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JOURNAL OF  
THE TRANSACTIONS  
OF  
The Victoria Institute  
OR  
Philosophical Society of Great Britain

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VOL. LXXXIV

1952



LONDON:

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PUBLISHED BY

THE INSTITUTE, 21, LOWER BELGRAVE STREET, WESTMINSTER,  
S.W.1.

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## 903<sup>RD</sup> ORDINARY GENERAL MEETING

HELD IN THE CAXTON HALL, WESTMINSTER, S.W.1. ON MONDAY,  
15<sup>TH</sup> OCTOBER, 1951.

D. J. WISEMAN, Esq., O.B.E., M.A., A.K.C., IN THE CHAIR.

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### *GOD IN HISTORY.*

By DR. FRANCIS RUE STEELE.

#### SYNOPSIS.

Scholars have frequently attempted to trace a pattern through the course of history. Most of them have failed utterly since they either ignored or denied God as the author and controller of every fact and event in the universe. It is possible to understand the true course and purpose of history only as we see all history as the outworking of a perfect, predetermined plan in the mind of a completely sovereign God. And this information may be found in its best and only detailed form in the Scriptures given by Him. Such knowledge mediated from the Inspired Word to the human mind by the Holy Spirit permits man to find his proper place in relation to God and to play his special part in the great pageant of history as a servant and child of God.

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**D**OES the course of history as far as we can trace it suggest any pattern or do events appear to take place haphazardly? If a pattern is at all discernible does it indicate progress or regress? The fact that some pattern at any rate is to be expected from a thorough study of history is ably set forth by Prof. William F. Albright of Johns Hopkins University. In his book *From the Stone Age to Christianity* he says, "It is not enough for the historian merely to accumulate a great mass of facts, no matter how well tested they may be as to their accuracy and how well selected with reference to their cogency and their representative character. Unless long occupation with those facts has impressed on him certain conclusions

as to the pattern which they form and the picture into which they fit, the accumulated mass will never become history.”<sup>1</sup> But what that pattern is constitutes a perplexing yet challenging question which appears to occupy men’s minds very much these days. Since there is a natural tendency to seek answers to present problems in past experience, men today surrounded by uncertainty and fear are anxiously looking back into history for some clue to their present predicament.

Science quite frankly assumes progress as the key to all history. Not unbroken or invariable progress, to be sure, but eventual progress in spite of frequent lapses or wrong turnings. The clearly documented course of technical progress during the past few centuries doubtless encourages this view, and inspires a transfer of the factor of progress from the technical to the biological realm. But when we approach the field of recorded human history the picture is by no means so clear. Those who look back fondly to the “golden age” apparently feel that the world has been getting steadily worse. Others who hopefully expect Utopia seem persuaded that, by and large, things are getting better. Many people, however, believe that the most one can discover from a close examination of history is a succession of cyclical ups and downs with no real progress or regress discernible. But all have failed to see the record of history in its true perspective. And this because most of the data are unknown and the only reliable clue has been ignored.

If by history we mean a record of past events selected and explained, then history *per se* must be limited to less than 5000 years, since we do not possess written records earlier than about 3000 B.C. Data from periods antedating the development of writing must be passed over as relatively inarticulate and ambiguous regarding human spiritual or psychological concepts, and hence irrelevant for our present purposes. Such a limitation is a serious but imperative one if we are to speak in terms of significant development and change in human history, since the psychological nature of man is of far greater importance than either his physical make-up or mechanical abilities. Yet we are, by that fact, strictly limited to the period of recorded history, since it is only through the communication of his thoughts and concepts by means of written records that ancient man is able to provide us with any clear insight into his mental and spiritual being. The

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<sup>1</sup> W. F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity* (1946), p. 48.

arbitrary association of technical with psychical development in human history—common to most scientific disciplines—is based upon the assumption that man's ideas and skills were alike learned one by one as a result of extensive experimentation. What clear evidence there is, however, suggests that psychologically at least man 5000 years ago was just as humane or bestial as he is today; apart, of course, from the influence of the Judæo-Christian religion as it is sometimes called. It is pure speculation which projects the theory beyond the scope of written records and posits a primitive man, totally void of any religious or æsthetic consciousness, groping his way about in a world to which he reacted by sub-human grunts and squeals until at last he reached a civilized state and began to develop his mind. Yet this concept in one guise or another forms the major premise in the theory of history for most people today; hypothetical, perhaps, but an essential prerequisite to the idea of "progress" which serves as a psychological sedative for the troubled thinkers in our present political chaos. Prof. William A. Irwin of the University of Chicago exemplifies this school of thought. In an article entitled "The Orientalist as Historian" he writes, "It is convenient to set the problem immediately in its broadest scope: Will anyone deny that modern life is better than that of our remote ancestors of Palæolithic and long anterior times?" After pointing out that considerable brutality still exists he goes on to say, "But they are not the total, if indeed they are the significant, characteristic of modern man. What of the longing for universal peace founded on right and truth which permeates all levels of society in a way never known before? What of the ever-widening sense of social responsibility which constitutes the unique contribution of Western culture to the total achievement of the ages? . . . qualities which permeate in varying measure the historic period of man's life but which, if available evidence may be trusted, were present only in embryonic forms in *Pithecanthropus*, Neanderthal man, and their descendants for tens of thousands of years? The time is long past when serious scholarship can glorify 'the noble savage'; no one whose opinion is worth considering will assert that civilized life is no better."<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, history as the Bible explains it witnesses the divine resolution of conflict between the wilfulness of man and the will of God. A conflict which began by disobedience

<sup>2</sup> *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 8 (1949), p. 308.

in Eden, bringing a chaos of confusion, and leading to blind wilful experimentation which shall be concluded in divine judgment, restoring the universe to unity in the will of God. No secular document of history, no matter what its source, can reveal more than human attempts to steer the world this way or that with the oar of political institutions while ignoring the Pilot in control at the helm. Patterns derived from such documents can at best depict fluctuations in the present turmoil, but give no hint as to the true course and real purpose behind life much as the countless eddies along the banks of a river swirling in constantly shifting directions fail to indicate the flow of the great stream itself.

