

GOD AND HISTORY

It would be hard to say which of the words in our deceptively simple title has caused the most perplexity among theologians during recent years. The meaning of the word "history" has seemed as full of problems as the word "God" itself, and things become even more complex when we try to understand the "and" which joins God and history together.¹ However, whatever the difficulties, we shall only understand these concepts if we do hold them together; it is a fruitless way of working to develop a complete doctrine of the nature of God without reference to the world, and then ask afterwards how such a God can be involved in human history. Rather we must allow our concepts of God from the outset to be shaped by God's own decision to enter the sphere of human life. That at least seems to be demanded by an incarnational faith which believes that "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself".

If then we begin our enquiry with the relational term "and", there are two basic ways in which we ought to consider the notion of "God and History": (1) does God *act* in history? and (2) is God *revealed* or known in history? These two questions are obviously linked, though different combinations of answers have been given. One well-known approach answers both these questions in the negative. With regard to the first, it maintains that God's "action" cannot be an objective happening in the external world of space and time; to talk like that would be to confuse the realm of the transcendent with earthly things. It urges that talk about God's acting, speaking and coming is a mythological kind of language; God cannot be a cause in the sequence of worldly events since this would make him an object of study like other objects. Rather, it is said, God "acts" in the present experience of our faith, transforming our personal existence. He acts within the human consciousness, enabling us to recognise what is authentic life. With regard to the second question therefore, revelation must be something God does here and now in a present encounter with him; it cannot be knowledge that is gleaned from historical study. God's revelation is in the present word of the gospel, challenging human existence, and not in past events which are dead and gone. So to speak of God's acting in past history is really a way of speaking of our present experience of having the true meaning of life revealed to us through the word of the gospel.² For example, talk of God's creating the world is really a way of expressing our present experience of dependence upon that which is beyond us. So runs one kind of approach to these two questions.

Another popular approach answers the first question (does God act in history?) with a positive reply, but the second question (is he revealed in history?) with a negative one. It is asserted that God does indeed act in our history, but no study of history with human-tools of enquiry will bring this to light. God acts in our history, but historical events do not testify to his acts. Only faith knows that God has acted. God's acts then are a kind of special "history" within human history; they are God's own history and cannot be detected by human historical method but only through the experience of faith. Revelation is God's reve-

lation of himself in personal encounter, and this can only happen through the word of the gospel in the present. The historical events themselves are dumb; no bridge can be built from the side of the secular happening to the divine happening. As one notable exponent of this approach puts it, the historian can only discover Jesus as the Rabbi of Nazareth and not as the Son of God.³

Both these influential approaches raise important challenges to the notion of "God and History", and if we are to reply "yes" to our two questions we must take account of the points they make. If we affirm that God does *act* in history, we must speak of this action in a way that does not reduce God to one more object in the world among others, and in doing this we must also avoid proposing a form of action which makes human freedom meaningless. If however we do affirm that God acts in history, it seems highly odd to deny that history in some sense makes God known. If God has really acted in *our* history, then one would expect there to be some traces which a historian could pick up. It seems then inconsistent to take the approach of answering "yes" to the first question and "no" to the second. But we must take account of the objection that faith is needed to recognise what God does, if we are not to reduce God to the level of an object of scientific enquiry. Somehow we must say that historical enquiry contributes to our knowledge of God, that God is known to us with the help of historical investigation, without excluding the necessity of faith. Some current attempts to speak of history itself as revelatory do not seem to succeed in giving this priority to faith. They seem to turn faith into a kind of science.

A common feature of the two approaches we began by describing (which we might call the "existential" and the "divine-history" approaches) is that they doubt whether historical investigation of a secular kind has any importance for faith. Indeed, it might actually damage faith in their view. Against this, I want to suggest that the results of critical historical enquiry into the events of the Old Testament and the life of Jesus have a crucial bearing upon Christian faith. This is not simply because faith ought to be grounded in the reality of *past* history. That of course is an important point, for we can hardly isolate our inner experiences today from the outer stage of the world which has made us what we are. The human consciousness is a part of the wider web of events in nature and history, as the social and biological sciences insist on telling us. But more than this, if we cannot speak of God's action in the past we shall also not be able to speak of God's action in *present* events in the outer world, in the areas of social change, politics and the struggle for justice. We shall be locked up in the faith of the individual.

There are of course dangers in claiming that God is acting in this or that political event. It was in part a sense of these hazards that led theologians in the 1920s and 1930s to formulate those same theological retreats from history which we have already noted. They were rightly scandalised by partisan attempts to claim God as a tribal God who supports human political and racial ambitions. They were working in the aftermath of the First World War, having experienced the break-up of a regime

which had been too confident about its divine support, as expressed in the message on the buttons of its soldiers - "God with us". Similarly, important people in British political life wanted the recent Falklands' Memorial Service in St Paul's Cathedral to be a service celebrating victory and thanking God for coming to our aid. In the face of such dangers of claiming God for one section of humanity over another, many contemporary theologians have withdrawn faith from the outer sphere of history altogether, whether past or present. But while recognising the hazards we surely need to be able to speak of God's action in the world for the sake of human justice, freedom and peace. We need to be able to discern where it is that God is at work in our present history, and to cooperate with him in it. We recall that the Israelite prophets' perception of the acts of God in current political life were not a matter of comfort for their own people, but of challenge and judgement. There is, of course, a widespread attempt today to create political theology, but the problem of being able to detect where it is that God is at work on behalf of true humanity remains a vital and puzzling one. Considering how God can be said to have acted in the past, and how his action is known in past events, may help us to consider his action in the present.

