

Message for Purim

The pursuit of history is an endeavour which has been with humanity almost as long as we have been present on planet earth. Yes, from the earliest times mankind has not only felt the inner urge, nay need, to record the passing of time, but he has also felt the urge to pass comment on the act of recording too. Thus it is that over the millennia many things have been said in criticism of the pursuit of history. Edward Gibbon, for example, who in the eighteenth century masterfully catalogued the decline of the Roman Empire, commented with regard to history that it "is indeed little more than the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind". More recently, Henry Ford, who was never short of a controversial opinion or two, commented famously that "History is more or less bunk", while a certain William L Burton added cynically, "If you do not like the past, change it", the implication being that written history is nothing more than the manipulation of the past for seedy present gain. Karl Marx, who was certainly wont to use history himself to this effect, summed this cynical attitude up with these words: "History does nothing, possesses no enormous wealth, fights no battles. It is rather man, the real, living man, who does everything, possesses, fights. It is not History, as if she were a person apart, who uses men as a means to work out her purposes, but history itself is nothing but the activity of men pursuing their purposes." According to this viewpoint, which, it must be said, is not without some justification, there can be no history that is neutral or impartial, for no one can truly escape his experiences and no one can ultimately stand apart from the forces that have shaped his or her consciousness – in short, everyone brings their own baggage to the table of history. In ancient times, when, whatever the society, whether pagan, Jewish or Christian, belief in the existence of the divine was paramount, this effectively meant that recorded history reflected the religious background of the writer. Thus human events were never truly just human, and there was never truly any incident of chance, for all had been determined by the gods. Ancient Greek history was thus really a record of the interplay between humans and the Greek gods, and, indeed, of the interplay between gods – gods who envied each other, warred with each other, loved each other and so on and so forth. Homer's account of the fall of Troy is, for example, essentially all about the intervention of the gods in human affairs and it is simply impossible to remove that from the story without impoverishing it, as Hollywood's mediocre blockbuster starring Brad Pitt found to its folly! Quintus' final comment on the fall of Troy is thus that "By the Immortals' purpose all these things Had come to pass, or by Fate's ordinance." Ancient Jewish histories similarly also appealed to the divine in order to explain human affairs. Thus while the books of the Maccabees contain detailed accounts of that turbulent period of Jewish history in which the Jews rose up against their Greek oppressors, it is always with the underlying understanding that the Maccabees ultimately prevailed because, through it all, by remaining true to the Torah, they merited God's favour. Thus it is that 2 Maccabees 8:1-5 says, "Judas Maccabeus and his companions entered the villages, secretly, summoned their kinsmen, and by also enlisting others who remained faithful to Judaism, assembled about six thousand men. They implored the Lord to look kindly upon his people, who were being oppressed on all sides; to have pity on the temple, which was profaned by godless men; to have mercy on the city, which was being destroyed and about to be levelled to the ground; to

Message for Purim

hearken to the blood that cried out to him; to remember the criminal slaughter of innocent children and the blasphemies uttered against his name; and to manifest his hatred of evil. Once Maccabeus got his men organized, the Gentiles could not withstand him, for the Lord's wrath had now changed to mercy."

But it's not just pagan or Jewish histories, Christian histories too told a story of divine intervention in human affairs, though naturally to the benefit of the Christians! Thus in the *Gesta Francorum*, one of the main accounts of the Crusades, the following account of a bitter battle between the Muslims and the Christians is typical. Apparently the Christians were hard pressed until God miraculously intervened on their behalf and "There came out from the mountains, also, countless armies with white horses, whose standards were all white. And so, when our leaders saw this army, they were entirely ignorant as to what it was, and who they were, until they recognized the aid of Christ, whose leaders were St. George, Mercurius, and Demetrius. This is to be believed, for many of our men saw it. However, when the Turks who were stationed on the side toward the sea saw that that they could hold out no longer, they set fire to the grass, so that, upon seeing it, those who were in the tents might flee. The latter, recognizing that signal, seized all the precious spoils and fled. But our men fought yet a while where their (the Turks) greatest strength was, that is, in the region of their tents. Duke Godfrey, the Count of Flanders, and Hugh the Great rode near the water, where the enemy's strength lay. These men, fortified by the sign of the cross, together attacked the enemy first. When the other lines saw this, they likewise attacked. The Turks and the Persians in their turn cried out. Thereupon, we invoked the Living and True God and charged against them, and in the name of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Sepulchre we began the battle, and, God helping, we overcame them. But the terrified Turks took to flight, and our men followed them to the tents. Thereupon, the knights of Christ chose rather to pursue them than to seek any spoils, and they pursued them even to the Iron Bridge, and then up to the fortress of Tancred. The enemy, indeed, left their pavilions there, gold, silver, and many ornaments, also sheep, cattle, horses, mules, camels, asses, grain, wine, butter, and many other things which we needed. When the Armenians and Syrians who dwelt in those regions heard that we had overcome the Turks, they ran to the mountain to meet them and killed as many of them as they could catch. We, however, returned to the city with great joy and praised and blessed God, who gave the victory to His people."