Suppose we had chanced upon a pageant being performed in the open air by a great company of actors. It is already in progress when we arrive and for some time we can make neither head nor tail of the plot. We do not know how much has transpired, who the major characters are, or what their relationship to each other is. We must deduce what we can from the isolated incident now being played before us. In these circumstances how is it possible to fathom the meaning of the pageant as a whole? However, if by some document or person we are told who the leading characters are and what the drift of the plot is, we can readily understand the present action, and perhaps gain some clue as to the eventual outcome. Viewed in these terms man stands today in the pageant of life with a role to play. Unless he is willing to accept the information and guidance of the Bible, he can never know what is going on around him, much less how to conduct himself in the part he has to play. The Bible names the principal characters and sketches the plot, giving explicit directions to every human player how he must conduct himself if he would adjust himself harmoniously to the scheme of the Author. Unless we credit the Biblical record of the activity and motives of God, man, and Satan, we cannot understand the enigma of human history. Only a clear recognition of the fact of sin and its resultant corrupting power balanced against the redemptive plan and purpose of God as set forth in the Bible will enable us to judge events aright. The confusion of mind in those who do not accept the Biblical explanation at face value is further witnessed by Prof. Irwin who writes, "Man is an incredible complex of contradictory impulses. He seems to be the most extreme of the animals, at once the most idealistic and the most brutal; the kindest and the most savage. He

aspires to realms of the spirit completely denied to his fellow-creatures, and yet none of them can sink to such depravity as he. Here is the total base for all theories of historic pluralism. And yet mankind is one, as the individual is one. And man's governing impulses may be simplified into a single statement: he wants the better."<sup>3</sup> Granted that God's revelation of the true nature of the present predicament of man together with His solution of it alone can provide one with true perspective for and understanding of history both personal and general, this leads us directly to the fundamental question: Is the Bible trustworthy? Here is where the battle with the enemy is joined in earnest; here the most devastating and deceptive attack upon the Scriptures is launched by the "father of lies" and his disciples. They know full well that if the integrity and consequent authority of the Bible can be successfully challenged, the very foundation of Christianity will be swept away, leaving mankind floundering in a maelstrom of conflicting human opinions.

The past two centuries have witnessed increasingly bitter and insidious attacks upon the historical accuracy of the Bible. Open attack and blatant denial, however, have in recent years largely given way to persuasive rationalism and false agreement. All such positions, however, and every variation of them are characterized by a deliberate refusal to accept the Bible reverently and obediently as the inspired inerrant Word of God. Speaking generally, three groups of opponents have ranged themselves against the historic position with regard to Biblical inspiration: forthright opponents who say that the Bible cannot be totally reliable; fifth columnists who say that it is not; and faithless believers who say that it need not be. The first, the forthright opponents, confidently and flatly state that the Bible cannot be totally reliable. It is a human document, they say, and must of necessity partake of that human fallibility. This attitude clearly springs from a prior denial of the existence of God in any true sense. Once the step was taken to limit scientific investigation to the natural realm and to operate upon the principle of natural laws alone there was no place for a supernatural God or, for that matter, for a supernatural revelation, the Bible. This step was not taken, however, as a result of the compelling force of facts, but rather through an arbitrary shift in the basic philosophy underlying scientific investigation. Purely upon the basis of a philosophical premise it was decided that the super-

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 306.

natural realm would no longer be admitted as a legitimate sphere of reference; hence no God, and no divine revelation. Accordingly, all we have left is a record of man's attempt to adjust himself to, and master, his environment; in the pursuit of which course he invented first magic and then religion to help him overcome his fear of the unseen and the unknown. This false premise is basic to the works of Toynbee, Sorokin, and Kroeber, to mention a few selected examples of non-Christian philosophies of history. Even after the veneration of superstition has been removed, however, there is still much that is untrustworthy in the Bible, we are told, since it arose from the undeveloped mind of ancient man with his naive and primitive concepts. Not only is such a Bible shorn of the dignity and respect which it once enjoyed; it is also virtually a fraud, since it pretends to speak with an authority which it does not have about things of which it has no knowledge.

However, much of the strength of this attack has been nullified by the results of archaeological discoveries during the past half century. Presumed historical inaccuracies were confidently cited as confirmatory evidence for the far more sweeping denials, based for the most part on subjective prejudice, which were intended to destroy completely the spiritual authority of the Bible. Here, in the very arena of historical criticism where the factual assault upon the Bible was made, the tide of battle has turned. Scores of historical events recorded in the Bible have been confirmed, often in minute detail. The names of kings and generals, peoples and nations, all lost to us for centuries—apart from the Biblical record—are now known from contemporaneous monuments and records which exhibit remarkable agreement with the Hebrew text. Furthermore, innumerable details of daily life and social customs found in the Old Testament perfectly reflect the times of the events described as shown by the evidence recovered by archaeological excavations. In short, the Bible put to the most rigorous test in the only realm where any scientific discipline can offer legitimate criticisms—political and social history—stands fully accredited. No *fact* found has contradicted the Word of God.<sup>4</sup>

The fifth columnists, in this case as usual, operate from within the ranks. Their number includes many a seminary professor as well as innumerable clergymen. It is not so much impossible

<sup>4</sup> D. J. Wiseman, "Some Recent Trends in Biblical Archaeology," *Transactions of the Victoria Institute* 82 (1950), pp. 1 ff.

