only to the authority of biblical revelation. This is the imperative of Scripture — to hold every thought captive to Christ (2 Cor. 10:5) in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col. 2:3). God’s Word is foundational to the academic discipline of history, which is necessarily Christian in its rational assumptions. For example, historians assume at the outset the very possibility of factual, objective evidence, cause-and-effect relationships, and our ability to apprehend truth. Only the Bible can furnish these basic premises whereas the autonomous worldview of the unbeliever cannot — hence, the secular historian must subconsciously borrow them from Christianity, incorporating these foundational axioms into his internal belief system. And so, in order for history to be rationally intelligible and meaningful, the people of God must obediently begin with the person of God who established and continually upholds the created order. Without a personal Creator operating behind the scenes, and without His special revelation to explain His actions, the meaning of history from our finite vantage point would be an “impenetrable mystery.”²

The Historical Necessity of Divine Omniscience and Sovereignty

Two biblical doctrines foundational to understanding history are God’s omniscience (Job 24:23; Ps. 33:13–15, 139:13–16; Prov. 15:3; Jer. 16:17; Heb. 4:13) — that is, God knowing all things — and God’s sovereignty or absolute control of all things. The Lord knows everything because He establishes every event of history (Eph. 1:11) for His own glorifying purpose, which we are told is always good (Rom. 8:28). Having created all things and continually sustaining all things through His Son who

² C. Gregg Singer, “The Problem of Historical Interpretation,” in Gary North, ed., *Foundations of Christian Scholarship: Essays in the Van Til Perspective*. Ross House Books, 1976, 53–73.

“upholds the universe by the word of his power” (Heb. 1:3), the Father according to His good and perfect will determines what is possible and impossible in our historical experiences. He knows the future no less than the past because He has foreordained all events that have happened as well as those yet to transpire. This includes both good and bad experiences: “I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and calamity, I am the Lord, who does all these things” (Isa. 45:7). God’s sovereign rule over history, then, is absolute and perfectly righteous, even though His ultimate purpose may be hidden from us (Gen. 50:20). Because God is the author of every moment, history as a form of knowledge is objective without being impersonal — yet personal without being arbitrary or unpredictable.

Scripture explicitly references God’s providential control over the universe as a whole (Ps. 103:19; Dan. 4:35), over the earth (Job 37; Ps. 104:14, 135:6; Matt. 5:45), over the animal kingdom (Ps. 104:21, 28; Matt. 6:26, 10:29), over nations and political events (Job 12:23; Ps. 22:28, 66:7; Acts 17:26), over the creation of life and its duration (1 Sam. 16:1; Isa. 45:5; Gal. 1:15, 16), and over our prosperity and failures (Ex. 4:11; Ps. 75:6–7; Luke 1:52). Not only has the Lord predetermined our life span (Ps. 139:16) but He also intimately exercises His authority over the mundane aspects of it as well, for “Even the hairs of your head are all numbered [pre-established]” (Matt. 10:30). Therefore, what we call “natural law” is really the moment-by-moment upholding of all things by the Second Person of the Trinity, for “in him all things hold together” (Col. 1:17; John 1:3–4; Acts 17:28); Christ is the unifying power of the created order — not an unconscious and undirected natural force.

Since man’s chief end is to glorify God, in order to give our Heavenly Father all honor and glory due Him, Christians must reject the pagan notion that history “naturally” occurs apart from divine control; this is the ancient Greek concept of a world ruled by an impersonal fate that controlled all things and limited what even the gods could do. However, *time* does not exist apart from Him nor does it operate outside His jurisdiction. God knows the future because He foreordained it in the past, even “before the foundation of the world” was laid (Eph. 1:4; see also 2 Thess. 2:13; 2 Tim. 1:9; Rev. 13:8, 17:8). He did not “fast-forward” through time as if it were independent of Him, and then once informed of our future choices, works in the present to bring them about because He cannot override our “autonomous” decisions. This unbiblical view would diminish God’s sovereignty — and make history capricious — by limiting

what He does in relation to human actions; it would have the Creator responding to the creature's erratic will when the Bible portrays it the other way around: man responding to the Father's unchanging will.

God does not make things up in the course of history in order to compensate for our indiscretions; He does nothing ad hoc. For example, to mete out justice against King Ahab for having stolen Naboth's vineyard, false prophets of the Lord — unbeknownst to them — became the agents God's vengeance against the king of Israel:

Therefore hear the word of the Lord: I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him on his right hand and on his left; and the Lord said, "Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?" ... Then a spirit came forward and stood before the Lord, saying, "I will entice him." And the Lord said to him, "By what means?" And he said, "I will go out, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets." And he [God] said, "You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do so." Now therefore behold, the Lord has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; the Lord has declared disaster for you" (1 Kings 22:19-23).