Indeed, this view of an interventionist deity that favours the Christian side in battles, prospers Christian economies and establishes empires, prevailed until very recently. Those of the older generation, my parents perhaps or Charles, may well remember Empire Day. First celebrated on 24th May 1902, Queen's Victoria's birthday, Empire Day was instituted in the UK in 1905 by Lord Meath and thence extended throughout the colonies of the vast British Empire, which covered nearly a quarter of the globe, as a "symbol of that unity of feeling . . . to those ideals of freedom, justice, and tolerance for which the British Empire [stood] throughout the world." Empire Day became a major event, involving, among other things, school parades and the BBC; in 1925, 90,000 people attended an Empire Day thanksgiving service held at Wembley Stadium as part of the British Empire Exhibition. The idea that the British Empire had been

Message for Purim

divinely instituted for the purpose of evangelising, converting and civilising the wider world was a keenly held one, was preached in churches almost every Sunday and was reflected in British history books. An early example of this perspective is found in a sermon delivered by Luke Booker, the minister of St Edmund's in Dudley in 1792. As Concerned about the outbreak of war with revolutionary France, Booker was nevertheless certain that God's providential hand had not deserted England, and that, notwithstanding the recent loss of the American colonies, God was maintaining it still. God, he said, had shown providential care for the English throughout their history and in particular during the Reformation; in deliverance from the Spanish Armada and the uncovering of the Gunpowder Plot; in the restoration of the monarchy when it seemed entirely lost; and in the Glorious Revolution, which had saved the country from a bigoted, enslaving Catholic reign. He ended with this praise to the God of the English: 'Against his little Isle – what Empires were in arms! 'If the Lord Himself had not been on our side, now may Englad say'.... Warring with Omnipotence on our side... we ...TRIUMPHED GLORIOUSLY.'" As Rowan Strong notes in his book, "Anglicanism and the British Empire," Anglicans in the eighteenth century considered that the fortunes of the British Empire were enmeshed into the scheme of Divine Providence. "Subject to various criticisms and conditions as that divine involvement might be for the British, God was – according to this Anglican construction of Empire – nevertheless fundamentally favourable to the British imperial project." Indeed, such too was the parallel German conception of their Empire. In fact, given the evil nature of the subsequent Nazi regime it seems hardly possible that Wehrmacht soldiers went into battle with the motto "Gott mit uns," (God is with us) on their belt buckles, but so they did. Moreover, just as the British were inclined to regard the successful spread of Empire as evidence that God was on their side, so too, particularly in the early years of the war, vast numbers of Germans attributed their overwhelming success in conquering Europe from the coast of France in the west to the mountains of the Caucasus in the east, to divine favour – with Hitler, of course, being their anointed Messiah. Hitler himself attributed his survival of the July 1944 bomb plot to divine favour and given the miraculous nature of his survival when Stauffenberg's bomb exploded, it was easy for millions of Germans to believe this. Though today the British Empire is no more, the idea that God is still playing favourites with countries, raising them up or throwing them down, has not completely died. The idea that providence is guiding the affairs of nations may no longer find favour in a largely secularised Western Europe, but in the US it is still potent. Just as the British once believed that their Empire was prima facia evidence of divine favour so now millions of Americans, mostly evangelical Christians, believe that the United States' pre-eminence on the world's stage is also due to divine favour. Indeed, they would no doubt proof text this idea by reference to the Scriptures. In fact churches and individual believers often take this idea and apply it to almost every aspect of life. Thus success in any and all spheres is always attributed to God's favour, while failure is regarded as evidence of God's disfavour due to some sin, or to the devil who seeks to diabolically interdict and disrupt the execution of the divine will. Many believers see the divine or satanic hand in almost everything, determining even the smallest things in life, from the weather on the church picnic, or even to the outcome of sports. I remember chuckling to myself during the last European Championships when,

Message for Purim

having beaten Wales in the group match, Daniel Sturridge thanked God for “allowing” him to score. According to Sturridge then England beat Wales because God was on the former’s side. While I have sympathies with this sentiment, it is hard to sustain it in view of England’s rank defeat to Iceland and Wales’ brilliant procession through to the semi-finals. It would certainly be interesting to hear how Sturridge theologises his failure to score on any given day. Would it be because he had sinned that he might draw a blank, or because the opposition goalkeeper was demonically inspired? Funny, on further investigation, it turns out that God determining practically every detail of his life is fundamental to Sturridge’s outlook. Having scored on his home debut for Liverpool in the latter’s 5 nil drubbing of my beloved Canaries, he said, “I enjoyed it very much.” And, “I want to thank God for the opportunity and making me put on a Liverpool shirt, without him this wouldn’t be possible.” Yes, you heard that right! God made him put on a Liverpool shirt. Not sure about your theology there Daniel! We supporters of other teams rather think that it was the devil ‘wot made you do it!’ Better dead than red!