Further, such consideration is also important for our view of God's action in the future. If we are to have hope in God who does something radically new in the future then we must have some perception of God's doing new things in the past, some grasp of the relationship between promise and fulfilment according to the witness of history. History is a continuum of past, present and future, a flow of events. Recent theology has been right to listen to the prophetic witness about the future in scripture, which has so long been obscured by interest in apocalyptic alone; the prophets speak of a God who does something new and unexpected in history, rather than simply cancelling history with another order of reality.⁴

But then a whole set of questions also arises about the term "history" itself. We should observe that "history" might mean either (1) a series of events in space and time, or (2) events as interpreted and given meaning by enquirers in the present. These two senses of "history" have sometimes been defined as *Historie* and *Geschichte*. That is, bare events (or "the facts as they happened") have been regarded as known by means of scientific history (*Historie*) while there is another kind of history writing which is more concerned with meaning and values, with interpreting the facts from a particular viewpoint within present experience (*Geschichte*); the Christian belief that God has acted for man's salvation is seen as a prime example of *Geschichte*. This kind of distinction between types of "history" lies behind both theological approaches with which we began. On the one hand, Christian "history" (*Geschichte*) is understood as a way of expressing the believer's present experience; he speaks of God's saving encounter with him as if it were an event in past history. On the other hand, *Geschichte* is seen as a kind of parallel history running alongside the record of secular events (*Historie*); the true meaning of history is indeed a series of divine actions, but no examination of *Historie* will reveal this true history is there. One

reason for these sorts of disengagement from the events of history was the discovery that the history of Israel in the Old Testament and the life of Jesus in the Gospels had been written in an interpreted way; they had been shaped by the viewpoint of the faith of the community. It seemed safer then to leave the uncertainties of "events" to secular historians and to concentrate upon the experience of the faith of the community of Israel or the early church. What was significant was not event itself but meaning.

But the important distinction between history as (1) event and (2) meaning is surely wrongly understood as an absolute distinction between two kinds of history-writing viz. (1) *Historie* and (2) *Geschichte*. All historical study is a matter of interpretation; as soon as we begin to record events - as soon indeed as we begin to observe events in which we ourselves participate - we import meaning. We select detail and we view matters from our own perspective.⁵ Thus in actuality we can never separate "event" from "meaning". The secular historian supposedly doing scientific history is in fact working within a particular perspective and world-view. The Christian believer should not therefore be embarrassed by having his own perspective of faith upon past events (the belief that God has acted within them in a saving way), and the fact that he interprets events in the light of faith is no reason for fleeing from the discipline of critical historical method. On the other hand there is some point in keeping a conceptual distinction between "event" and "meaning" even if we cannot separate them, or else we shall have to give up the task of historical investigation altogether as being a totally relative activity about which no two people could ever agree. Although we can never get to a bare "fact" without interpretation, there are *levels of interpretation*.⁶

What we call "discovering the original events" is really an attempt to discover events in their original context of meaning. Historians, using agreed tools of criticism, must try to find out what happened *and* the ways in which those involved in it would have understood it. The original participants might well have had different understandings of what was going on, and the historian must try to uncover this: the event is to be found within a conflict of meaning, much of this deriving from traditions stretching back into the past of the community. Naturally, the historians' conclusions are not going to be certain, either about the event itself or its context of meaning; the historians after all are working within the horizons of their own world-view. Conclusions are going to be a matter of a weight of *probability*, not certainty. But one would expect a certain degree of consensus about events at this level of interpretation, and conclusions should at least cut across the different perspectives of the enquirers. With regard to events in scripture, one would not have to be a believer in order to discuss whether such an event happened and what it would have meant to those involved in it at the time. However, there are also *further levels* of interpretation, expanding horizons of meaning, where different people and different communities will find different meanings in the events. The Christian meaning will focus upon the conviction that God has been at work for man's

salvation, in the Exodus from Egypt or the return from exile or the crucifixion of Jesus. The fact that there are these expanding contexts of meaning (for example, the shaping of the gospel material by the early church) does not make impossible the attempt to find at least a minimum of the original events - though the conclusions remain a matter of probability, considered as history.

