

A biblical theology of persecution and discipleship: Part 2 The historical books

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Abstract

A truly biblical theology of persecution requires an understanding of a biblical view of history and of suffering. This article seeks to provide such an understanding through an examination of the Old Testament historical books, comparing the biblical view of history with Israel's surrounding cultures and an examination of suffering, discipline, and persecution as revealed in the historical books of Scripture.

Keywords Persecution, theology, Bible, historical books, history, suffering, discipline.

The Old Testament view of history

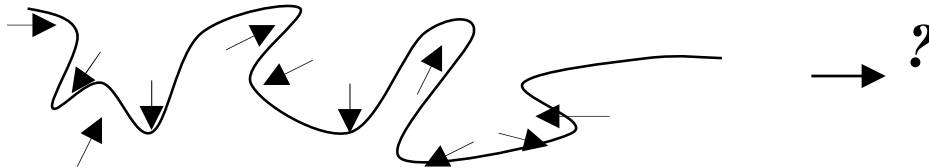
The study of how history was viewed by the peoples of the ancient world is a fascinating one. While time and space do not permit us the luxury of a thorough investigation, it is accurate to say that the Jews were rather unique in their view of history.

Speiser makes the keen observation that the Bible is not so much a chronicle of events and thoughts worth recording as it is an interpretation of significant happenings. The Bible is, thus, "essentially a philosophy of history" (Speiser 1976:2). The way that Israel viewed history was startling, particularly in comparison to the two dominant cultures with which it interacted: Egypt and Mesopotamia.

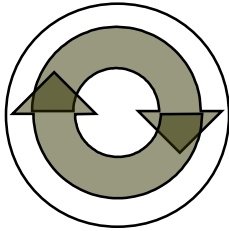
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By way of introduction, let me propose, by means of illustration, the Mesopotamian, the Egyptian, and the biblical views of history. An explanation will follow.

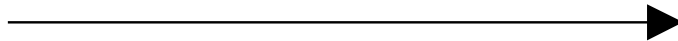
Mesopotamian



Egyptian



Biblical



The Day of the Lord

The Mesopotamian cultures¹ saw history as a chaotic meandering, subject to the whims of capricious, untrustworthy gods who might turn on them at any moment. No one, not even the gods, knew where history was going. No one god was the ultimate source of power and authority. Indeed, none were truly omnipotent (:3) Nothing in the universe was, therefore, permanent and absolute; nothing could be taken for granted. History was dynamic but unpredictable. The only hope of averting disaster or misfortune was by seeking to propitiate the gods somehow. Perhaps, it was hoped, some sort of favourable decision might be rendered on behalf of the one making the offering. Since the gods were capricious, this was never a certain thing. It was important, therefore, to find out what had apparently ‘worked’ in the past. If it could be shown that a certain offering or ritual had proved effective before, this provided a possible key to pleasing their deities in the present.

¹ Babylonian, Chaldean, Assyrian, Elam, Anatolian, Hurrian, Hittite, Ugarit, Alalakh.

The past then became very important as a check against the reoccurrence of past disasters (:4).² The past, it was hoped, might provide keys to knowing how to propitiate the gods. There was, therefore, a need for constant watchfulness and an increasingly elaborate ritual. “The cosmos, in short, lacked a true basis for an ethical approach to life. Form rather than content promised the best protection against the whims of heaven” (Speiser 1976:4; cf Halo & Simpson 1971:171-172).

The ziggurats are a prime example of the hopes of the Mesopotamians to forge a link between heaven and earth, between immortals and mortals in their pursuit of survival. The ziggurats also reflect the other tenet of the Mesopotamian worldview; the belief that human society was an exact replica of the society of the gods with the ziggurats serving as a link between the two. Just as no god could claim absolute divine authority, it was impossible for any human ruler to claim such rights. The concept of a divine ruler was foreign to Mesopotamian thought (Speiser 1976:3; Halo & Simpson 1971:175). The authority of the king was thus doubly restricted. As Speiser (1976:3) points out:

On the one hand, his mandate stemmed from the gods, to whom he was accountable for his every action. And on the other hand, the king was subject to the will of the assembly of his elders, just as the head of the pantheon was bound by the wishes of his celestial assembly.

These twin checks on the power of the mortal ruler – one cosmic and the other societal – had a direct effect on the Mesopotamian concept of state. In these circumstances, the state could evolve into nothing but a kind of democracy. For government by assembly and the circumscribed authority of the king could scarcely add up to anything else. The main beneficiary was the individual, whose rights were protected by the law – more specifically the cosmic, unalterable, and impersonal law called *kittum*, an approximate synonym of Hebrew *’emeth*. The ruler was ever the humble servant of the *kittum*, never its master. The presence of writing was a further safeguard against abuses or distortions on the part of the king.

These laws, which protected the rights of the individual, can be found in the vast numbers of documents that have been found in

² This emphasis is clearly seen in Mesopotamian war records where the perceived need for continued divine favour in battle seems to be strongly emphasized. Cf. Pritchard 1958:188-208.

Mesopotamian archeological digs. While this dynamic view of history resulted in societies run, for the most part, by the rule of law, the lack of an absolute authority made it impossible to determine whether the laws were ultimately right or moral. No values were ultimately enduring. The collapse of the Assyrian and Babylonian empires was ultimately due not so much to the superiority of their enemies than to the crushing weight of their internal structure as they sought to find form and security within the chaos of their worldview. The Mesopotamians were an expansionist, progressive people who, because of their worldview, had to keep looking over their shoulder in fear. Lacking absolute standards, they sought security in form and ritual that increasingly became too taxing to maintain. Trying to find a way to live securely in a chaotic universe, tragically, led eventually to their collapse.

