

Bible History and Archeology

6. The Unseen Hand in History

History and the Bible

Is history simply an arbitrary succession of events, a meaningless patchwork of incidents, devoid of purpose, just a series of random events? Or is there definite design and purpose behind human history? Or is there some sort of overall design or recurring pattern in history?

The rise and fall of empires and nations is a dominant feature of history. One power rises to prominence, only to decline and eventually be supplanted by another. Why? For centuries, historians and philosophers have pondered this inexorable progression of civilizations. What does it all mean?

Consider the fall of ancient Babylon; in October, 539 BC, Babylon, the greatest city of the ancient world, fell to a Medo-Persian army under Cyrus the Great. Less than half a century earlier, the famed city had reached the height of power and splendor under King Nebuchadnezzar, builder of the magnificent Ishtar Gate and the world-renowned Hanging Gardens, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

After Nebuchadnezzar's death, Babylonian power declined rapidly. By 539 BC, the stage was set for collapse. Greek historians Herodotus and Xenophon record that Cyrus achieved entry into the heavily fortified capital by cleverly diverting the waters of the Euphrates River, which flowed under the city's huge brass gates and through the length of the metropolis.

According to the account, Cyrus' army dug a channel upstream to lead off the water into a huge abandoned reservoir near the river. The level of the river soon began to sink. Cyrus' army, under cover of darkness, slipped quietly down into the now knee-deep water and waded under the carelessly left open gates into the unsuspecting city. The Babylonians were taken by surprise, and the city fell with little bloodshed.

Was this just lucky planning on the part of Cyrus? One might think so, until learning that the whole event was described by Isaiah over a hundred years before, even to the point of Cyrus being named before he was even born.

“That saith of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid.” Isaiah 44:28.

What about those gates left open? If they had not been so, the army could have marched through Babylon and out the other side and got no closer to victory.

“Thus saith the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him; and I will loose the loins of kings, to open before him the two leaved gates; and the gates shall not be shut;” Isaiah 45:1.

The fall of Babylon was one of the decisive events of antiquity, marking the end of an era. The once-great Babylonian realm was absorbed into the Persian Empire, which soon included all of the Near East from the Aegean Sea to the Indus River. Eventually, the great Persian Empire followed in the footsteps of its predecessor, falling to the armies of Alexander the Great some 200 years later.

Then the legions of Rome ultimately swallowed up the one-time domains of Alexander. What did it all mean? The ancients themselves pondered this recurring pattern through history. The Greek historian Polybius recounts how the great Roman commander Scipio the Younger, while watching the city of Carthage going up in flames in 146 BC, remarked to him: "A glorious moment, Polybius; but I have a dread foreboding that some day the same doom will be pronounced upon my own country . . . [For thus it had] happened to Ilium and to the empires of Assyria, Media and Persia, the greatest of their time." Scipio the Younger was right; history did repeat.

The belief that it is possible to discern some all-encompassing pattern in the course of human history is very old. Many theories have been advanced attempting to give meaning to the events of history.

Oswald Spengler, the early 20th-Century German philosopher, drew an analogy between the life cycles of civilizations and those of biological organisms. He maintained that all civilizations pass inevitably through a four-period life cycle of birth, maturity, decay and death.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, fathers of communism, saw an endless class struggle between the oppressed and the oppressors as the mainspring and primary motive force of history.

Thomas Carlyle, 19th-century Scottish historian, contended it was the actions of a few outstanding figures such as Alexander the Great, Caesar, Genghis Khan and Napoleon that above all other factors shaped the course of history. "The history of the world," he wrote, "is but the biography of great men."

The eminent English historian Arnold Toynbee, based on his analysis of 26 civilizations throughout history, drew a different conclusion. That the growth and continuance of civilizations is the direct result of their responding successfully to challenges, under the leadership of creative minorities. Once a civilization fails to respond successfully, it disintegrates. Unlike Spengler, however, Toynbee did not regard the death of a civilization as inevitable.

Some historians find no overall pattern at all, stressing the overriding role of the unexpected and the accidental in history. Most historians today draw upon elements of each school of thought in analyzing and explaining history. Rather than attempting to discern some type of grand design, they limit themselves to exploring the numerous and varied causative factors and influences on the course of history.