Let us make all this concrete with two paradigm events, to which we shall return several times in our discussion. (A) It is probable that in 701 B.C. King Sennacherib of Assyria laid siege to the city of Jerusalem, and that for some reason the city survived and Sennacherib returned home with his army. It appears that at the time the official spokesmen of court and temple understood this event in a different way from the prophet Isaiah. Both detected God at work in this crisis, but the popular view understood it as an act of divine deliverance showing God's favour to Israel and promising success for the future. Isaiah seems to have understood the event as an act of divine judgment, with the Assyrian army as the hand of God against Israel; that the siege was lifted was an act of divine mercy intended to drive the people to their knees in repentance. This conflict over meaning in the immediate context stems from the influence of tradition within the community. The official line was to understand the event in the light of the popular tradition of the inviolability of Jerusalem; it was assumed that Yahweh would be bound to defend his chosen city. Isaiah countered this tradition as shallow; this event was no guarantee from Yahweh but a warning to look to the actual state of their lives.

Now, a historical judgment about the probability of the event of the unsuccessful siege, and about the immediate context of meaning which it evoked, can be made despite the fact that later levels of interpretation have shaped and coloured the narrative accounts (Isaiah 36-37, II Kings 18-19, II Chronicles 32),⁷ and have prompted the inclusion of new, salvific oracles among those of Isaiah.⁸ This story was apparently being used later on in prophetic and priestly preaching to underline the message that God was a God of salvation. In the despair of later oppression, it was being said that the same God who had delivered Israel from the hand of the Assyrian would now give new life to a nation under the heel of Babylon, Persia or Greece. The event of 701 B.C. was looked back upon as a salvation event, full of promise, and this contemporary handling of the story is made clear by the feature of the Angel of the Lord who destroys the Assyrian host. The story has been written up from the angle of its later use in the preaching of faith, but this does not prevent a historical decision about the original event and its original context of meaning. Indeed, it is a matter of the viewpoint of faith if we affirm that God was actually at work in this event at all, let alone deciding whether Isaiah or the officials were right at the time. These are meanings which faith gives to the event, and which a secular historian would be unable to comment upon. The historian says: it is probable that the siege was lifted, and this is what Isaiah and the official spokesmen *thought* their God was doing through it. The believer adds: this God is real, and he was at work.

The second paradigm event is (B) The crucifixion of Jesus. Any historian, believer or not, could come to the conclusion that it is probable that the man Jesus was executed in Jerusalem under the governorship of Pontius Pilate. Further, the historian could attempt to uncover the conflict of meaning which surrounded this event at the time. As part of this immediate context, it is historically probable that there was a conflict over the meaning of the Jewish Law.⁹ It is reasonable to conclude that Jesus was crucified in part as a blasphemer against the law of Moses. In opposition to the tradition that God's blessing could only be gained and forgiveness pronounced as a result of the meticulous keeping of the demands of the law, Jesus offered God's acceptance directly to those who repented and responded to the good news of the coming of the kingdom of God. This applied, he maintained, even (indeed especially) to the outcasts of society who had no hope of complying with the prescriptions of the law. In thus side-stepping the law which was thought to be the only true medium of God's blessing for man, he was crucified by the religious authorities as a blasphemer. As with the earlier and lesser example of Isaiah, the historian could uncover a conflict of understanding about an event - here the ministry of Jesus; was it God's way of salvation, or blasphemy? Was the crucifixion God's righteous judgement upon an evil-doer, or was it also in some mysterious way a part of the coming of the kingdom? The historian can uncover the probability of the event and the different meanings which would have been given to the event by those participating in it. And he can do this despite the shaping of the story of the crucifixion by the preaching of the later community of faith (e.g. the feature of the earthquake in Matthew 27 is a good parallel to the feature of the Angel of the Lord in Isaiah 37, making clear that this event was indeed a saving act of God).

It is, however, a matter of the perspective of faith when we say "God *was* in Christ, reconciling the world to himself". More particularly, it is the viewpoint of faith when we decide whether the Pharisees or Jesus were right about the way that God deals with people, a decision of faith taken in the light of the belief that God vindicated Jesus in raising him from the dead. Such meanings belong to the expanding horizons of interpretation.

Some pressing questions arise from these two paradigms of God's action in history. For instance, we are first bound to ask what the relation is between the "event in its original context of meaning" as uncovered by historical investigation, and the further perspectives of faith. The details of the "original event" as I have described them are, of course, a matter only of historical probability; does the story of faith *require* this historical reconstruction? Is the one validated by the other? Is it affected by it? Second, we have been dealing with two events which raise few problems as events in human history in themselves - the siege of a city, the crucifixion of a man. These are events within the regular flow of history, and we have been asking what is involved in claiming that these are also acts of God. But what events should be allowed to count as "historical events"? Should we also allow irregular events which have no analogy in our present experience, which have never been repeated? Here the question of the resurrection of Jesus becomes crucial. Third, *how* does God act in these events, and

what impact does a particular view about the manner of divine causation have upon the issues we have discussed so far? I intend to try to answer these and other questions through a number of theses about God and history, which will build upon the two sets of terms we have already elucidated, viz. God as (1) acting and (2) revealed in history; and history as (1) event and (2) meaning.

