

DISCERNING THE HAND OF GOD IN HISTORY: The Challenge of the Jews

There can no question of the fact that God is a God of history and works his purpose out for individuals and for nations in the course of their histories. This is clear from biblical history, and has been especially true of the Jewish nation. However, we need to ask whether there is any real warrant for attempting to find the hand of God in the events of non biblical or even modern history? Is this an acceptable practice in principle? If so, what would be the guidelines that would enable us to make such judgements on history? What sort of hazards might such an attempt hold?

Is Looking for God in History an Acceptable Principle?

There is little difficulty in finding a warrant as far as principle goes. Three reasons, at least, argue for this.

First, as individual Christian people we each have our own personal history. The events of that personal history are undoubtedly effected by our relationship with God, and embody his “hands on” activity in our lives. If we cannot find evidence of God’s hand in at least some parts of our own personal history, then there is a clearly a lack in our relationship with God and our awareness of God at work in our lives. God, indeed, expects us to make assessments of his intervention, and our testimonies of our Christian experience should be verbal records of his interventions. Finding God at work in our lives is, therefore, not only legitimate but a requirement. Moreover, if such records are appropriate for individuals, then it is a perfectly legitimate step to conclude that it must be so for groups of individuals and that includes nations.

Second, one of the great cornerstones of Biblical and Christian teaching is the call to prayer. We are encouraged to pray for God’s intervention in the events of our lives and to look for answers to such prayer. The call to prayer obviously and explicitly brings with it a demand to believe that God can and does answer such prayer. Moreover, we are expected to be able to recognise answers from God and to give thanks accordingly. In other words the very process of praying insists that we look for his hand in our life history. We are not called simply to pray for ourselves, however, but for our communities and nations. This being the case we should expect to see answers to prayer in tangible ways in national and community history.

Third, the appropriateness of making such assessments about our history is fully endorsed by the innumerable biblical stories of God at work in shaping the historical experiences of both individual people and nations. These stories not only show us how much our histories are shaped by God, but, perhaps even more important, they show us how and why he shapes them and thereby provide us with crucial guidelines for making our own assessments of God’s hand in history. At a personal level we are all aware of how edifying these stories are as we watch the lives of the biblical characters unfold before us, and there is equal fascination in watching for example God’s dealings with nations and, in particular, his own people, the Jews.

Guidelines for the Discernment of God’s Activity.

Granted, then, that there are compelling reasons for seeking to discern the hand of God both at individual and community level, what are to be our guidelines for such interpretation or discernment, and especially at the national level?

The best starting point is an examination of how we handle our own personal histories and how we find the hand of God in significant moments in them. Most Christians have some experience in this and have developed practical ways of discernment. The guidelines we adopt for understanding our personal history should then give us essential clues for finding significance in the events of national history. There are three things that can help us in this:-

First, we should look at how we discern or assess answers to prayer.

Sometimes these answers come in such a seemingly natural way we are apt to overlook them and so miss the hand of God (something we need to guard against); at other times they come in such a remarkable way and so against the run of probability that we cannot but notice them, and we readily ascribe them to a divine hand. We need to hold to those convictions which God places in our hearts that prayer has been answered; recognising answers to prayer is a great faith building exercise.

Personal answers to prayer do not, however, just involve one off situations or needs, not do they come always with an act of remarkable providence. They can be seen in long term and strategic changes in life situations, involving such crucial issues as guidance, healing, provision etc. These answers frequently come over a period of time, often long periods of time, gradually emerging after complex and conflicting processes. They are only apparent and discernable through carefully looking back on a whole a string of events. These are not so easily discerned. It is this latter kind of answered prayer over a longer period that is particularly appropriate to nations. Long term events, whether they are answers to prayer or otherwise, may actually be of deeper significance for discerning God at work, even if more difficult to discern. For example, for the Jews the rise of Babylon over several decades was the most significant of events revealing the hand of God, and to which unfortunately they were blind.

Second, we should look at the principles on which God acts, for such principles are the basis for what he does in our lives and in the world. Events inevitably reflect those principles. For example, one of the most important principles he has laid down is that the righteous person will find that blessing and peace will be part of their life history, whereas the ungodly person will find that distress and harm will predominate. That principle can be seen at work constantly. Awareness of this principle, it needs to be said, is primarily so that we may watch our own behaviour, not judge the behaviour of others. It also needs to be said that this principle must be balanced in any particular life history by the fact that the righteous will find dark patches in their life and the ungodly will seem to prosper. Only the longer view of history will shows the dark patches of the righteous to be ultimately a source of blessing, and the prosperity of the ungodly to be ultimately destructive. The same principle may be applied to nations as the psalmist so clearly reminds us, “*Righteousness exalts a nation; sin is a reproach to any people*”. It is this same principle that is so clearly spelled out in the Old Testament biblical prophets, where the sins of the nations and the devastating consequences of those sins are so clearly portrayed. It is only too possible to recognise in the history of nations a repetition of the scenarios depicted by those old Testament prophets. Since the prophets are dealing with the principles on which God works we can rightly make some application to present history of those principles.