for them to believe that the Bible is inerrant and totally reliable as it is inconvenient. Calling themselves Christians, but sounding more like Unitarians or Deists with a vague concept of divine providence, they are at the same time careful to keep one foot firmly on the ground of scientific rationalism in order to permit themselves the privilege of exercising critical judgment upon the validity of all truth, religious as well as secular. They have arrived at this philosophic position at the expense of the two major historic Christian doctrines, which deal with the person of God and the principle of revelation. It was inevitable that if the independence and autonomy of man be emphasized, that emphasis must effect a curtailing of the power and authority of a once sovereign God. The whole issue hangs on this point. If God be God in the fullest sense of the term, man, by contrast or comparison, must, in taking his proper place with reference to God, be a subordinate dependent creature. Final authority and absolute truth must repose in God alone. Therefore, as a direct corollary, not only can there be no absolute standard known to man apart from that communicated to him by God, but also it is incumbent upon God thus to communicate knowledge of Himself and His will to His intelligent creatures; hence the imperative need for a direct divine revelation. On the other hand, if one proceeds upon the basic supposition that man can and must exercise freedom of choice and action independent of supernatural interference or control, it follows that the sovereignty of God is limited, and the pre-eminent authority of the revelation thereby repudiated. Man ceases to listen, and begins to look; he does not receive but rather discovers for himself. However, such searching in matters of philosophy or religion can be carried on—as in the fields of scientific research—only in a spirit of continual scepticism towards current ideas. A healthy scepticism promotes curiosity and stimulates further investigation, which in turn may well result in the discovery of further truth; generally at the expense of contemporary ideas or else by modification of them. The attitude of scepticism is as inherent to this philosophy as it is foreign to the concept of a sovereign God who gave a special Revelation. In the latter case the Bible must be absolutely and objectively true in order to be the Revelation it professes to be. In the former case, although the Bible may contain more useful ideas than any other religious book, it cannot contain absolute truth, and hence cannot speak with absolute authority.

It is interesting to note that Prof. Herbert Butterfield, of Cambridge University, in his recent book *Christianity and History*, betrays this fundamental weakness every time he touches upon the question of sources and authority for Biblical facts and statements. In discussing the development of religious ideas among the Hebrews in his introduction, Butterfield uses such words as "realize," "apprehend," "search," and "discover," to describe the method whereby the Hebrew writers got their ideas. He further states with regard to the control of Providence, "It is better worldly-wisdom, even when we are only looking for a pictorial representation, to think of history as though an intelligence were moving over the story, taking its bearings afresh after everything men do, and making its decisions as it goes along—decisions sometimes unpredictable and carrying our purposes further than we wanted them to go. There is no symbolic representation that will do justice to history save the composer I have already mentioned, who composes the music as we go along, and, when we slip into aberrations, switches his course in order to make the best of everything."<sup>5</sup> And this remarkable statement is included in a chapter entitled "God in History." It is well-nigh impossible to conceive of a representation less qualified to describe a Creator God and His relationship to His universe than this.

Speaking of the authors of the New Testament books, Butterfield generously grants that "the Gospel narrative gives us something authentic on which to build"<sup>6</sup>; but adds later on with regard to their concern for accuracy in composition: "such men may be so interested in the essential points—and particularly in the moral issues—that they do not greatly concern themselves about the question whether an event happened on Wednesday or on Friday, in Birmingham or in Bristol."<sup>7</sup>

Throughout the whole of his book one detects the idea that exceptional men in past generations gradually moulded the form of their theology or philosophy in accordance with the reaction of their inherent insight or native genius to their experiences and circumstances. These "prophets" who faced up to the moral issues of their day and pondered the enigma of human history, individual as well as corporate, apparently viewed the total problem in the light of a divine Providence brooding

<sup>5</sup> Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and History* (1950), p. 109.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

over the universe, permitting partial chance glimpses of Himself now and then, more or less at random, to those who most earnestly sought such visions. Nowhere in the book is there the slightest hint of a supreme Deity working out a preordained plan, some details of which He deliberately and purposefully divulged to specially chosen men whose duty it was to transmit this revealed information to their fellow creatures. According to the Bible, the initiative in revelation lay with God ; according to Butterfield it was up to men to do the best they could under the circumstances. In the Bible, God declares truth with finality ; Butterfield says that men speculate hopefully. Since human discovery can only provide temporary relative truth, and the Bible is—by this theory—essentially a human document, it is naturally subject to subsequent correction in all matters, theological as well as historical.

A somewhat different explanation is offered by Prof. Albright. He suggests that it was not so much a matter of unconcern or lack of control of necessary information which renders some portions of the Bible inaccessible to scientific criticism or unacceptable as historically verified, but rather that the subjects treated and the ideas expounded are of such nature that they cannot be dissected with the tools of the professional historian. In speaking of the writers of the Gospels and their historical objectivity, he says that they were men who were "overwhelmed by the profound experiences and the extreme tension of mind and body through which they had passed. Men who see the boundary between conventional experience and the transcendental world dissolving before their very eyes are not going to distinguish clearly between things seen in the plane of nature and things seen in the world of the spirit. To speak of the latter as 'hallucinations' is quite misleading, since nothing like them is otherwise known either to historians or to psychologists. Here the historian has no right to deny what he cannot disprove. He has a perfect right to unveil clear examples of charlatanry, of credulity, or of folklore, but in the presence of authentic mysteries his duty is to stop and not to attempt to cross the threshold into a world where he has no right of citizenship."<sup>8</sup> Albright does not, however, explain how the historian is to distinguish an "authentic mystery" from a case of "credulity" or even of "charlatanry." If this judgment may be successfully exercised,

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<sup>8</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 300.