Even by disguising himself as a soldier, Ahab could not avoid the Father's will, for "a certain man drew his bow at random and struck the king of Israel between the scale armor" thereby killing him (1 Kings 22:34) according to the original decree of the Lord (see 1 Kings 21:19).

God's eternal purposes are sure and never changing (Heb. 6:17) as evidenced by His message to the prophet Malachi: "I the Lord do not change" (Mal. 3:6). The Apostle James ascribes to the "Father of Lights" "no variation or shadow due to change" (James 1:17). Owing then to His immutable nature and unyielding will, our Heavenly Father will not change His mind: "God is not a man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?" (Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29). Whatever the Lord decrees will transpire even though the Bible oftentimes uses (anthropopathic) language suggesting that God may alter His plan in response to historical circumstances. However, such language is necessary in order to accommodate our finite understanding (or ignorance) of the mysterious ways God accomplishes His eternal plan. For instance, in Exodus 32, when God proposed to Moses that He would kill the "stiff-necked" people of Israel whom He had just delivered

from captivity, He was merely suggesting a possibility to Moses with no intention of actually going down that path. His ultimate purpose was to (1) test Moses by giving him the opportunity to intercede and (2) show mercy and grace to His people Israel. God could never have set aside His covenant promise made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and still remain true to His character. As such, we must not conclude that Moses altered God's original plan toward Israel; rather, he in fact carried it out, for it was always the Lord's will to withhold final judgment on this particular occasion ("And the Lord relented of the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people" — Ex. 32:14) as indicated by the outcome (see also, God's similar interaction with King Ahab in 1 Kings 21:25–29 and King Hezekiah in 2 Kings 20:1–7).

As we can see from Scripture, God is the protagonist in history — and He alone is the measure of all things. Here is the reason why: The Lord is not merely more powerful than we, He is all-powerful, and in being all-powerful, He is sovereign over all things; and being sovereign over all things, He controls all things that come to pass. Thus, there can be no contingency — no chance occurrences, no blind fortune or "dumb luck" — in His universe for even "the lot is cast into the lap but its every decision is from the Lord" (Prov. 16:33). All things — even seemingly "random" events — happen because He has ordained them so, and no clay vessel can thwart the Potter's will (Rom. 9). Only for this reason, then, does history have overarching purpose and meaning: because all historical events were planned by God and ultimately bear our Lord's seal of approval.

Divine Grace and the Human Will

God's sovereign control over our lives by no means constitutes blind determinism, where individuals — like Sophocles' tragic character Oedipus — valiantly strive against their grim destiny but are hopelessly overcome by it. Quite the contrary, according to Scripture, we freely choose all that we do, yet we do so in circumstances that God has arranged for us, for according to the psalmist, "You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me" (Ps. 139:5). Moreover, we cannot blame our unrighteous actions on God who controls all things for He never tempts us with evil nor does He entice us to sin (James 1:13); rather, we are tested by God, but tempted by Satan, for "God is faithful" and does not allow us to be tempted beyond our ability but, instead, "provides the way of escape" (1 Cor. 10:13). So, when we do sin, we are at fault, having been "lured and enticed by [our] own desire" (James 1:14).

Owing to original sin, the natural man is morally unable by himself to do what is good because he will not do what is good; he is “a slave to sin” (John 8:34), being “dead in trespasses and sins” (Col. 2:13) and “by nature children of wrath” (Eph. 2:1–3). Indeed, this proclivity to sin is part of our very constitution, as evidenced by the following scriptural passages: “I was brought forth in iniquity and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Ps. 51:5). “The wicked go astray from the womb” and “go astray from birth, speaking lies” (Ps. 58:3) for “their minds and their consciences are corrupted” (Titus 1:15). Therefore, “What is man, that he can be pure? Or he who is born of a woman that he can be righteous?” (Job 15:14). “Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? There is not one” (Job 14:4). “Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then also can you do good who are accustomed to do evil” (Jer. 13:23).

Given this biblical fact that “no one does good, not even one” (Rom. 3:12), it is a foregone conclusion how man will act apart from the grace of God, which restrains the full destructive power of our rebellious nature, thereby making human civilization possible. That there is moral orderliness to our existence in a world under the curse of sin testifies to the fact that God is supervening over and intervening in the affairs of men — introducing righteous spontaneity to what would otherwise be a nonstop committal of lawlessness on our part. Absent this supernatural infusion of grace, we would not have the freedom to do good because all our actions would be immorally yet volitionally determined by our natural condition — a condition from which we are powerless to break free of or overcome on our own. God’s grace is the only way for man to have any choice other than to carry out evil, for apart from God, man faces a grim determinism of his own making because, according to Paul, “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14).