1. Historical enquiry into events has an effect upon the meaning which faith gives to them. The word "effect" has been chosen carefully here, for it is possible to claim too much for the relationship between historical enquiry and faith. There is a recent theological approach, pioneered by W. Pannenberg, which tries to establish a very tight link between event and Christian meaning.¹⁰ This maintains that when an event is properly investigated by historical method, it will be bound to yield the meaning that God has acted within it. When properly examined, the events of history themselves will disclose the saving action of God. History *is* revelation, though it is revelatory only indirectly; we can infer from events the kind of God who acts in them and what he does. This approach builds a whole theory upon the prophetic word that in the light of a promised event, "Then you shall know that I am Yahweh".

Of course, Pannenberg qualifies all this by insisting that the event has to be examined *properly*. The event must be investigated in the context of the *whole* of history, not just in isolation." Since God acts in all of history, it can only be the whole of history which is the self-revelation of God. The event must be set within its immediate context of meaning, within the wider context of its expanding horizons of meaning, and then in the context of the sum total of events in history. Thus the historian will be bound to come to the conclusion that the cross of Jesus was the saving act of God (unless he is wilfully blind), as long as he sets the crucifixion in the context of the whole of history - including for example the traditions of Judaism about the law of Moses, the view of law and justice in the Graeco-Roman Empire and the impact of the cross upon all of human history since then. In doing this task of setting the event in the context of the whole, the key event is the resurrection of Jesus; this is the key ingredient of the whole enterprise since in the resurrection the whole of history is reflected proleptically. The argument goes here that the resurrection is a historical event, and its immediate context of meaning is within the apocalyptic traditions of Judaism. This is how people who experienced it would have understood it, and allowing for the element of metaphor in all religious language, we can say that the resurrection was an objective event concerning the end of history. The end of history is the whole of history, since the whole is revealed at the end; thus the resurrection reveals ahead of the end God's pattern for the whole of history, viz. the destiny of man for communion with God. So the resurrection of Jesus is the essential component in the process of relating events to each other to make up the whole, and no event can be properly understood unless it is viewed in the light of the resurrection.

This system is a fascinating attempt to bind historical event and Christian meaning tightly together, but even with its qualifications it does seem to make faith a superior kind of science. Though the Christian meaning of history (God's action for man's salvation) cannot be verified before the end since we do not yet have the whole of history, yet there is a kind of proof being claimed. According to this system it ought in principle to be possible to convince any historian that the Christian interpretation of events makes *more* sense, and fits all the facts *better*, than any secular explanation. Apart from assuming that historians are interested in finding overall patterns in history (which is not the case with most), this does not really take seriously a secular world view. It hints that secular-minded historians are either fools or knaves.

However, there are also many virtues in this approach to history. It stresses that if God has indeed acted in our history then there must be some bridge between the secular event and the divine happening; there must be a link of some kind between historical event and Christian meaning. It draws attention to the various levels of meaning that an event stimulates, in the immediate context and the after-life of an event. It also makes clear that there is no "safe area" where it can be claimed that God acts and which can escape secular scrutiny. The existential attempt, for example, to locate the acts of God within the believer's consciousness ignores the uncomfortable fact that this area is as open to scientific investigation through the psychological sciences as the historical area is to the historical sciences.

We can, I believe, take up these insights while affirming a rather looser link between event and Christian meaning. We have seen that historical enquiry can uncover some events in their original context of meaning, which is often a conflict of meaning. Now, faith must direct its attention to that conflict and to the questions it raises. No historical examination of an event can prove the interpretation of faith, but it should *shape* the content of faith. The belief that God has acted for our salvation will stand without any historical investigation of the "saving events", but when we ask what that salvation means and what implications it has for Christian living in the world of today, then faith is educated and deepened by reference back to the event. There is no simple one-to-one correspondence between the event in its original context of meaning and the further horizons of meaning which the event stimulates; but there is a coherence between all these levels of interpretation, and there is illumination in a dialogue between them. Faith will be enlightened by having to grapple with the historical task of finding the original event in its context of meaning, however successful the attempt.

Taking our paradigm event (B) the crucifixion of Jesus, the early church soon developed the view of faith that this was a reconciling act of God. Then through the ages any number of theories have been created which try to understand what this reconciliation means and how it was accomplished - the Christus Victor theory of the Fathers, the moral influence theory of

Abelard, the penal theory of the Reformers and so on. These further horizons of meaning have largely been conditioned by the intellectual and social contexts of their times, as is the concern with psychological categories of "acceptance" in our own age. Is there any criterion which can measure the suitability of these new horizons of meaning or is faith in the atonement a merely subjective matter? There is a historical criterion (though a wide one) - that they ought at least to be coherent with the original conflict of meaning in the actual event of the crucifixion. Struggling with the historical circumstances of the death of Jesus, in all their uncertainty, should act as some kind of boundary upon the expanding horizons of meaning. The further levels of meaning cannot be simply read out of the event but there ought to be some coherence with the original context.

Thus, if historical enquiry shows that Jesus was crucified as a blasphemer against the religious Law (and faith believes that God vindicated him), it would be odd to express the meaning of the Atonement in strongly penal terms, as though Jesus were satisfying the implacable demands of a cosmic law. Again, a view of salvation as a purely individual, interior matter does not fit very well with the historical conclusion that the Roman authorities were glad to dispose of Jesus because they found him an irritant in their political system. Although not a Zealot, Jesus did pose a threat to the absolute claims of Roman rule, since a religious reformation would have upset the structure of Roman appointees in Judaea. Again, if Jesus died believing that he was utterly forsaken by God and man, it would be odd if an understanding of Atonement had nothing to say about the problem of suffering in our world.

