

CHAPTER ONE: ASSUMPTIONS AND EARLIEST HISTORY

Is the study of history a waste of time? While some may think so, the attitudes held about history influence our whole lives. If history does not matter, then the historical Christ is insignificant. If history does not matter, then the Bible is trivial, since a great deal of the Bible is an account of history. To believe our moment in history is so unique that we can learn nothing from the accounts of the past is to be blinded by a very narrow view of reality.

But history does matter, particularly to the Christian. In contrast to the modern person who only looks to the now and perhaps the near future, the Bible often asks us to reflect upon history to learn important spiritual lessons. Hebrews 11, a listing of the great people of faith from Israel's history, is but one of many examples in the Bible where readers are enjoined to consider the lessons and examples of the past.

It's Never Been This Bad Before?

Many look at the modern dilemmas we face and conclude that the world has never been so bad. Surely, they say, people in the past never had such problems. While theologians used to say "things are getting better and better," most Christians today have concluded just the opposite.

Yet similar problems have existed before, and practical solutions were often found that can still be useful today. Solomon once said "there is nothing new under the sun" and that maxim continues to hold true.

When Sputnik, the Russian satellite, was orbited years ago, I was teaching a college physical science course. The Monday after the launch, students came to class with many questions of how such a thing was possible. At that time, it was hard for people to conceive of anything breaking the power of gravity and then orbiting the earth. I showed my students the

formulas involved and launched our own imaginary Sputnik to the satisfaction of my class. But this is hardly boasting on my part; everything I told them was completely familiar to Isaac Newton nearly three centuries ago!

Yes, Newton knew the principles required to place a spaceship in orbit. Furthermore, Aristotle knew quite a bit about practical politics. The “new” problem of inflation was a factor in the fall of Rome, Napoleon coming to power, and the rise of Hitler’s Germany. A spiraling crime rate has occurred many times in history, when the source of the society’s moral code (usually religious) is forgotten.

As a French historian stated after the French Revolution, “History, it is easily perceived, is a picture gallery containing a host of copies and very few originals,” or as another bard said, “those who don’t know their history are doomed to repeat it.” When the lessons of history are ignored, we sow the wind and thus “reap the whirlwind,” or as Moses said “the sins of the fathers are vilified upon the children of the third and fourth generations” (Ex. 20:5).

Thus we will selectively examine a number of key episodes in the history of Western civilization, with particular concern for events which provide insight on economic, ethical and spiritual issues. We will also consider events which parallel or fill out biblical content (for example, what do we know about Egypt during the time of the Exodus?). This will help in understanding the cultural context of God’s Word, and thus perhaps aid us in applying His Word in our own cultural situation. History also helps us avoid provincialism by getting us outside our own narrow mindset and seeing things from another perspective.

Values in History

This presentation of history is not value-free. Such a book is impossible--if a book is

written, it is done because someone felt it was a value-able task to accomplish. Accounts of history always have a perspective. The key value emphasized throughout this book are the importance of personal and social freedom within the moral guidelines of the Bible.

Most accounts of history, particularly those written in ancient times, are full of excuses and half truths.ⁱ The Bible is one of the rare exceptions to this trend. Take the account of David, for example--one of the finest and most respected figures in the Old Testament--who is portrayed complete with his major failings. This degree of honesty was virtually unheard of in ancient times, thus underlining the distinctiveness of the Word of God. It truly is an account of an outsider's perspective (God's) "as holy men were moved by God."

Three general views of history can be described, each of which have modern proponents. These views have obvious implications for how historical accounts will be interpreted.

Spenglerⁱⁱ held to the idea that our civilization is in decline. He pointed to conditions in our society that are similar to Egypt, Rome and Greece when they declined. Three phases are suggested for any given society, which correspond with human development: youth, maturity, and decline. This inevitable sequence may be slowed, but no essentially changed.

This position has its theological correlate in some extreme forms of premillennialism with the idea that things will inevitably deteriorate. Thus ultimately all Christians can do is hang on while the world falls apart around us. This tends to produce a retreatist mentality in which Christians do not take seriously Christ's commands to be the salt and light of the earth, preserving and enlightening our culture. This approach also overlooks the fact that some nations have declined and later seen renewal, as has been the case with Germany, England and China.

A second alternative states just the opposite -- a natural progression exists in history. This

approach has much in common with evolution, as progress is considered inevitable. While decline can occur, society can reverse the decline by avoiding war and nationalism. Toynbeeⁱⁱⁱ held to this position, and the theological correlate would be postmillennialism.

While many would question such a viewpoint, we can certainly applaud Toynbee's emphasis upon the need for freedom, morality and religion in society. He also emphasizes that people are the result of what they think, not just what they do. Is there not at least the potential for improvement?

Marxism takes the idea of progression further by suggesting that history is only a record of the struggles between different classes. A utopian communist state is coming, says Marx,^{iv} where everyone will have what he needs and brotherly love will predominate. While the communists have never come close to achieving their ideal, many "true believers" in the Marxist cause continue to hope it will happen.