Modern historians have overlooked one major factor in the rise and fall of nations and empires. In their reconstruction and interpretation of history, the vast majority have rejected the notion that the course of history has been directly influenced and guided by providential intervention.

When the evidence is examined, the conclusion that history in its broad outlines is providentially governed is inescapably apparent. Many of the actual makers of history, the great statesmen and military leaders at the helms of nations and armies, have come to that very conclusion.

Winston Churchill clearly perceived God's hand in history. In an address on December 26, 1941, the British prime minister asserted that "He must indeed have a blind soul who cannot see that some great purpose and design is being worked out here below." On another occasion in

Britain some 10 months later, the war-time leader further expounded his belief in divine intervention, observing: "I sometimes have a feeling of interference I have a feeling sometimes that some Guiding Hand has interfered."

Benjamin Franklin held a similar conviction. Speaking at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in June, 1787, Franklin asserted: "The longer I live the more convincing proofs I see that God governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice [a reference to Matthew 10:29], is it probable that an empire can rise without his aid?"

Historical evidence to support such a conclusion is abundant. Strange, inexplicable and miraculous circumstances at certain crucial junctures in the stories of nations and empires seem to point unmistakably to the guiding hand of God. Some examples that may surprise you:

In his quest for domination of the sea, and to receive the favor of the papacy by attacking the Protestants, King Philip II of Spain sent his "invincible Armada " of 124-ships against England in July, 1588. After about a week of fighting against the English, who were led by Sir Francis Drake, the Armada crossed the English Channel and anchored at Calais. On the night of July 28, Drake sent blazing fire ships adrift among the anchored Spanish fleet, causing the Spaniards to cut cable and put out to sea in confusion.

The Armada fled northward, pursued hotly by Drake. The hardest fighting of the entire naval campaign followed, and the Spanish lost heavily. But before Drake could deliver the knockout punch, the English ran out of ammunition! As the Spanish attempted to escape and return home to Spain by way of the North Sea, however, unprecedented gale-force winds arose and drove many of the ships to their doom on the rocky shores of Ireland and Scotland.

For many days, fragments of Spanish vessels were cast by every tide upon the northern coasts of the isles. The tattered ships that escaped disaster limped home to Spain. Many were so badly battered by the severe storms that they were unfit for further service.

In commemoration of the Spanish defeat, Queen Elizabeth I, aware of the real source of the victory, ordered the striking of a silver commemorative medal, bearing the inscription: "God blew, and they were scattered." Also, in a song of thanksgiving composed shortly after the Armada's defeat, Elizabeth declared, "He made the winds and waters rise. To scatter all mine enemies"

The Battle of Tours, fought in central France in October, AD 732, was described by 19th-century German historian Leopold von Ranke as "one of the most important epochs in the history of the world." The great victory of Charles Martel and the Franks over the invading Saracens halted forever Moslem expansion into Europe.

The turning point in the fierce day-long battle came when a false rumor of unknown origin spread through the Moslem ranks just as the Moslem cavalry was finally beginning to break through the close-knit ranks of Frankish infantry. The unfounded rumor was that some of the Franks were plundering the Moslem camp, where much spoil was stored in the tents. Fearful of losing their valuable booty, several squadrons of Moslem horsemen galloped off to protect it. Their fellow Moslems, however, thought the horsemen were fleeing from the Franks, and the whole Moslem host fell into confusion. As Abd-er Rahman, the Saracen leader, strove to lead his men back into battle, the Franks succeeded in surrounding and spearing him to death. Leaderless, the Moslem host fled in defeat.

The future of Europe hung on that day. Had an unknown Moslem warrior not been struck by a false and unfounded notion, the future of all Europe would have taken a radically different path.

The crucial battle of Hastings on October 14, 1066, in which the English succumbed to the Norman William the Conqueror, has been described as "one of those battles which at rare intervals, have decided the fate of nations."

In the late afternoon Harold, last of the Anglo-Saxon kings and commander of the English army, was killed in battle shortly after being struck in the right eye by a Norman arrow shot into the air at random. As evening neared, the news of his death spread throughout the English ranks. Leaderless and demoralized, the English were unable to rally and reform and they fled the field of battle. The Norman conquest of England was assured, laying the foundation for the emergence of a united England as a major world power.