Something, then, must first attune our darkened hearts so that we will hear and understand what God has revealed. Thus, prior to faith, the natural man must be renewed by the Holy Spirit — that “spirit of wisdom and of revelation” — who changes our moral disposition and inclines our hearts to God “by having the eyes of [our] hearts enlightened” (Eph. 1:18). As Paul succinctly stated, “No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:3), who must first “circumcise” the heart of fallen man in order for one to receive the Gospel: “And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that

you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live” (Deut. 30:6; see also Ezek. 11:19, 36:26–27 — “I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes”).

And yet, while God “has mercy on whomever He wills, and He hardens whomever he wills” (Rom. 9:18), we are personally at fault for our own stony heart. Unbelievers are “alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of hearts. They have become callous” on their own apart from God (Eph. 4:18–19a). This is a natural, self-imposed enmity against our Creator, which means our spiritual rebellion is premeditated. Thus, unlike poor Oedipus who, while trying to avoid his horrific fate (i.e., kill his father and marry his mother) only managed to fulfill it, we on the other hand are not dragged along in life against our will but, rather, gladly ratify the Father’s will by all our voluntary choices and actions — for good and for evil.

As we can see, God is the mover of history, and all that happens in history is according to His will. So even while we genuinely choose all our actions (“choose this day whom you will serve ...” — Josh. 24:15) — the Creator has overriding priority over human volition, defining the condition and extent of our choices (Ps. 139:5). He is the cause of all things that happen in history, and we are the willing agents who respond to and carry out His plan (Phil. 2:13). Only a sovereign and righteous God can enable the genuine freedom of sinners to choose according to their will and still hold them morally culpable for all their actions.

Part 3: The Biblical Purpose and Outline of History

In Acts 17, Luke provides an account of the Apostle Paul’s witness to the unbelieving intellectuals in Athens — the “ground zero” of secular wisdom in the ancient world. It is interesting to note that when Paul “reasoned” with these philosophers, he did not set Scripture aside in order to find religiously neutral, common ground with them — that is, first make his case on a rational, extra-biblical foundation and then bring Jesus and the resurrection into his argument; rather, he started with and continued to reason from biblical revelation. In the course of his apology, the Apostle challenged several fundamental axioms of the Greek worldview — not least, their understanding of history: “And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God ...”(Acts 17:26–27).

We should immediately note two important principles relevant to the discipline of history that Paul highlights in this passage. First, God is the mover of history, establishing both the geographical and chronological borders of all kingdoms and nations — not just Israel's. Secondly, because God is at work in history, history has a moral and intelligible purpose: God is directing all events for the reason of enabling humankind “to seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him” (Acts 17:27). What this means is that history is the record of God's redemption — the spiritual restoration of His people. And so it is imperative that we start at the very beginning of this remarkable story, as revealed to us in the biblical account of Creation and the Fall.

The Creation and the Fall in History

When God created man, the Lord gave him dominion over the creation. Bearing the divine image of the Creator himself, humans are God's vassals — administrators empowered to rule in God's name as stewards over the created order. All that the earth has to offer, the Father placed under the authority of our first parents for cultivation — with the exception of one thing: the “tree of knowledge of good and evil.” This tree epitomized rational self-sufficiency — knowledge attained independently of God's Word. Its purpose was to provide man with his first spiritual test: Will man submit to God with all his heart, body, and MIND or would he, instead, lean on his own understanding (Prov. 3:5–6)? God created man to be dependent on Him, to live “by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord” (Deut. 8:3), always to walk by faith in the Word of God, who alone determines good and evil, for it is “in thy light that we see light” (Ps. 36:9). Tragically, our first parents, rather than submitting to the command of God, were enticed by the serpent to evaluate God's command using natural revelation (or reason) and the standard of their own finite intelligence. In doing so, they made the categorical mistake of subjecting God — who embodies and defines the totality of all knowledge — to an evidentiary test based on fallible human logic and understanding. By placing God in the dock (witness stand), Adam and Eve made themselves judge over Him who alone is Judge (Job 38–41; Ps. 50:6). In this way, they fulfilled the serpent's declaration: “you will be like God” (Gen. 3:4) — that is, independent, self-sufficient, and rationally autonomous.