The historian notes the range of meaning which people involved in the event gave to it; where these views are about the actions of God the historian as such can make no judgement about their truth. But later faith directs its attention to them, just because it believes that God *has* been at work in the event. It is the belief that God has acted in history which makes us look for some coherence between the event in its original context of meaning and the later horizons of meaning. After all, the understanding of the people involved is part of the event. But because the kerygmatic word and faith are needed to interpret the event, historical conclusions can do no more than offer shape to the viewpoint of faith. Thus we can agree that God is revealed by history to this extent - that our knowledge of what God has done is fostered and increased through the process of considering the event. We say so much because of our belief that God has acted in history; we say no more because history cannot prove faith.

The historical conclusions to which I have referred (Jesus as a blasphemer against the Jewish Law, as political threat to Rome, as the forsaken one) are of course only probabilities, historically speaking; some Christian believers may disagree with them as well as some secular historians. But the fact that they are not certainties does not matter. While the existence of faith itself does not depend upon them, the exact content of faith does, and having a historical faith means

being willing for faith to be vulnerable to historical enquiry thus far. We take the risk of making decisions about history, and are willing to build the content of our faith upon those risks.

Dealing more briefly with paradigm event (A) about the siege of Jerusalem, we may well ask whether the interpretation of the event given by the later prophets and scribes was a valid one. Did the writers responsible for the final form of Isaiah 36-37 and II Kings 18-19 contradict the view of Isaiah in finding a message of salvation for their own time in the event of 701 B.C.? Were they simply continuing the popular tradition of Yahweh's defence of his holy city when they found it to be an event full of promise for the future? Their view *was* coherent with Isaiah's if they accepted his point that there is no automatic blessing from God, no cast-iron guarantee of his favour regardless of the state of people's lives. After all, Isaiah himself looked beyond the just chastisement of his people by God to the renewal of the City to a new kind of glory. Thus, if we are to interpret the event of 701 as a saving event of God with his people, whatever meaning we find in it for our own time must address the conflict of meaning which it evoked and make a decision about it; there is every indication that the later prophets had taken Isaiah's point to heart - they were writing in the aftermath of the exile.

2. God acts in all events of history, yet also in a particular manner in some. One reason why recent theology has been reluctant to speak of God's acting objectively in the history of human affairs is that this seems to limit human freedom and responsibility. This problem seems to intensify the more particular God's action is said to be; if, for example, God deliberately intended the Assyrian army to be the "rod of his anger" in 701 B.C. (Isa. 10.5) then the autonomy of the Assyrians in their decisions about imperial policy appears to have been over-ridden by God's act. Therefore a good deal of recent theological thought has tried to ease the problem of human freedom by proposing a highly generalised view of the activity of God in the world and human history. It is suggested that God acts in all events impartially, giving a constant purposefulness to the whole world as its creator and sustainer. It is suggested that God does not have a special relation to a particular set of events, but acts in all events equally, giving creative purpose to the world as a whole which in turn is universally dependent upon him. There are indeed scripture texts which seem to speak of two kinds of divine activity - general and special; an example of the former is God's sending forth the sun each day (Psa. 104.22) and an example of the latter is God's sending forth Sennacherib (Isa. 10.6) or Cyrus (Isa.45) to fulfil a special divine purpose. But it is proposed that these texts are really speaking of the same universal divine purposiveness. Some events "stand out" as significant locations of God's saving action in history, but this is not because God has embodied a special purpose within them; rather, the particular circumstances of the events have allowed God's constant purpose to find clear expression or given it special opportunity to display itself.¹² What we call "special acts of God" are

really events that simply draw attention to God's purpose for the whole of the world that we might otherwise miss.

This kind of approach is trying to cope with several problems raised by the statement that "God acts in history". There is the moral problem of human freedom, and the scientific challenge of the autonomy of the world order; the scientific world view requires that there must be a large amount of independent causation within the world (even if it does not dogmatically insist upon total independence). How then can God be an effective cause in particular occurrences? It seems to be less problematic to speak of a general purpose of God in all things, which does at least add an objective background to a purely existential approach. So far in this paper I have been speaking of the acts of God in history without defining the manner in which God acts. Is it adequate to speak only of a general purposiveness, or might it be possible to speak also of God's particular choice of some events? Can we speak of God's giving greater saving significance to some events than others, without running into moral and scientific road-blocks?