it seems to me that the event would stand justified as historic or non-historic by that very decision. It is the responsibility of a historian in criticising the record of an event to determine whether it actually occurred or not; that is to say, whether it is true history or not. But surely it is not incumbent upon the humble historian to explain how the event could have taken place. In other words, if there is sufficient valid evidence for the destruction of Jericho or the resurrection of Jesus Christ, that event may be considered as verifiable history by the conscientious historian without his feeling any obligation to determine whether natural or so-called supernatural powers were involved. Of course, if the historian has previously determined in his own mind that any event which is not susceptible of explanation upon the grounds of known natural laws must be denoted as spurious or fictional, he will not be so much concerned with criticising the documentary evidence. Instead he will exercise the option to which Prof. Irwin refers when he says that "not uncommonly the Orientalist has no recourse other than to evaluate his sources on the grounds of intrinsic credibility alone."<sup>9</sup> On these grounds he will reject the historicity of any supernatural event since it will be "intrinsically incredible" to him. With regard to the literal accuracy of the Gospels, Albright writes, "We can never know to just what extent details of the messianic framework of the Gospels are *literally* true. Because of their highly intimate and personal character some of them are set forever beyond the reach of the critical historian, within whose epistemological range they cannot be drawn. In other words, the historian cannot control the details of Jesus' birth and resurrection and thus has no right to pass judgment upon their historicity."<sup>10</sup> Apparently, if the factor of supernaturalism were not involved the historian could criticize the account of the birth of Jesus in exactly the same manner as he would the birth records of any other individual who lived centuries ago. Certainly it is not the "intimate and personal character" of the event which causes a cold-blooded man of science to shy away. But we gain further insight into this strange reluctance of Albright's when we read that "Since, accordingly, there can be no factual judgment and since the historian cannot settle questions which are outside of his jurisdiction, the decision must be left to the Church and to the individual believer, who are historically warranted in

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<sup>9</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 299.

<sup>10</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 307.

accepting the whole of the messianic framework of the Gospels or in regarding it as partly true literally and as partly true spiritually. . . ."<sup>11</sup>

I must confess I fail to understand how an event can be partly true literally and partly true spiritually. If, for example, Jesus Christ was born of a virgin that fact is true literally. If, on the other hand, Joseph was His natural father, the Biblical record is false and cannot by the wildest stretch of the imagination be described as spiritually true although literally untrue. In effect, what we appear to have here is a hybrid and unreal sort of category which might be described as "super-history." An event may not have occurred exactly as described and therefore not be literally true yet it need not be labelled fictional or non-historic since it is "spiritually true;" it belongs to "super-history." Needless to say, I cannot conceive of such an irrational and highly imaginative category, nor can I believe that it will be widely employed among historians apart from exceptional circumstances. Should the need arise for a historian to provide himself with an escape from the dilemma arising from passing judgment upon the historicity of a Biblical event whose spiritual truth he desires to retain, but whose historic circumstances—involving the incredible operation of supernatural power—are repugnant to the finer instincts of his scientific background and training, it will be quite convenient to characterize the event as super-historic, and thus retain the spiritual truth without endangering his scientific reputation. So far as truly scientific historical judgment upon a recorded event is concerned, however, a thorough historian will give one of three answers: it is verifiable and therefore true history; it is demonstrably false and therefore not true history; or there is as yet insufficient evidence to decide. To confuse a simple situation by adding a fictitious category like "super-history" is absurd.

The third group, described as the faithless believers, consists of truly Christian people who through innocent fearfulness have been misled by deceitful misrepresentation of the facts about Biblical inspiration. They may not have adopted the so-called new orthodoxy as a result of personal investigation of the theological points involved nor, for the most part, because they were persuaded by alleged facts that the Bible can no

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<sup>11</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 308.

longer be considered as literally inspired. But largely through the cunning deceit of a concept which is presented as more intelligent or more mature, they have been told that to hold to verbal inspiration means to confine oneself to a mechanical and unimaginative theory which limits the scope and activity of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, it is suggested that the really important function of the Biblical revelation is to communicate ideas which may be experienced personally, not just words or letters which can be counted and checked impersonally. For, we are told, the chief purpose in the giving of the revelation was to acquaint sinners with the person of the Saviour, not to provide literary data for academic argument. The most serious aspect of this theory is that it is partly true; yet surely we have here a perfect example of the adage, "A half-truth is worse than a whole lie." No one will question the statement that the primary purpose of the giving of the Scriptures was to set forth the plan of God in salvation and proclaim the person and atoning work of the Redeemer. But in a written record this knowledge is inextricably bound up in the words of the text. It is impossible to separate the one from the other. The validity of the ideas is directly proportionate to the integrity of the text. It is not enough that the text be only generally true; it must be literally accurate if the ideas it conveys are to be accepted at face value. On the other hand, significant demonstrable error in a written text automatically casts serious doubt upon the reliability of the meaning of the document; a doubt which, moreover, in the nature of the spiritual truth involved in the Bible is not susceptible to subjective correction or supplementation by finite human beings. If the truth revealed in the Bible be divine eternal truth—which alone is relevant to the message and situation—then the Bible must be an objective witness to God's will, entirely independent of human influence or control. This can only be true, however, if the whole Bible is true and, moreover, entirely true.

Now then, we come to the second proposition offered by those who say that the Bible need not be totally reliable. By way of accommodating themselves to the modern attack upon the historic passages of the Bible, they have modified the generally accepted evangelical orthodox statement with regard to the inspiration of the Bible, so that it runs something like this: "we believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice; but that does not necessarily imply

that it is likewise inerrant in statements of history and science."<sup>12</sup> The manifest absurdity of such a position is immediately apparent. In the first place, it is contrary to the very nature of a personal self-revealing God that He give a revelation of Himself in any but a perfectly reliable and intelligible form. Moreover, it is impossible to separate the spiritual lesson or example from the historical narrative in which it is contained in order to accept the one and reject the other. It is as important to the lesson of supreme faith derived therefrom that Abraham actually climbed Mount Moriah with his son Isaac fully intending to perform a human sacrifice there at God's command, as is the fact of the empty tomb in the garden close by Calvary essential to the truth and power of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. In neither case can the spiritual truth be separated from the historic event. If the incident described occurred, we can turn to the spiritual lesson or truth with absolute confidence. If not, the alleged "truth" and the fictitious event are alike obscured by the same fog of doubt.