A third alternative combines the best of these two extremes by suggesting that either decline or improvement in society is possible. The great Harvard sociologist, Peterim Sorokin,^v believed that people have power over natural forces and to some extent can control social forces as well. Unfortunately, people are unable to control themselves. Thus we need a change in social values, says Sorokin, including a new sense of duty, justice, love, sacrifice, and a relationship with God.

Man is as he thinks, says Francis Schaeffer,^{vi} and thus progress is possible. Holding to either the idea that the world is getting "better and better" or conversely "worse and worse" is an oversimplification. As the scriptures so clearly state "If my people . . . will humble themselves and pray . . . then will they hear from heaven" (II Chron. 7:14). Our downhill slide is not due to

prophecy being fulfilled, as some would have it, but because we have turned from God and sensible thinking. Christ is returning, not because of some historical upswing or downswing, but due to His own sovereign plan:

The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some men count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. (II Peter 3)

Certainly there are aspects of premillennial and postmillennial theology that we can appreciate, but to base all of our activity (or lack of it) on a debatable theological premise is a mistake.

The Caveman Myth

The earliest history of the world is quite fragmented since writing was not invented. Many centuries, perhaps even millennia, passed before writing developed--God did not create mankind with this skill (although He did apparently create us with the inherent ability to talk).

At one time, certain historians and archeologists held that writing had not been invented at the time of Moses, thus they felt it was impossible that he wrote the first five books of Moses. Yet the Bible says Moses wrote these books, often referred to as the "Pentateuch," and in the New Testament Jesus confirmed it. This used to be considered a major test of faith, but more recently archeologists have located artifacts from Sumer with writing well before the time of Abraham. Genuine science and the Bible correctly understood never contradict one another.

Another difficulty in studying early history is that in most cases evolution is assumed. This contrasts vividly with earlier historians who assumed a created world, usually arguing that the evidence of design indicates a Designer. Even the philosopher Aristotle used this argument.

Modern historians interpret the few details we have of early history according to the evolutionary dogma. Thus we have developed a "caveman" mythology complete with drawings

of hairy ape-like creatures that are supposedly our ancestors. While it is true that people lived in caves during early history (and a few still do) the assumption that we all came from hairy, ape-like ancestors is more the result of evolutionary bias than historical evidence. The drawings of the creatures are derived from a few bone fragments, most of which are quite similar to either modern apes or modern humans -- no complete skeletons of transitional forms are to be found.

Actually Darwin's^{vii} idea of the "survival of the fittest" is quite the opposite of Christ's statement that the "meek will inherit the earth." Evolution assumes that the world goes forward, evolving and naturally getting better. While most modern accounts of early history assume this, the actual historical records clearly indicate that decay is as often the case. Nearly every civilization has declined or disappeared.

It might be noted that evolutionist thinking has been around a long time. Even Moses, who wrote the book of Genesis, undoubtedly knew of an Egyptian myth that somewhat resembles our "modern" theory of origins. At the school Moses attended, the Egyptians taught that people came from worms that crawled out of the Nile. Thus when Moses wrote "In the beginning God created" he was clearly contradicting evolutionist thinking.

Again, language also produces problems for the evolutionist. While an "upward push" of language is assumed throughout history, there is no evidence for increasing complexity of language with time. The earliest languages were not simple; they were highly complex, as can be seen not only in archeological findings but also in the books of Moses.

The Development of Religion

Evolution has also been used as a part of several theories of how religion developed. Auguste Comte^{viii} believed that religion evolved in four stages. First people used fetishes, objects

which supposedly had magic powers, such as sticks, stones, necklaces or charms. Eventually fetishes gave way to polytheism, the belief in many gods which were more distant from the world.

From polytheism the number of gods eventually decreased until monotheism was achieved, the belief in one supreme God as both Judaism and Christianity teach. When humanity finally “comes of age” people realize God is not needed and atheism is achieved. People become their own gods.

Comte’s interesting theory fits quite well with evolutionary assumptions. Unfortunately it suffers from one rather serious flaw: no real evidence supports the theory. In fact, atheism is described in the Old Testament, “the fool hath said in his heart, there is no God,” long before the decline of fetishism and polytheism. Actually, all of the supposed stages continue to exist in various parts of the world, and one can make just as good an argument that monotheism came first with the other types of religion developing as a rejection of God.^{ix}

Another more credible theory is that of the great sociologist Emile Durkheim.^x He studies the aborigines in Australia and found a progression in their religion as time went by.

First, certain dominant traits became prized by the tribes, usually related to the survival of the group, such as physical strength or wisdom. Eventually these traits became associated with an animal, such as “strong as a bear” or “wise as an owl.” The animal is described by Durkheim as a “totem” and thus worshiped for the collective traits they represent.

Anthony Campolo^{xi} suggests that to a degree many Christians today are also totemistic—instead of worshiping the God of the Bible, many of us worship a god who is little more than the qualities we want him to be. We worship a god of our own creation. I suspect there is more truth

to this than we would like to admit: sometimes we worship a god we create in our own image instead of the God who created us in His image.