Such is and has been the popular view of God’s intervention in human affairs. Indeed, it has to be said that this is also, for the most part, a popular view in the Scriptures. Sefer Shemot thus explains the collapse of Pharaoh’s Egypt and the release of the Hebrew slaves with reference to divine intervention. And while it is of course true that many of the events of the exodus, such as the parting of the Yam Suf (where you will recall that a wind blew all night across the water), or the incident of the quails (where a wind is also said to have blown the birds into the Israelite camp) had, on the surface, naturalistic causes, the perspective of the authors of the Biblical texts is more often than not that it was God that ultimately caused these things to happen. Similarly, while the histories of the kings of Israel certainly record the minutiae of their various diplomatic manoeuvrings and military campaigns, they are also careful to note that each rose or fell, and Israel along with them, because of God’s favour or disfavour. Similarly, when our people were finally exiled from the Land at the hands of the Babylonians the writers of the various texts that record these details explain this in relation to Israel’s sin, and thus God’s disfavour. This is also how the Biblical writers explain our people’s return from exile. Thus Koresh, the Persian Emperor, is considered to have been raised up by God and is uniquely called ‘Mashiach’ so that he would enable our people’s return. Such is the prevailing view in Scripture. And yet, it must be said, it is not the only view. In the Book of Ester, for instance, which records our people’s deliverance from Haman’s destructive hand, there is not a single mention of God. How odd! One would have thought that a pre-requisite for inclusion in the canon of Scripture would be that it ought to attribute such salvation to God or it should at least have the name of God in its text. But not the Book of Ester, according to which deliverance came, not because of a divine intervention, but because of the bravery and courage of some unlikely people – principally Hadassah, a young Jewish girl, who had become one of the king’s many women. As such the Book of Ester is much more theologically aligned with Kohelet than with Shemot, stressing as it does the need for human agency in the service of righteousness than for direct divine intervention. Kohelet is certainly aware of the theological outlook of other books, that God rewards righteousness with long

Message for Purim

life and overflowing blessings and punishes sin with the opposite; that sees God intervening in both world and individual affairs, determining the rise and fall of nations, the outcome of battles, and alternatively filling barns with wheat or causing famine. Indeed, for Kohelet these promises are a cause of intense pain because in the real world that *he* lives in he does not see them in action. In chapter 3 Kohelet confesses his young faith that “The righteous and the wicked God will judge, because there is a right time for every intention and for every action.” And yet, by chapter 7 he bemoans the fact that this is not how things actually work out, for “in my pointless life, I’ve seen everything – from the righteous person perishing in his uprightness to the wicked one who lives a long life and keeps on doing wrong.” The world that the older (and presumably wiser) Kohelet sees is therefore not one in which God is perpetually intervening in favour of one nation or another, nor one individual over another, but one in which anything can happen to anyone, for good or for bad. Kohelet finds this lack of divine intervention “frustrating” since there are “righteous people to whom things happen as if they were doing wicked deeds; and, again, there are wicked people to whom things happen as if they were doing righteous deeds. I say that this too is pointless.” The world that Kohelet describes is one in which neither success nor failure are indicative of divine favour. Moreover, the world that Kohelet describes is one in which God doesn’t intervene at all. Only at the very end, in the Olam Haba and with the final judgement will the righteous and evil receive their just rewards. This being so, given the still prevailing ideas to the contrary, it’s perhaps little wonder that Kohelet is rarely read in evangelical Christian circles. Indeed, he is often portrayed as a depressive whose ideas are destructive to true faith. And yet, Yeshua himself no less referenced Kohelet when he said, that God “causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” The Book of Ester not only follows on from Kohelet in the Scriptural ordering of books but shares the same theological space. According to Ester it is not God that delivers the Jewish people but the courageous actions of unlikely people; when, for instance, Ester put her life on the line by approaching the king, and when the Jewish people took up arms to defend themselves and defeat their enemies. Deliverance was not secured by heavenly thunderbolts or by angelic armies, but by human beings facing their fears and doing the right thing in the face of evil and with no guarantee of a successful outcome. Indeed, in the end, knowing everything we know about our human nature, isn’t this the real miracle of Purim? Surely the real miracle that both we and wider humanity needs and which alone can accomplish the divine intent for us as human beings isn’t an angelic army, but an unfailing commitment to do the right thing – and that is something that only the determination of human beings can achieve. While you might find the outlook of these two books, Ester and Kohelet, somewhat uncomfortable, do consider that the fact that they are welcomed into the canon of Scripture demonstrates that, in the world of Judaism, there is (thankfully) more than one acceptable way to read God’s involvement or non-involvement with His Creation. It’s all a matter of perspective – and, of course, of debate! A famous Russian proverb somehow manages to embrace both outlooks when it says, “pray to God by all means, but row to the shore!” And that, to me, seems like a good place to start.