Napoleon's dramatic victory over the combined armies of Russia and Austria at Austerlitz on December 2, 1805, established his dominance over the European continent. But his victory cannot be attributed solely to his tactical brilliance. December 2 began with thick fog and mist. The Russians and Austrians could have wished for nothing better. Under its cover they hoped, the Austro-Russian armies would be able to complete their maneuvers without the French seeing what they were doing.

"But suddenly," as one historian describes it, "the sun with uncommon brightness came through the mist, the sun of Austerlitz. It was in this blazing sun that Napoleon at once sent a huge cavalry force under Marshal Soult into the gap left between the center and the left of the Austro-Russian battlefield." This was the break Napoleon needed. His victory was sealed."

Napoleon became the master of Europe, sweeping away the decadent and largely ceremonial medieval Holy Roman Empire and establishing in its place a "revived" version, a short-lived Roman-European civilization dominated by France.

Napoleon's attempted come-back from exile was foiled at Waterloo in 1815 by a combined British-Prussian army under the Duke of Wellington and General Gebhard von Blucher. Napoleon's defeat, however, was due in part to a timely pouring rain.

M.A. Arnault and C.L.F. Panckoucke, in their *Life and Campaigns of Napoleon Bonaparte*, observe: "The night of the 17th (of June 1815) was dreadful, and seemed to presage the calamities of the day. The violent and incessant rain did not allow a moment's rest to the (French) army. The bad state of the roads hindered the arrival of provisions, and most of the soldiers were without food."

At dawn on the 18th, the rain was still coming down. The weather cleared somewhat at 8 o'clock, but the mud forced Napoleon to postpone his attack lest his cavalry and artillery become bogged down. By the time Napoleon ordered the attack at 11:30, some drying had taken place, but the condition of the ground nevertheless favored the troops on the defensive, namely the British and Prussians.

French author Victor Hugo (1802-1885) observed that "the shadow of a mighty right hand is cast over Waterloo; it is the day of destiny, and the force which is above man produced that day." Further elaborating on the source of the French defeat, he asserted: "If it had not rained

the night between the 17th and 18th of June, the future of Europe would have been changed." Providence required only a little rain, and a cloud crossing the sky at a season when rain was not expected. That was sufficient to overthrow an empire.

During the spectacular evacuation of more than 300,000 British troops from Dunkirk (May 26 - June 3, 1940), the waters of the English Channel were unusually smooth, calm and placid. This permitted even the tiniest boats to go back and forth between Britain and France in safety on their emergency rescue runs. Many seamen knowledgeable of the Channel remarked at the strangeness of the calm at that critical time. Furthermore, bad weather to the east, grounded the German Luftwaffe [air-force] during part of the evacuation, permitting the British to get away in safety until the Germans were once again able to get their planes airborne. Little wonder the episode has commonly come to be called "The Miracle of Dunkirk."

The Allied landing on the beaches of Normandy on D-Day (June 6, 1944) is still another example. June 5, the day originally chosen for Operation Overlord (the code name for the invasion) was a weatherman's nightmare. General Eisenhower wrote that on the morning of that day his camp near Portsmouth in southern England was "shaking and shuddering under a wind of almost hurricane violence, and the rain traveled in horizontal streaks." Continued high winds and stormy seas were predicted, the best allies Hitler could have. For Eisenhower to have mounted his offensive under those conditions would have spelled disaster.

Then, suddenly, the weather experts predicted a lull in the storm, a short one, to be sure, but long enough to permit a Channel crossing. So General Eisenhower made his "final and irrevocable decision" to proceed with the invasion early the next morning, Tuesday, June 6. Shielded by low clouds, the invasion fleet took the Germans by surprise. Furthermore, because of the storm, the German coastal guards had relaxed their vigilance. The weather, in all respects, had suddenly allied itself with the Allies!

Reminiscing about the critical period just prior to the D-Day invasion, General Eisenhower noted years later: "If there were nothing else in my life to prove the existence of an almighty and merciful God, the events of the next 24 hours did it.... The greatest break in a terrible outlay of weather occurred the next day and allowed that great invasion to proceed, with losses far below those we had anticipated" (Time, June 16, 1952).

While we are speaking of God's wonder-working power, let us associate it with an interesting item of thirst. This particular item reveals His workings in the making of history. This item comes to us under the title of *A Drink That Made History*; written by Major Peter W. Rainier, with the British forces in North Africa. Thus it was an event of World War II.