Furthermore, it is quite wrong for the Christian to apply to the Bible the check of secular history as though the latter deserved priority in respect to authority. It is indeed strange that Christian scholars should discredit clear reasonable historic statements in Scripture upon the basis of isolated and often questionable data in secular records, as though the authors of the latter must be presumed to report truthfully without exception, while Biblical writers can easily be charged with falsification or accidental error. On the contrary, secular history must be seen in the light of Scripture and Scriptural principles if it is to be rightly understood. The Bible alone contains what God has chosen to reveal explicitly to man regarding His purpose and plan in the universe. It is only here that we have specific statements informing us that God raised up a certain king or nation to accomplish a determined purpose. No other document explains that military defeats and catastrophes befell men because they had disobeyed God. Yet without such clues we should be at a loss to explain the true meaning of history. We could simply record the fact that certain events occurred at a given time and place and let it go at that. But with the Bible as a guide to the principles of God's dealings with mankind in that it illustrates the application of these principles in specific

<sup>12</sup> The writer has included considerable material at this point from an article of his in the magazine *HIS* of the American IVF, June 1951.

cases, we can infer from these instances the purposes and motives involved, and use them to interpret subsequent similar events both in world history and in our own lives. Thus we make practical application of the lessons learned from the Biblical account of history. However, if the reliability of the narratives in the Biblical text is called into question or the principle of divine revelation is denied in the name of "science" we are left to our cloudy and limited imagination for answers to the question of the purpose of life and the course of history. We must accept the Bible completely, or else reject it entirely to our everlasting confusion; there is no middle ground. From the very beginning the Bible sets forth one great immutable principle; obedience brings blessing, disobedience brings punishment. This principle is implied in every recorded event and enunciated explicitly in most. The success of the campaign to occupy Canaan found in the tenth chapter of the book of Joshua is credited there to the power of God. Over and over again we read, "the Lord delivered up the Amorites . . . the Lord fought for Israel . . . the Lord delivered Lachish into the hand of Israel," etc. Likewise, the destruction of Samaria and the subsequent downfall of Israel is specifically related to the disobedience of God's people, "for the children of Israel walked in all the sins of Jeroboam . . . until the Lord removed Israel out of His sight" (2 Kings 17: 22). The fact that the Israelites occupied Canaan is well attested in history by the break in Canaanite culture and the new super-imposed settlements of the invaders discovered in the mounds of ancient cities dug by modern archæologists. The reason why, and the means by which, the invasion was accomplished, however, are known to us only through the Bible. Moreover, the spiritual principle—favoured obedience and punished disobedience—is illustrated in actual fact by historic instances.

If it were possible to prove, for example, that King Sennacherib reduced Jerusalem in the same ruthless fashion that swept its neighbours under the Assyrian yoke despite the Biblical account to the contrary there would be no point to the recorded promise of divine protection for a repentant king of Judah. Indeed, the whole story would be a hollow mockery, and the testimony of the Bible generally would suffer irreparable damage. Suppose, as some historians would have us believe, a small bedraggled band of Hebrews escaped from Egyptian slavery, and, wandering into Canaan, stumbled upon congenial relatives there and

gradually built up the relatively insignificant and culturally inferior kingdom of Israel more or less by accident. What conceivable meaning could there be to the magnificent and oft-repeated theme "I am the Lord your God who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage . . . to set you in the land that I swore before to your fathers to give unto you" ?

If, on the other hand, God did raise up the Chaldean monarch Nebuchadnezzar to carry Judah into captivity in punishment for their sins ; if indeed He did raise up the Persian king Cyrus later to release the captives and allow them to return to their country and rebuild the Temple and Jerusalem as God had promised, then we have cogent and compelling evidence for the Biblical premise that God is interested in, and in control of, the affairs of men. Moreover, we would be able to trace a coherent historic pattern from the Garden of Eden to the Garden of Gethsemane ; a single consistent plan, disclosed through a gradually unfolding revelation, of divine grace seeking rebellious sinners and effecting reconciliation between God and man on the cross of Calvary where God the Son bore the just punishment of God the Father for the sin of mankind. All history before and after this great event must be seen in relation to it in order to be properly understood. Consequently, the God of creation and Calvary, is at the same time the God of history and of current events, and we can detect evidence of His working even to-day in history, in prophecy, and in our daily lives.

Opponents of the Bible have told us that, on scientific grounds, it simply cannot be totally reliable ; from within the Christian camp comes the declaration that, upon thorough examination, it can be demonstrated that the Bible actually is not totally reliable ; and more and more in Christian circles everywhere to-day we hear the supposedly reassuring word that, after all, it need not be totally—that is, historically—reliable. What shall we say to these things ? Simply this : for all practical purposes the Bible must be in itself totally reliable if it is to speak with authority to human beings about eternal truth, since they are not themselves capable of exercising critical selection in this field. Furthermore, if the Bible really is the Word of God, it not only can be, but by that very token is, totally reliable ; being the special revelation of God by God to mankind. Consequently, the sincere Christian believer can go to the Bible with perfect confidence, knowing that it is "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for

instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (2 Tim. 3: 16, 17).