There is certainly much worth in the view that "significant acts" of God are simply events which happen to display God's continual purpose in a striking manner. This would account for many events in history (and in our own lives) which we are inclined to view as special acts of God. But it does not seem to be an adequate explanation of other events in which Christians have found a special meaning, and in particular the event of Jesus. The Christian tradition has been that God acted in a special way in Jesus; it was his deliberate purpose to "send forth his son". It was not simply that in the life of Jesus the purpose of God for man happened to find clear expression; God intended that it should be like that. But does not such special purpose, such divine election, deny human freedom and worldly autonomy? I think not, if the manner of divine causation is understood as being *persuasive* rather than mechanical or coercive. If God acts in history through offering influence and persuasion to the human personality,¹³ then there is room for human freedom as well as divine choice. If God acts in a persuasive mode, then particular acts of God are no more destructive of human freedom than is a general activity. As well as influencing all events with his overall purpose for the world, God is free to offer a particular kind of aim to an individual; he can offer a special function to a man or a nation. The aim which God offers would of course have to be accepted and co-operated with; but then the New Testament witness about Jesus is not only that he is the elect Son but the obedient Son. In this way of thinking, "special acts of God" would be special moments of persuasion which had found response and acceptance within human history.

If it is objected that such a view of God's action is not sovereign enough, we might reply that there is nothing greater than the power to persuade and change human hearts, and that views of power as absolute and coercive owe more to human notions of dictatorship than to the revelation of God. We must take care not to make God in our own image; if he chooses to be divine in humility and self-limitation, then who are we to

protest that he is not divine enough? A view of divine action as persuasion is particularly fitting for human history where persons can make choices; though it is not our concern at present, Process Theology has also proposed a whole metaphysic which speaks of God's action in the physical world in a similar way, "luring on" particles of organic matter to their fulfilment in his plan.¹⁴

I suggest then that God offers a purpose to man in the *whole* of his history, but offers particular possibilities in *certain* events as well. If we ask what it is about certain events that makes them stand out as "significant saving events", then a crucial feature is their character of promise. Certain events have the character of fulfilling past promise which God has given and at the same time they are full of new promise for the future. The promise when fulfilled is not over and done with; the fulfilments point beyond themselves to new things. So certain events stand out as disclosing a personal aim, witnessing to a God who shapes events with the intention of creating within history a pattern of promise and fulfilment. The special function which God offers people in certain events is to be bearers of this pattern.

In our paradigm event (A), the siege of Jerusalem in 701 B.C., the event stands out because it has the potential of evoking promise in new situations: as people looked back on this event they heard again God's promise for his pilgrim people, whatever desperate straits they were in. The event came alive because it created expectation that God could still do new things for his people, bringing them to the satisfaction he had in store for them; he had a city for his people. But if we look to the biblical sense of promise and fulfilment it is important to stress that God gives *promise* and not *prediction*. Prediction supplies a detailed map of the future which therefore binds the future within a rigid form. But promises can be fulfilled in unexpected ways, leaving room for the freedom of God to do new things and the freedom of man to respond to God. The biblical record witnesses to the fact that God fulfills his promises in unexpected ways, doing new things that the bearers of the promise could not have imagined.¹⁵

Thus our paradigm event (B) fulfills the promise of event (A) in a totally unexpected way. The saving event of the cross of Jesus is God's way of fulfilling the promise of salvation which events like (A) kept alive; the hope of a new City and a new Temple is fulfilled in a surprising way in the community of faith which lives according to the cross. The event of the crucifixion is a "particular act" of God, not simply a vivid disclosure of God's constant purposeful activity for man, though it is also that. While God enters continually into all events of human desolation and forsakenness, here he enters *most* deeply into the brokenness of the human condition. The cross is a particular act of God, not because it is the only place where God participates in human estrangement but because it is the point where he goes furthest so that death is finally defeated. While God intends that this event should be the decisive point of his reconciling activity, it also requires the obedient response of the true Son, who was "obedient unto

death, even death on a cross". Thus the cross is not just a window into the loving activity of God for men; it has all the scandal of particularity. The character of this event as a particular act of God is seen in its being full of promise. It fulfills the promise of God to reconcile man to himself and also opens up new horizons of promise. It points forward to the hope of the reconciliation of all things to God and the liberation of the whole cosmos from its bondage to death (Rom. 8.21). Yet because it gives promise and not prediction there is room within this hope for the contribution of man's response to God; God allows man to cooperate with him in the bringing to pass of human destiny to glory. History is no mere charade, no puppet-show in which mankind only appears to be free. God has a purpose for history, but this is not the same as an eternally fixed blue-print.

The concepts of God's persuasive action, his fulfilment of promise in surprising ways, and his making himself known *indirectly* in history all hang together. If God's action is persuasive then it is apt that no historical investigation of an event can simply yield its meaning for faith. We have seen that although the event should shape faith, the event cannot compel the meaning which faith finds in it - that God has acted there. After all, persuasion is a hidden factor in any event; causation *can* be described without including it though the description will not be a complete one. Events in history are ambiguous; God is veiled as well as revealed in history. Other explanations can always be given, and will seem to some people to be more convincing than the Christian ones. Again, if God's action is persuasive, it is apt that "special acts of God" have the character of promise rather than prediction, which would fix the future. Promise leaves some things open, for persuasion wants to win response.