We should look for the principles on which God acts in the world

These principles and the nuances of their operation in people's lives and in nations are thoroughly embedded in scripture. Only the study of scripture, therefore, will bring about a mature understanding of them and enable us to make mature assessments.

Third, we need to look at the element of prophecy. By that I mean we need to take note of things that God has said he will do in the course of history. The prophetic is a very important stream in scripture. The fact is that God has spoken through his prophets about future events in history, and obviously, therefore, we do well to watch out for such events. Jesus himself spoke prophetically of scenarios of wars and rumours of wars, of famines, of earthquakes, of conquests, of persecutions, of the world-wide proclamation of the gospel, of the restoration of his people the Jews, and ultimately of signs in the heavens. He gave no details or dates, but the general shape is clear. These scenarios all fit into the principle of righteousness in this world being blessed and ungodliness being judged. History as it has unfolded has provided a massive endorsement of these prophecies of Jesus. In our own generation three are very much in evidence; the persecution of Christians, the world-wide proclamation of the gospel and Jewish restoration.

**God has spoken
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events in history**

We should note also that personal life stories also bear witness to the way in which prophecy can be given to an individual and then come to pass. When this happens it can be an astonishingly powerful in strengthening personal faith.

There is certainly a divine expectation that people would seek to discern those historical moments when prophecy seems about to be fulfilled; we are to watch for the signs of the times. Such discernment in our own generation, for example, is required concerning Israel. We have seen the formation of a restored Jewish nation in Palestine.

Hazards

Is the discernment of God's hand at work in this world something we always get right? No! None of us is gifted with infallibility. We can easily get overzealous and somewhat dogmatic. We need to hold our discernment lightly. But that is not a bar to our attempting to recognise God's hand, it is a caution to the way we approach the matter. The fact is that frequently we shall get our discernment right and be blessed. We need to recognise that it does not pay to be dogmatic or proud in these things, but that an unhurried, thoughtful, open and prayerful heart is essential.

Perhaps one of the most dangerous hazards lies in the area of seeking detailed interpretations of biblical prophecy. Christian literature is a grave yard of such speculative "end time" interpretations, sadly coming sometimes from the most devout of writers. We may safely keep the broad outlines of biblical prophecy in mind, and then watch, but with prophecy only the event itself as it is fulfilled will provide us with a full and detailed understanding of the original prophecy. This was supremely the case with the first coming of Jesus, for which there was much detailed prophecy. No amount of speculative prophecy, however, could have discerned how in fact he did come. The real challenge was to discern the moment when in the most unexpected of ways he did eventually come. Nonetheless we cannot ignore the broad outlines of biblical prophecies - the gospel will go to all nations, Jesus will return, to name but two - indeed we fail if we do not watch out for these great prophetic promises, especially in our own generation. But the precise fulfilments will remain a mystery until the end.

Applying the Above to the History of the Jews

Prophecy abounds concerning the Jews as a nation. Perhaps the simplest prophecies to write about are those which speak on the one hand of their loss of the land for disobedience and the distress of the ensuing exile, and on the other hand the promise that God will never completely destroy them as a nation. We actually have some 2½ millennia of history that abundantly fulfil these prophecies.

More difficult perhaps (at least for some) is the return of the Jews to Palestine in the second half of the 20thC. Is that to be seen as fulfilment of biblical prophecy in modern history? This is a critically important historical event to grapple with in the light of so much biblical prophecy speaking of Jewish restoration. Fundamentally it is a question of weighing historical evidence. This is important; historical facts have always had a critical edge over theological interpretations ever since the days when Cornelius was accepted in the church without circumcision; it was the fact that he received the Spirit that caused a major rethink about Gentile conversion.

It is historical facts that have buried so many fanciful "end time" schemes. It would be foolish to hold to a theology that denied a further purpose for the Jews if the historical facts seem to point in the opposite direction, and we have to weigh two simple historical facts here; first that one third of Jewry is now back in Palestine and second that those who have returned have come from the "ends of the earth". These facts must be carefully examined: if they do not bring total assurance, they cannot be simply dismissed. They have to be explained.

The century and a half preceding the coming of the State of Israel in 1948 must also demand our attention. What does that history add to our assessment of the return of the Jews. Does it have any marks of outstanding providential happenings that might betray the hand of God? Does it have any long term historical trends that suggest something more than just human historical activity? These are matters about which may not be dogmatic but concerning which we can certainly make prayerful historical investigation.

It is precisely all the above areas that are investigated in the pamphlets in the series, "**The Jews and History**". In so doing we need to recognise complete dependence on the same spirit of prophecy that first so remarkably pointed to future events so long ago. It is not simply a question of historical analysis, the conclusions of which can be so variable.

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