#### DISCUSSION.

The Chairman (Mr. D. J. WISEMAN) said: I know I voice your thoughts when I say that we have been listening to a most timely and thought-provoking paper. It is an honour to have with us an American scholar, for the Victoria Institute owes much to the continued support of its many loyal Fellows, Members and Associates in that country. It is interesting to recall that the last American archæologist to address us was, I believe, Professor Melvin G. Kyle who was then returning from his explorations in the Sodom (Dead Sea) area with Mr. William F. Albright in 1927. We have surpassed this achievement by having Professor Steele, a colleague of Professor Albright, to address us before he leaves for Nippur (Iraq) where he will be epigraphist for the third season and carry out his duties as Annual Professor of the American School of Archæology in Baghdad. Dr. Steele speaks as one who is well versed in literature contemporary with the earliest Biblical records.

I like the analysis of the answers which a thorough, and therefore truly scientific, historian can make when applying historical method to assaying the Biblical written history. It takes true Christian courage and humility for any scientist to say "I do not know; there is yet insufficient evidence to decide." For this reason I am grateful that Dr. Steele has emphasized the weakness of the "science" of Biblical archæology, which is largely due to a lack of concentration of evidence upon any one Biblical point. The result of failing to realize this weakness has been that some earnest Christians have, I believe, erred in the same way as some eager critics of the Bible in quoting as facts what in reality are but hypotheses, and in making these the basis of detailed arguments to support their case, and through it, their faith. By this I do not mean that there are not very many points where Holy Writ is remarkably and emphatically confirmed by archæological studies. This is to be expected where God has revealed Himself in a time and place which comes within the limited realm of knowledge yet entered by the human mind. With Dr. Steele I would say that the authority

of the Bible and its historical reliability ultimately rest outside the area of mere historical investigation.

Mr. GORDON BARNES said : Any piece of original research, whether historical, scientific, linguistic, or any other, implies certain presuppositions ; and the validity of the conclusions to which that research gives rise depends, to a very large extent, upon the validity of those presuppositions. Thus, the historian presupposes that history is a continuous process, and that events are explicable in terms of earlier events. Furthermore, he makes certain assumptions about the particular kind of relation between events ; e.g., if he is an economic historian, he seeks an explanation in terms of wealth, mineral resources, balance of trade, standard of living, etc. ; if he is interested in political history, he interprets history in terms of political factions, balance of power, national sovereignty, etc. ; if his interests lie in sociology, he conceives of causes lying in tribal customs, culture, civilizations, etc.

All of these interpretations of history may be valid as partial explanations, but whether they are or not depends upon whether the basic presuppositions are valid. A present-day problem in physics may illustrate this point. It is well known that there are two different interpretations of light, both valid as partial interpretations, the wave theory, and the corpuscular theory ; but when these theories are used to explain the phenomenon of diffraction a difficulty arises. On the basis of the wave theory, a ray of light must be regarded as taking one path through the diffraction grating, while, on the basis of the corpuscular theory, it must be viewed as taking another course. There are thus two explanations of diffraction dependent upon two different presuppositions, but these two explanations are mutually inconsistent because neither of the presuppositions is a true concept of the nature of light. Presumably, if and when the truth is known about the nature of light, it will then be possible to frame a satisfactory explanation of the phenomenon of diffraction.

Now, historians are busy producing many partial explanations of history, based upon various presuppositions, but if any of those presuppositions are inconsistent with the ultimate truth of history, false (and possibly inconsistent) interpretations will result.

In the Scriptures we find, divinely revealed, the ultimate truth

concerning history. Christ said, "I am the Truth," and all human intellectual disciplines will achieve their true aim only in so far as they bear the correct relationship to the Person of Christ. History is no exception. As Creator, He is the Originator of history; as Redeemer, He is the Centre of history; and, as King of kings, He is the Consummation of history. The Old Testament consistently points forward to the death of Christ; the New Testament naturally flows from it.

We, as Christians, not only know that God is controlling all history, but we also have had revealed to us the plan to which He is working. "For God has allowed us to know the secret of His Plan, and it is this: He purposes in His sovereign will that all human history shall be consummated in Christ, that everything that exists in Heaven or earth shall find its perfection and fulfilment in Him." (Ephesians 1: 9-10, *Letters to Young Churches. A Translation of the New Testament Epistles*, by J. B. Phillips, Geoffrey Bles, 1947.)

#### WRITTEN COMMUNICATIONS.

Rev. J. STAFFORD WRIGHT wrote: I have enjoyed Dr. Steele's paper. There are probably three main reasons why people find difficulty in accepting the entire accuracy of the Bible, even when they accept Dr. Steele's logical argument that as a revelation from God it ought to be wholly accurate.

1. They cannot believe that a high truth about God could be given suddenly, but feel bound to hold that spiritual ideas must grow gradually by a hit-and-miss process. Consequently they rewrite the Bible revelation in terms of an evolution of religious thought. But in the physical and mental spheres the indications are that great things have come in suddenly and not only by the process of evolution. J. G. Bennett in his book *What are we living for?* writes: "It is assumed that our science and technology are in every respect an advance upon anything which existed in the remote past. If this were true, it would be difficult to account for some of the achievements of prehistoric man, such as the domestication of animals and plants. At some time in the early history of mankind, this extraordinary technological achievement was realized. We depend very largely for our existence upon agricultural achievements the origin of which goes back beyond the dawn of history. With

all the progress of biological science, we have scarcely succeeded in domesticating a single animal or a single plant not known to our early ancestors. It is true that through breeding we have made great improvements, but all our accomplishments in this respect are not impressive when compared with those of what we are pleased to call 'primitive' man" (pp. 104f.)

In the mental sphere, too, great poets and painters appear suddenly. The art of the early cave paintings is as fine as anything today. Homer and Shakespeare were not the climax of a gradually improving series of poets. Hence, purely by analogy we may reason that in the spiritual realm great truths will be given suddenly and that they will appear early in the history of mankind as well as later.