Genesis 3:15 — “Enmity”

The result of this insubordination was unremitting hostility between man and his Maker. But God, being rich in mercy (Eph. 2:4) would make many alive through His Son. In Genesis 3:15, we see the first articulation

of the Gospel in history and the resultant dialectical tension (spiritual polarity): “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” In this passage God promised that He would preserve by His grace alone (otherwise, there would be no enmity between the sinner and the serpent), a lineage that will be faithful to Him: “I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me” (Jer. 32:40).

Thus, beginning with Cain vs. godly Abel and then Cain vs. godly Seth, the eventual intermarriage of these two lines accelerated the moral decline of humanity, culminating in the last remnant of Seth, Noah, who alone “found grace in the eyes of the Lord” (Gen. 6:8). After the Flood, the Bible indicates that this special lineage fell to one of Noah’s sons: “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem.” It is from his descendants that we get the Semitic peoples, including the Hebrews. But more importantly for those of us in the West, Japheth — whose extended offspring include the Greek and Roman peoples — would vicariously share in his brother Shem’s blessing: “May God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem” (Gen. 9:26–27). And so the Gentiles, who were “once alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise” (Eph. 2:12), are those descendants of Japheth who would come to salvation in the messianic age (see Acts 14:27; Eph. 2:11–22). Thus, Noah’s blessing represents the inclusion of Gentiles in the covenant, which began 2,000 years ago and has increased ever since.

Abrahamic Covenant

Unfortunately, the post-diluvial human race, in corporate rebellion against God, refused to honor the original creation ordinance to fill the earth and subdue it; they disobeyed God in order to make their name great (Gen. 11:4). The Lord then forcibly dispersed mankind from the plains of Shinar (Sumer) — the cradle of Mesopotamian civilization — graciously scattering the human race by language in order one day to unite many to Himself. And so we find that the redeemed lineage — the “Seed of the woman” (Gen. 3:15) — narrowed even more in history when God reached out to a lone individual in order to establish His “everlasting” covenant, promising to make Abraham’s name great: “And I will make of you a great nation ... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” In response to this gracious call, Abraham trusted God and it was credited to him as righteousness. For this reason, according to Paul, “it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham.” We are all one in Christ Jesus, “And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring,

heirs according to promise” (Gal. 3:7–8, 28–29). This, then, is that “mystery of the Gospel” — “that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” first established in the covenant with Abraham (Eph. 1:9, 3:6; Col. 1:26–27).

Sadly, we know by the Jewish rejection of their Messiah and persecution of the New Testament Church, that Israel exchanged the inclusivity of the Gospel for the exclusivity of Hebrew nationalism. And yet, according to Paul, from the very beginning God had ordained that ancient Israel was to be the means by which all the nations “might feel their way toward him and find him” (Acts 17:27). For instance, in Exodus 19:6, we are told that the Father established His people to be a “kingdom of priests” — set apart from the world in order to be a holy example so that many outside Israel would be justified: “And all the peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the Lord . . .” (Deut. 28:10). Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, God promised to send His Servant, who would come out of Israel in order to bring salvation to the nations: “I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Isa. 49:6). This included even Israel’s most dreaded enemies, who would likewise be part of the family of God: “Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance” (Isa. 19:25; see also Jonah).

God the Author of World History

Given this redemptive arc structuring ancient history, we must be mindful of the fact that while God guided Israel, He also influenced the historical development of her inhospitable neighbors — utilizing them as instruments of His retribution or blessing on other nations. One such pagan kingdom He enlisted in His judgment of the nations was Assyria (named after its god Ashur): “Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger; the staff in their hands is my fury! Against a godless nation I send him, and against the people of my wrath I command him, to take spoil and seize plunder, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets” (Isa. 10:6). This does not mean that Assyria intentionally served the Lord in this capacity, because we are told, “But he [Assyria] does not so intend, and his heart does not so think: but it is in his heart to destroy and to cut off nations not a few” (Isa. 10:7–8). It was through this unbelieving race that the Lord said, “I remove the boundaries of peoples, and . . . I bring down those who sit on thrones” (Isa. 10:13), orchestrating and granting success to their conquests: “Have you not heard that I determined it long ago? I planned from days of old what now I bring to pass, that you [Assyria] should turn fortified cities into heaps of ruins” (2 Kings 19:10–12, 25).