We certainly may have reservations about accepting all of Durkheim's concepts about how religion develops, since his study used a limited sampling of people. Indeed the Bible records totemistic religion (idols) early in the history of mankind, but long after our first parents talked with God in the garden.

An Evolving Bible?

Evolutionary thinking also pervades some of the thinking of liberal theologians. In 1875, the German scholar Wellhausen went through the Bible and attempted to show that the books of Moses were a pious fraud, partly written and extensively edited by priests long after Moses lived.^{xii} Wellhausen laid the groundwork for the JEDP theory, sometimes known as the "Documentary Hypothesis." Wellhausen's theory has largely collapsed because of contrary archeological finds^{xiii}, but many non-evangelical theologians still hold to many of his assumptions.

The basic point is that most popular accounts of prehistory are inaccurate because evolutionary assumptions are used, assumptions that have no proof and cannot be tested scientifically (science only deals with observable, repeatable phenomena, and evolution fails both of these tests). If one has faith in the doctrine of evolution, considerable manipulation is needed to obtain a fit between archeological findings and the theory, while the correspondence between the biblical record and the evidence is generally much better.^{xiv}

Sumer and Ur of the Chaldees

One of the oldest known civilizations was that of Sumer, near the Persian gulf, which

developed some time about 3500 B.C. Hyma and Stanton^{xv} tell us that Sumer may have been founded by Nimrod, one of Noah's grandsons. The Sumerians probably invented the wheel and written language. Sophisticated mathematical systems were developed, including arithmetic and geometry. Architecture also thrived, as the people of Sumer built a temple (called a "Ziggurat") which the Egyptians later copied for their pyramids. The city also had a complex sewage system. They even had a game similar to our checkers!

The people of Sumer faced high taxes by their rulers, who were also priests, and fought many wars with neighboring cities. A rich literature developed in Sumer, most of it religious mythology, proverbs, laws, and history.

Of particular interest to Christians and Jews are the legends of Sumer, recounted by Chaim Potok^{xvi}: "Enki ate forbidden fruit in a paradise called Dilmun; Ziusudra was saved from the flood and given eternal life." In the latter story, a god warned the king of a coming deluge, who then built a boat to survive. When the rain stopped, the king opened a window and allowed the sun, also a god, to illuminate the boat. Afterward Ziusudra offered sacrifices to the god who saved him, and as a result was allowed to live forever.

Clearly these early myths bear a striking resemblance to what we read in the book of Genesis. Are we to conclude that Moses (or some other writer) collected a number of popular tales for pleasure reading; the results being our Bible?

Behind most myths there is some actual event which has been exaggerated and twisted with the advent of time. Behind the tales of Sumer were actual events, events which are accurately recorded in the Bible. Whether God revealed the exact details to Moses, or if Moses collected accounts which were accurately handed down, we cannot be sure. But we can have

confidence that the biblical account is true to what happened. One can make just as good a case that the Sumerians borrowed from historically accurate accounts which were later included in the Bible.

After a brief rule by Sargon, an Akkadian, Sumer once again regained power. Its capital became Ur, a major seaport on the Persian Gulf. Ur flourished until overcome by wandering nomads about the year 2000 B.C. It was from the capital of this advanced civilization that Abraham “went out, not knowing where he was going” (Heb. 11:8). He traveled through Haran, a major crossroads of the time, “the Chicago of Mesopotamia,” says Potok.^{xvii} From there he went on to Palestine, leaving a well-developed civilization to live in a desolate “mission field” of sorts.

Tablets of the time describe a wandering group of people called the “Habiru,” wandering nomads, much like the seminomadic sheiks who now reside in the Middle East. Was Abraham a Sumerian, an Akkadian or a Habiru? It is difficult to say, but Potok believes the similarity of the words “Habiru” and Hebrew” may mean he was the first of many “wandering Jews.”

Chapter One

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- i. Edward Chiera, *They Wrote on Clay*.
 - ii. Oswald Spengler, *Decline of the West*.
 - iii. Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*.
 - iv. Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*.
 - v. Peterim Sorokin, *Crisis of Our Age and Man and Society in Calamity*.
 - vi. Francis Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?*
 - vii. Charles Darwin, *Origin of Species*.

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- viii. Harriet Martineau, ed., *The Positive Philosophy of August Comte*.
 - ix. Wilhelm Schmidt, *The Origin and Growth of Religion*.
 - x. Emile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*.
 - xi. Anthony Campolo, *A Reasonable Faith*, pp. 97-102.
 - xii. Julius Wellhausen, *History of Israel*.

 - xiii. Herman Wouk, *This is My God*, pp. 252-259.
 - xiv. Harry Orlinsky, *Ancient Israel* and William Albright, *Eternity*, (Feb. 1959).
 - xv. Albert Hyman and Mary Stanton, *Streams of Civilization*, vol. 1. pp. 34-42.
 - xvi. Chaim Potok, *Wanderings*, p. 32.
 - xvii. *Ibid*, p. 40.