2. There is a certain bias against miracles. This is again a product of our scientific age. Today, however, the rejection of miracles is less reasonable than it was. The advancing frontiers of science, and the fuller investigations of the reach of the mind, lend greater credibility to some of the Biblical records of miracles. This does not mean that we can prove that the miracles really happened, but we can no longer assert confidently that miracles are impossible. This subject has been dealt with before in this Institute, and will be dealt with again.

3. The existence of difficulties in the Bible is a great stumbling-block. Dr. Steele has rightly pointed out that a number of these difficulties have been cleared up as further evidence has come to light. It is only reasonable to point out that there are equally serious difficulties and apparent contradictions in God's other great revelation, the created universe. But no scientist will accept the fact that these difficulties and contradictions are real, in the sense that they cannot ultimately be harmonized.

There is one point in the paper on page 13, where Dr. Steele speaks about checking Biblical history by secular records. I think he has safeguarded his statements sufficiently, but those of us who believe the historical accuracy of the Bible cannot ignore secular records, even when they create difficulties for us, as they do at present over the date of the Exodus. We must try to distinguish between known historical facts, and deductions that

are drawn from those facts, and this applies to the Bible facts as well as to the facts discovered by archæology. If the records in the Bible are true, they cannot in the last resort be out of harmony with any other truth. Therefore the student of the Bible will welcome all truth, from whatever source it comes.

Dr. R. E. D. CLARK wrote: The subject of this paper is not discussed at all until we are very near to its end. For the rest, we are told repeatedly that the Bible is reliable. One such statement would have been enough. There might then have been room for the author to develop his thesis.

As it stands the thesis hardly seems convincing. God chose a people for Himself and dealt with them as a father deals with his children. This, surely, is the teaching of the Old Testament. But does the Bible bid us jump from here to the conclusion that God deals with all men as He dealt with His own people? Surely not. Yet without even arguing the case, the Lecturer assumes that this is so and he even goes further than this; for he seems to say (though ambiguously) that the principles which governed God's dealings with Israel are those which God uses in His dealings with us "in our daily lives." Such teaching, if intended without qualification is profoundly unscriptural. In dealing with Israel God rewarded godliness with earthly prosperity. That is not the promise God offers to Christians.

Some of the criticisms directed against Herbert Butterfield seem unfair. If Butterfield errs in one direction, could not an equally good case be made for saying that the Lecturer errs in the other? The reiterated theme that "in the Bible God declared truth with finality" is true, but it is also a half truth, and it is Butterfield who supplies the missing half. For God's revelations cannot be understood by all men—even the spiritually minded can only understand them partially. Words like "apprehend," "search," etc., are appropriate words with which to describe the process by which saints in all ages have seen the light.

The Lecturer is most critical of Butterfield's picture of an Almighty Intelligence who, "when we slip into aberrations, switches His course in order to make the best of everything." But Butterfield is not the first to have seen God's hand in history operating in this

way. Is not Butterfield expressing the thoughts of St. Paul in Romans? Is it not the matchless way in which God "switches His course in order to make the best of everything" that calls forth the Apostle's exultant cry: "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and his ways past finding out!"?

Mr. KNOPP wrote: I should like, if I may, to welcome wholeheartedly the paper by Dr. Steele. Several statements therein are deserving of special attention and wide publicity.

The elimination of the supernatural realm, and of God Himself, as a legitimate hypothesis was due not to the compelling force of facts, but to an arbitrary shift in the basis of philosophy—in one word, to prejudice.

The tide of battle in the field of historical criticism has indeed turned. In scores of instances the critics' shout of triumph has proved premature. But, so far from acknowledging this, the predominant school of thought searches ever more feverishly for fresh openings for attack—to be driven also from these as knowledge accumulates.

The protest against exalting statements unearthed in secular records above Biblical history is especially timely. We know how dictators of our own time can falsify and have falsified history, and we have plenty of evidence to show that their brothers of the ancient world were equally guilty.

I welcome most of all the last part of the paper, in which the Author stands for the orthodox view of verbal inspiration, and protests against the loose view that the Bible, not being a scientific textbook, need not be reliable in matters of science or of fact. That the *words* of the Bible are inspired is fundamental to Christianity. The Apostle Paul bases an argument on the number of a noun in Scripture (Gal. 3: 16). But we can have no higher authority than our Lord Himself, who in one place lays great stress on the tense of a verb (Matt. 22: 32), and in another said, "The Scripture cannot be broken." There is no hint of any unreliability or the least imperfection, though he inveighed against the accretions, alterations and interpretations of the Jews. In His great contest with Satan His whole defence consists of words written in Scripture. No

believer in verbal inspiration has ever treated the words of Scripture with greater respect than Jesus did.

That the Bible is reliable where it touches matters of fact or of science is also fundamental. The reliability does not, of course, extend to the various interpretations by the Church or by men in different ages. The late Professor McNeile Dixon said, in his famous Gifford Lectures, "It is better to forget what Science said yesterday if you are to believe what she says to-day." But men cannot say this of Scripture. We may climb the foothills of truth, but the lofty peaks remain for ever impregnable to man unaided. He who formed the peaks, and who knows the "balancings of the clouds" (Job 37 : 16) miraculously inspired men to write the Scriptures. Men are slowly discovering that He also preserved them from error.

Lt. Col. L. MERSON DAVIES wrote : I heartily agree with Dr. Steele. As he says, if the Bible's historic statements are not true, then its theology falls to the ground. More than any other religion, Christianity is based upon *historic facts*, from Creation to Calvary and the empty tomb. If these are not really *historic facts*, then the Gospel of Redemption loses its basis, and we have merely a code of ethics backed by fables.