God's giving the character of promise to events, breaking all human expectations and pointing to new things, has a bearing upon the question of whether the resurrection of Jesus is "an event in history". This feature of promise helps to make coherent the two claims that (i) the resurrection has happened in our history, and yet (ii) it cannot be established as an event by historical enquiry. We have been dealing so far with events that in themselves belong to the regular flow of history (a siege, a death, for example); if the resurrection is claimed as a historical event then it stands outside that regularity. It is a unique event with no analogy in our present experience. I suggest that the historian should not rule it *out* on that account, but that he cannot rule it *in* either. The unique character of the resurrection event is that it has happened in history but cannot be validated through historical enquiry. This is not because it is one of a series of events belonging to a special kind of "salvation-history" which escapes the search of history, but because it alone belongs to a different order of reality from the present world. The New Testament treats the resurrection of Jesus from the dead as an event belonging to 'the new creation', which ought to have happened at the end of all things, but which has astonishingly happened in the midst of history. The New Testament does not regard the resurrection as one of a series of events

but as an eschatological event which is exceptionally here and now. This gives it the character of a promise-event in a supreme manner; it breaks all human expectations about what God can do, and defeats all human attempts to analyse it with the tools of the present creation, historical or scientific. It contradicts our present view of reality, and so points forward to the new thing that God can do in the future.¹⁶ It fulfills promise in a surprising way, and is full of promise for the future.

This character of the event makes it, I believe, coherent to claim that the resurrection has happened in our history, but cannot be substantiated by historical method. In its very happening it contradicts human method. I agree then with Pannenberg that the concept of "resurrection" is a metaphor, not an exact description, but that it refers to something which happened objectively to Jesus and which concerns the end of all things.¹⁷ Indeed, just because it *is* a promise and not a prediction it cannot supply us with a blue-print of the end. "Resurrection" is a promise God makes, but which he may fulfill in unexpected ways.

Other reasons might also be adduced for proposing the resurrection as an event in history. All that the historian as such ought to be asked to do is to leave the question open, that is not to rule it *out* as a possibility. Faith rules it in. Leaving the question open should not go against the historical method of analogy, that is examining past events by comparing them with events we know in our present experience. Only a positivist world-view will insist on absolute conformity of events in history, saying that an event cannot have happened unless it happens in the present. Using the method of analogy neutrally, one can point out that the account of the resurrection also has no analogy with "non-events" in our present experience, such as dreams, hallucinations, deceptions and mistakes. If then, using the method of analogy in this non-dogmatic manner the resurrection can neither be confirmed or denied by analogy with present events, it does not seem unreasonable to leave the question open. W. Pannenberg has been anxious to show that the "particularity" of the resurrection can be claimed in this way,¹⁸ but I suspect that the particularity of the event as *promissory* is far more important for faith.

3. God's action in the world today, like his action in history, can only be known indirectly. We must end with some consideration of the problems of speaking of God at work in present history, in the light of our approach so far. Our first conclusion is based upon what we have said about promise and fulfillment; we cannot expect any study of scripture to provide us with prediction about the acts of God in present history. There is no simple set of rules by which we can read off a description of how God acts in the setting of our present political and social turmoil. But the more familiar we become with the promises which God has given to his people in the past, the more sensitive we are likely to become to his action in the present. We must learn to empathise with the history of

the people of God in the past, to enter into their experience with a historic imagination, to re-live the special moments which seem to be alive with promise. Then we shall have an attitude of mind which will enable us to take responsible decisions and to recognise "the form which Christ takes in the present" (Bonhoeffer).¹⁹

Second, we have seen that faith addresses itself to the conflict of meaning in past events. It makes the scientific effort to recover the different viewpoints that the event evoked in its time; because it believes that God was acting in the event it faces the challenge of grappling with the event in its original context of meaning. Faith then has to make responsible decisions about this conflict of interpretation; who was right and what implications does this have for faith now? In a similar way we shall only discover what God is doing in present events by trying to understand the conflict of meanings which significant events produce, and then by making a decision about them. This will mean taking a risk and taking a step into the unknown, for there can be no certainty that we have read the situation aright. There is only the hope that as we take responsible action, getting involved in movements for peace and social justice, that the truth of the situation will emerge more clearly. In looking to the past, faith is illuminated by taking the risk of making decisions about historical events. In the present, faith is clarified as we take the risk of involvement, even where we cannot see the whole way ahead. The interpretation of events is always a matter of *expanding* horizons of faith. We shall never know what God is doing in the world unless we take the risk of acting in a way that we believe is a co-operation with his purpose. To have a historic faith means being prepared to share the situations of those who suffer, to venture into the forsaken places of our world and to find there the God who enters history most deeply in the cross of Jesus. We may find ourselves in strange places and ambiguous situations, but without such risks we shall not discover what God is doing.

Third, the fact that God fulfills his promises in unexpected ways means that no absolute allegiance can be given to any structures or organisations in the present. They can never be given the status of the Kingdom of God, though they may be sign-posts to it; they can never be deified as permanent channels of God's activity, though God may use them. For God can always do a new thing, and our allegiance is always to Christ as the Lord of history and the future. We may take the risk of identifying a particular social or political movement with the action of God, but we hold ourselves free to admit that we were mistaken in the light of events, or that the movement no longer conforms to the purpose of God. No political party, economic theory or church structure has the final value that belongs to God and to his Christ. The God who acts in history cannot be confined in such idols, and our trust in him as the God who *will* act in new ways frees us from such idols too.