"Most of the world believes that the Axis advance through North Africa was stopped by the British at Alamein. It wasn't. On July 3rd, 1942, Rommel smashed the allied center, and what was left of three Panzer divisions plunged through. Before nightfall they had covered half the 50 miles between Alamein and Alexandria.

"The following day, one of the most fateful of this war, a fantastic drama was played on the desert sands.

"Rommel's men could see the towers of Alexandria, the goal for which they had striven for two years of bitter desert warfare. Rest, food, water—particularly water for their parched throats seemed almost at arm's length. They started forward.

“But suddenly a dust cloud rose in the desert between them and their prize. It was scuffed skyward by a remnant of our British army—50 tanks, a few score field pieces, lorries filled with weary soldiers.

“In this sector, the enemy had about the same strength as the allies. Their tanks had also been reduced to about 50; and they had an equal number of men, about 5,000. The only difference was in fire power; we had nothing to match the Axis 88’s.

“Great was the issue to the valor of so few! Had we failed to stop Rommel’s Panzers that morning, Alexandria must have fallen and all Africa would have been lost. Russia might well have been outflanked in the Caucasus; and the Axis tentacles would finally have stretched across Asia to join Japan.

“All through that hot desert morning the opposing forces pounded at each other. Men on both sides were so close to exhaustion, they could hardly see to aim through the sweat-packed sand caking their bloodshot eyes. Each army was close to the breaking point even when the battle began. As soon as the grim will to fight had been drained to the last drop, one or the other would collapse.

“The sun was almost overhead; and our men were fast reaching the end of their endurance, when the Nazis broke. Ten minutes more and it might have been us. Slowly, sullenly, the Mark VI tanks lumbered back from their battle smoke.

“And then an astounding, incredible thing happened. Eleven hundred men of the 90th Light Panzer Division, the elite of the Afrika Korps, came stumbling across the barren sands with their hands in the air. To have captured a mere handful of the 90th would have given a British regiment something to boast about for months; but for 1,100 of them to surrender when escape lay open—that was nothing short of a miracle!

“As the Nazis stumbled wearily closer, the plot of their dread desert drama began to unfold. Cruelly cracked and black with coagulated blood, their swollen tongues were protruding from their mouths. Crazily they tore water bottles from the necks of our men; and they poured life-saving swallows between their parched lips. Later I talked with some of them. And this is the story they told:

“When they had broken through at Alamein the day before, they had already been 24 hours without water. But at our overrun defenses they found a six-inch water pipeline. At various points along a ten-mile stretch, where it was above the ground, they shot holes in it and then dropped to their knees to drink the cool, gushing stream. In all, a thousand men drank the water and took great gulps before their parched throats gave a belated warning: *The water was salt.*

“All night those men suffered unspeakably. Only the lure of quenching their thirst in Alexandria sustained them through the hours of the grim desert battle next morning. But, when the Nazi tanks turned tail, the infantrymen could bear the agony no longer. In a mass they started for our side—and freshwater.

“Why was that pipeline full of saltwater? As the officer responsible for supplying the eighth army with water through all its desert campaign, I can give you the answer. The pipeline was a new one, and I never wasted precious freshwater in testing a line; I always used saltwater. If

the Panzers had punched through Alamein the day before, that pipeline would have been empty. Two days later it would have been full of freshwater. As it happened (God was directing that warfare), the Nazis got saltwater; and they didn't detect the salt at once because their sense of taste had already been anesthetized by the brackish water they had been used to and by thirst.

"The balance of that crucial desert battle was so even that I believe the enemy without the salted torture might have outlasted us; and then defenseless Alexandria would have fallen into their hands. On so small a turn of fate is history written." —*Readers Digest, January 1944.*

It is not difficult to read between the lines of this story and see the hand of God throwing the balance in the scale of that evenly fought battle toward the allied forces. Truly God is seen within the shadow, *keeping watch.*

Space does not permit the recounting of similarly unusual circumstances at many other critical junctures in history. Whether or not miraculous circumstances are readily apparent at all crucial turning points in history, the Bible repeatedly assures us that God is in complete control of events.