It was to meet attacks upon Bible history at their source, that I early took up the study of geology ; and now, as a D.Sc. in the same, I criticize the doctrine of organic evolution so drastically, on a basis of fossil *facts*, that the B.B.C. (who had asked me to broadcast, as a "scientist of repute") would not, after seeing my script, allow me even 15 minutes to state those *admittedly true* facts. Yet they now allow Dr. Julian Huxley (who has no status in geology) to broadcast fact-obscuring representations in favour of evolution, for six periods of 45 minutes each—or for 18 times as long.

No wonder that the public, which is never allowed to hear both sides, does not realize that the supposed scientific case for rejecting Scripture is "science falsely so called" from the start. And, as Dr. Steele insists, archæology no more opposes Scripture than palæontology does. Sceptics used to declare that writing was unknown in Moses' day ; but we now realise, as Sayce said, that great libraries existed long before Moses was born. The very

existence of the Hittites was also formerly denied ; but it is now known that they were a great and powerful people, just as Scripture indicates. For "The Word of the Lord endureth for ever" (1 Pet. 1 : 25) ; and it will be preserved by its Author despite all attacks by its enemies (Ps. 12 : 6-7).

Mr. SAGGS wrote : 1. Dr. Steele makes it clear that he is primarily concerned with the *course* of history : as he says " a record of past events selected and explained." This view—successive events—is appropriate to his purpose of relating these events to the field of natural science where human progress is most easily demonstrated and of making certain deductions ; but the subject *God in History* challenges us to a wider definition of history itself.

2. History is a record of human thought and action ; it is the essence of innumerable biographies ; and, as such, in the final issue, defies expression. The historian must of necessity narrate, but the events which he indicates successively may well have occurred simultaneously—as a group, not as a series. No one event is the direct offspring of another ; there are many causes which multiply and inter-relate as time goes on until the cross-section of the whole of human society at this moment is so infinitely complex in its actions and causes of action as to surpass comprehension. Indeed, of new history the most is lost without recovery for it lies in the lives of countless millions who are forgotten by man, though not by God. The true historian, then, aims at a representation of *action* which is *solid* (height, length and breadth) ; he is not content with pure narrative, which is linear. How can the wars or achievements of this or that great man, of this or that nation, be more than a single thread of progress through an immensity of experience ?

3. Is God really in history so defined ? It cannot be otherwise. " In Him we live and move and have our being." God's foreknowledge has made Him the omniscient Historian to whom the future becomes a past—to whom the lives of men are as a tale that is told—and, having foreseen the free-will actions of men, He has appointed the day of the ultimate consummation of all such action when the perfect will shall be realized.

4. A human philosophy of history seeks to establish principles on which more perfect human action may be based, and Dr. Steele

has rightly indicated that such a conception is doomed to successive failures and ultimate annihilation.

5. We question Dr. Steele's limitation of recorded history to written documents. To begin with, written records are notoriously unreliable. Carlyle points out that "History has been written with quipo-threads, with feather pictures and wampum belts; still oftener with earth mounds and monumental store-heaps, whether as pyramid or cairn; for the Celt and the Copt, the Red Man as well as the White, lives between two eternities, and warring against oblivion, he would fain unite himself in clear conscious relation, as in dim unconscious relation he is already united, with the whole Future and the whole Past."

6. Is there not in every human artifact, could we but see it, a revelation of God's eternal principle of how man's fuller nature works, of the appreciation (however dim) of God Himself, yet, ultimately, of the deliberate reversion to sin (cf. Romans I)? Whether it is the fiercely distorted African idol of to-day, or the grace of an Aphrodite of 2,000 years ago—these are expressions of history—they are records of thoughts. Whether the artist (the *historian*) is a member of a primitive or a civilized society or not, his conception of life is revealed in his work, clearly, perhaps, in the former, very obscurely in the latter.

7. Dr. Steele's paper challenges the Christian scholar in every field. These are days when the interpretation of the arts (in particular) lays increasing emphasis on the psychological aspects of human expression and experience. The critic can penetrate little beyond the conscious mind. The Christian's task surely is to demonstrate the ultimate truth of human nature and human emotion as revealed in God's Word.

8. Dare we suggest that a work still to be done by the Christian archaeologist, the Christian historian, the Christian philosopher, the Christian economist, the Christian lawyer, and so forth, is to study every example of his subject given in Holy Writ to determine those principles of behaviour and action which God has seen fit to stress? It may well be that such studies would reveal certain divine laws in the light of which secular history could be more clearly narrated, more clearly related, and more clearly interpreted. History,

in fact, would be seen in the light of divine truth. In a word, history is God.

#### AUTHOR'S REPLY.

In reply to Dr. Clark, it was my intent to point out that, for the most part, God deals with all men upon the common basis of rewarding obedience and punishing disobedience. The significant exception is that in the mercy and grace of God "He hath not dealt with us after our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities" (Psalm 103: 10). Nonetheless, although the Israelites, having more knowledge of God's will, were charged with greater responsibility, all men will be held accountable before God for their response to His will as they knew it.

I do not agree that such words as "search" and "discover" are appropriate to describe the means whereby men of old *received* the revelation God gave them by His initiative.

Finally, it is inconceivable to me how anyone can believe that Paul thought of God as "switching His course to make the best of everything." There is no greater apologist in the Bible for an absolutely Sovereign God than Paul, who declares that He "worketh all things after the counsel of His own will" (Eph. 1: 11). (Note also Acts 2: 23.)

In reply to Mr. Saggs, the limitation of recorded history (see paragraph 5) to that period and those areas where written records exist was done purposely, since it is impossible to know the mind of man or the will of God in ancient times in the absence of documentation. Mr. Saggs appears to imply this fact in the following paragraph where he admits that such knowledge is revealed "very obscurely" in human artefacts. We can deduce from anepigraphic evidence principles and truths similar to those set forth explicitly in God's written revelation; but without the latter such deductions, lacking essential control, would be valueless.