NOTES

This paper was originally read at the European Baptist Theological Teachers' Conference at Rivoli, 10th-13th September 1982.

- 1 Recent surveys of the question include T. A. Roberts, *History and Christian Apologetic* (London 1960), A. Richardson, *History Sacred and Profane* (London 1964), J. Robinson and J. Cobb (ed.), *Theology as History* (New York 1967), Van A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer* (London 1967), A. Thistleton, *The Two Horizons* (Exeter 1980).
- 2 See e.g. R. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (English Transl., London 1960), p.68.
- 3 K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* Vol.I, Part 1 (2nd English Ed., Edinburgh 1975), pp.165, 325; cf. K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (English Transl., London 1933), pp.145-47.
- 4 See J. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (English Transl., London 1967), pp. 124-133; G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (London 1980), pp.243-271.
- 5 This view, popularised by Carl Becker in 1910, has been expounded by e.g. R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford 1946), pp.226 ff., E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (London 1961), pp.69-72. Notable theological use has been made of it by W. Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology*, Vol. One (English Transl., London 1970), pp.66-80.
- 6 cf. W. Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science* (English Transl., London 1976), pp.211-24, 284-296.
- 7 See B. S. Childs, *Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis* (London 1967) *passim*.
- 8 e.g. 10:20-27, 12:1-6, 29:5-8, 32:15-20, 33. See E. H. Heaton, *The Hebrew Kingdoms* (O.U.P., London 1968), pp.319 ff., B. S. Childs, *Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis*, pp.112 ff.
- 9 See E. Schweizer, *Jesus* (English Transl., London 1971), pp.30-34, E. Käsemann, *Essays on New Testament Themes* (English Transl., London 1964), pp.37-47, J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (English Transl., London 1974), pp.112-153.
- 10 W. Pannenberg (ed.), *Revelation as History* (English Transl., London 1969), pp.135-155; cf. *Basic Questions in Theology* Vol. One, pp.85-95, 175 ff.
- 11 W. Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology* Vol. One, pp.71 ff, 140 ff, 151 ff.
- 12 M. Wiles, *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine* (London 1974), pp.34-39, 'Religious Authority and Divine Action', *Religious Studies*, 7, 1971, pp.1-12; S. Ogden, *The Reality of God* (London 1967), pp.180-187.
- 13 cf. C. Hartshorne, *The Divine Relativity* (New Haven 1948), pp.140 ff.
- 14 See J. Cobb and D. Griffin, *Process Theology* (Belfast 1977), 41 ff, 63 ff, 144 ff; C. Hartshorne, *A Natural Theology for our Time* (La Salle 1967), pp.90-125.
- 15 See W. Zimmerli, 'Promise and Fulfilment' in C. Westermann (ed.), *Essays on Old Testament Interpretation* (London 1963), p.107; J. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, pp.102-112.

- 16 Cf. J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, p.173; *Theology of Hope*, pp.179-82.
- 17 W. Pannenberg, *Jesus - God and Man* (English Transl., London 1968), pp.74-78.
- 18 W. Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology* Vol. One, pp.45-50.
- 19 D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (English Transl., London 1963), pp.23 ff.

PAUL S. FIDDES

Outwood Chapel 1834-1979

A small notebook, 7" by 4", concerning the origin of this chapel building on Outwood Common, in the parish of Bristow, Surrey, has recently been deposited in the Baptist Union Library.

On the oil-cloth cover the book is noted as the property of Mr George Brewer, Lower Road, Meadhill, Redhill. The first entry tells of a meeting at Dorman's Land, 12 May 1834, to discuss the decision to build.

In July 1839 George Chapman, of Dorman's Land, writes a commendation of the Outwood congregation urging the support of the neighbouring churches so that the £151 remaining debt can be extinguished.

The next entry is dated December 4th 1847 and signed by John Westcott. The Church had 100 members at this time. The Trustees, meeting on November 24th 1847, had decided to enlarge the chapel. There follows a list of subscribers, some for large sums, like Robert Skinner, who gave £5; most people gave between 2s 6d and 10s. Some members gave materials or help with the building. Mr Sharp provided carriage for the bricks; Mr Charlwood gave one load of stone. The cost of the works is noted in some detail. The timber, excluding oak beams, cost £27; the slates £8 8s; and the bricks £13 7s 8d.

The last service was held in the chapel, and the building sold in 1979. There was a small burial yard near the chapel, but no records of this are yet to hand.

Baptist Union Handbooks

A number of back copies of the Baptist Union Handbook are at present being held in the basement at Baptist Church House. Any member of the Baptist Historical Society who is trying to make a collection of the Handbook/Directory would be welcome to copies. Enquiries should be made to: The Rev. G. W. Rusling, Department of Ministry, Baptist Church House, 4 Southampton Row, London WC1B 4AB.

A precise list of copies is not available, but Mr Rusling will answer specific queries. Cost of post and packaging will of course have to be met by the recipients.