The prophet Daniel declares that "Daniel answered and said, Blessed be the name of God for ever and ever: for wisdom and might are his: And he changeth the times and the seasons: he removeth kings, and setteth up kings: he giveth wisdom unto the wise, and knowledge to them that know understanding:" Daniel 2:20, 21.

To King Nebuchadnezzar of ancient Babylon, Daniel affirmed that "the God of heaven hath given thee a kingdom, power and strength and glory" (Daniel 2:37). The seven years punishment of Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4) was for the purpose that "the living may know that the most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomsoever he will and sets up over it the basest of men" (Daniel 4:17).

The prophet Isaiah says it is God who "That bringeth the princes to nothing; he maketh the judges of the earth as vanity." (Isaiah 40:23). King David of ancient Israel declares that "But God is the judge: he putteth down one, and setteth up another." (Psalm 75:7).

It is important to understand that God's intervention in events is not of a capricious play-it-by-ear nature. Millennia ago, God, who knows the end from the beginning (Isaiah 46:10) set forth a definite scheme of history, as revealed in the ancient prophecies of the Bible. At certain times, it has been necessary for God to directly intervene to influence events to conform with the timetable of that overall master plan.

In this regard, Victor Hugo, writing with unusual insight in his description of Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo, declared, "it was time for this vast man to fall. . . ."

Few realize that the Bible is nearly one-third prophecy. Prophecy is simply history told in advance. James A. Garfield, 20th President of the United States declared: "History is but the unrolled scroll of prophecy."

Centuries in advance of their actual fulfillment, the inspired prophecies of the Bible outlined a definite, unmistakable progression of world empires, beginning with the Babylonian and continuing through the subsequent Medo-Persian, Greco-Macedonian and Roman empires and

beyond. Additional prophecies foretold the fates of numerous other major cities and nations. In all cases, the pages of history have confirmed the unerring accuracy of these prophecies.

The eighth chapter of Daniel was written some 200 years before the time of Alexander the Great. It is a remarkable example of prophecy become history. In it, Daniel describes a struggle between the Medo-Persian empire and Greece, predicting two great Grecian victories (Alexander's triumphs at Issus 333 BC and at Gaugamela 331 BC), the final collapse of Persia, the untimely death of Alexander and the division of his kingdom among his four generals, all of which later came to pass exactly as foretold!

Alexander himself, at one of those rare, fateful moments in history, may have actually seen those very predictions as he was in the process of fulfilling them! The first century A.D. Jewish historian, Josephus, records in his Antiquities of the Jews (X, Volume 5) that in 332 B.C. Alexander the Great, on a campaign through Palestine, met personally with Jaddua, the Jewish high priest. "And when the book of Daniel was showed him, wherein Daniel declared that one of the Greeks should destroy the empire of the Persians, he (Alexander) supposed that himself was the person intended, and ... he was glad."

Josephus also records that Cyrus the Great, whose conquest of Babylon was foretold by the prophet Isaiah nearly 200 years before it happened, may likewise have read the prophecy regarding his role in rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem (Isaiah 44:28).

Interestingly, the Bible records an example of an actual conference at God's throne in heaven at which was discussed the best manner of influencing a crucial historical event! Undoubtedly, similar conferences have been held throughout history. The question at hand (1 Kings 22) was how to influence Ahab, the most wicked of all the kings of ancient Israel, to go to battle against the Syrians, a battle in which he would surely be killed.

"Who shall persuade Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead? And one said on this manner and another said on that manner. And there came forth a spirit and stood before the Lord, and said I will persuade him. And the Lord said unto him, Where with? And he said, I will go forth and I will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets" (1 Kings 22:20-22). So God allowed the evil angel to influence Ahab's pagan prophets to falsely assure Ahab that he would be victorious in the war.

Now Ahab decided that he would make sure of his own safety by disguising himself as an ordinary soldier, but this actually led to his death. On the day of battle, the powerful Syrian easily defeated the Israelites. During the fighting, someone shot an arrow at random against what they thought was just one of the men, and it struck King Ahab between the joints of his armor. (verse 34)

The Bible also records other supernatural circumstances throughout history, such as God's destroying the ships of Tarshish with an east wind (Psalm 48:7) and His sending a great storm to rout the Philistine armies preparing for battle against the Israelites (1 Samuel 7:10).

It is time to awake to the real meaning behind current events. We can know what lies ahead and see the signs that declare that Jesus soon will come!