When Paul told the Athenians that the “unknown” God had determined the allotted periods and boundaries of the several kingdoms, he was underscoring the fact that our Lord is the author of all national histories. This is made plain in Amos 9:7: “Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Capthor [Crete] and the Syrians from Kir?” It is God “who removes kings and sets up kings” (Dan. 3:21) — such as the Babylonian ruler Nebuchadnezzar who received his “kingship and greatness and glory” from the Most High (Dan. 5:18). Yet not only does God raise up foreign leaders and hold them accountable, but He also uses these rulers to bring glory to His name and to fulfill His redemptive purpose. For this reason, the prophet Isaiah spoke of a future pagan ruler who — 200 years later — would unite Medo-Persia under his rule: “of Cyrus, ‘He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill my purpose’; saying of Jerusalem, ‘She shall be built,’ and of the temple, ‘Your foundation shall be laid’” (Isa. 44:28). So, not only did Cyrus later rule by God’s decree, his singular purpose in history was to restore Israel, “subdue nations before him and to loosen the belts of kings.” Of Cyrus, the Lord’s “anointed” (Christos), we are told, “It is I, the Lord, who calls you [Cyrus] by your name, for the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by name yet you do not know me. . . . I equip you, though you do not know me” (Isa. 45:1–5). This was in fulfillment of His promise to the people of Israel prior to their entering the Promised Land: “The Lord will scatter you among the peoples, and you will be left few in number among the nations where the Lord will drive you. . . . [But] you will return to the Lord your God and obey his voice. For the Lord your God is a merciful God. He will not leave you or destroy you or forget the covenant with your fathers that he swore to them” (Deut. 4:27, 34). And so, in order that His word might be fulfilled, “the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia” (Ezra 1:1) to commence the restoration of God’s covenant people.

What we find throughout the Bible that is vitally important to one’s understanding of history, is this simple truth: the Lord carries out His saving mission among men through men. This also includes working even through hapless unbelievers in powerful places, such as a certain Roman prefect who flaunted his political autonomy before the Supreme Governor of the universe! “You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?” In His response, Jesus meekly corrected Pilate’s secular understanding of temporal rule: “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above” (John 19:10–11). As with everything else that happens in history, Jesus’ interrogation and resultant death was all part of

God's sovereign plan and thus orchestrated every step of the way by the Father (Acts 2:23).

Nebuchadnezzar's Dream: The "Four Kingdoms"

God's management of history is dramatically established in Nebuchadnezzar's historically significant vision (Dan. 2) of an image with a head of gold (kingdom of Babylon), chest and arms of silver (Persian empire), stomach and thighs of bronze (Greece), and legs of iron (Rome) with feet of iron and clay ("partly strong and partly brittle"). According to Daniel's interpretation of the dream, "a stone cut without hands struck the image on its feet. ... Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold, all together were broken into pieces, and became like chaff ... and the wind carried them away. ... But the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth" (Dan. 2:31-35). Here, God revealed to Nebuchadnezzar His sovereign plan regarding the rise and fall of these four major kingdoms in the ancient world. The "stone cut without human hands" represents Christ our Cornerstone whose arrival concluded this period of history while inaugurating another: the kingdom of our Lord — the Church — which will "fill the whole earth" thereby ending the dominance of polytheistic religion and culture.

As prophesied by Daniel and fulfilled in subsequent history, the last 2,000 years have witnessed the culmination of the blessing of Japheth via the evangelization of the Gentiles. A Western civilization — once pagan to the core but now culturally steeped in a Judeo-Christian ethos grew out of the ashes of this ancient world — providing political, cultural, and technological leadership. All of this has been accomplished by the hand of God working through people for the purposes of implementing His Gospel; it is the Lord who moves history — not blind natural causation or the mere machinations of man.

Conclusion

The divine mandate to subdue the creation obligates us to order the facts of our experiences in grateful acknowledgement of our Creator and His revealed will. We do not do justice to God's objective revelation in the natural order — that is, His works of creation and providence — if we fail to attach scriptural meaning to it. For this reason, Christians must be critically discerning of secular thought, measuring all things by the yardstick of special revelation. Given the Lord's providential governance of the universe at every level — past, present, and future — the historian

must examine these facts through the lens of God’s Word, authored by the Sacred Historian who orchestrates all things. Only from Scripture can we know that there is no endless repetition or random sequence of events; rather, history is eschatological — advancing toward a prescribed and glorious conclusion: “So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it” (Isa. 55:11). Given the role of Christ in completing this mission, the Incarnation remains the singular event of the cosmos; it was the end of ancient history — its fulfillment now is the template for all events thereafter. This biblical fact must structure our historical understanding as we piece together the experiences of the past. Out of obedience to Christ, we must strive to situate even the seemingly trivial occurrences happening in the “City of Man” within the cosmic backdrop of the “City of God.” This is the only way for history to have objective meaning and lasting moral significance.

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