The Egyptians, on the other hand, held to a static view of history. The cosmos of the Egyptians was the outcome of a single creative process, unlike the progression of events in the Mesopotamian (and biblical) creation story. There was no *kittum* concept among the Egyptians either. In its place was a personal absolute law in the person of the Pharaoh, the incarnation of the creator. The king was a god whose world was as stable and unchanging as the rhythm of the Nile and the constant shining of the sun (Speiser 1976:5; Livingston 1987:123). History was wrapped in the reign of the divine king. There was no codification of law as in Mesopotamia. The word of the Pharaoh became law as soon as the words were spoken. In the Pharaoh there was stability and order. As Livingston (1987:123) points out:

When the Pharaoh was crowned, he did not become a god; he was simply unveiled as a god. In the cult, the Pharaoh was high priest; in the government, his rule was the absolute; in war, he was the army; in art, he symbolized Egypt. The Pharaoh could delegate his power to others, and at times his underlings may have seemed more powerful than he; but his power was repeatedly reemphasized. There is no clear evidence that a real revolt of the people was ever mounted against him. Even invaders were absorbed into the concept of the Pharaoh's supremacy and ejected as soon as possible.

Since the kingship was supremely important, the Egyptians gave very little heed in their records to events not directly related to the throne (:100).³ The records make no reference to the predecessors of the

³ Cf. Pritchard 1958:173-187. As Livingston notes, one wonders at times how

Pharaoh or to his successors; history is the reign of the Pharaoh. The calendar begins with his coming to the throne and ends with his death. The linear concept of time with a continuous era was completely foreign to the Egyptian worldview. Frankfort (1958:20-21) notes:

The Egyptians had very little sense of history or of past and future. For they conceived their world as essentially static and unchanging. It had gone forth complete from the hands of the Creator. Historical incidents were, consequently, no more than superficial disturbances of the established order, or recurring events of never-changing significance. The past and the future – far from being a matter of concern – were wholly implicit in the present...the divinity of animals and kings, the pyramids, mummifications – as well as several other and seemingly unrelated features of Egyptian civilization – its moral maxims, the forms peculiar to poetry and prose – can all be understood as a result of a basic conviction that only the changeless is truly significant.⁴

To reconstruct a history of Egypt is notoriously difficult. Often private and business documents prove to be more reliable than royal ones. Records from western Asia that date from the same period – diplomatic treaties, trade, wars and other contacts with Egypt by other civilizations – often prove more enlightening than actual Egyptian documentation.

It is difficult to conceive how two cultures could have existed in such close proximity to each other, with frequent interaction between the two over thousands of years, yet socially and religiously they differed fundamentally.

With Israel in close relationship both historically and geographically, does the Bible reflect a similarity with either the Mesopotamian or Egyptian view of history? The answer is both yes and no.

Speiser (1976:9) argues:

It is abundantly clear today that, of the two major centres of civilization in the area, it was the distant Mesopotamia and not neighboring Egypt that left the deeper cultural impression upon Israel. This was to be expected. For in the first place, the patriarchs had their roots in the land across the Euphrates and in the second place, the Egyptian way was static and isolationist, whereas the Mesopotamian was dynamic and

much of these accounts are actually factual and how much is royal bragging.

⁴ Cf. Hallo & Simpson 1971:191; Bull 1955:1-33.

expansive – naturally suited to reach out to other lands, Israel included....

The independent evidence of the law, moreover, serves to emphasize the fact that in the wide area of cultural correspondence between Mesopotamia and Israel, we are likely to be confronted with cases of actual kinship as opposed to mere coincidence. In both societies the law was impersonal and supreme; the king was its servant and not its source and master. Furthermore, the respective legal disciplines are closely linked in spirit and in content, notwithstanding numerous differences in details. And because many of the features that are common to both lands can now be traced back to the very beginning of Mesopotamian civilization, Israel has to be regarded in this respect as the cultural descendant of Mesopotamia.

Despite their similarities, however, there are profound differences in the Mesopotamian and Israelite views of history. For example, I would disagree with Speiser that the law in Israel's case was impersonal. This is a critical area of difference. Israel's law was from a personal, covenant-making God whose character and will was reflected in the law. This is far cry from the Mesopotamian *kittum*. Because of the covenant, Israel saw history as being under the control of a single, omnipotent master who created all things, sustains all things and controls the course of history.⁵ Unlike the gods of the surrounding nations, Yahweh is distinct from all the other gods in that He cares for a people while all the other gods are concerned only for their lands. Unlike the gods of the nations, Yahweh's interests embrace all peoples in all places, not only those who worship Him.

History was, thus, seen as purposeful, not liable to the whims of capricious deities as in the Mesopotamian view, or the totalitarian authority of rulers with divine pretensions, as in the Egyptian view. History has meaning, for it is under the sovereign control of Almighty God (Trites 1977:40). From the biblical point of view, man is bestowed with responsibility, dignity, and hope (Speiser 1976:15).⁶ In a very real sense, the biblical view is a direct rejection of both the Mesopotamian and the Egyptian views of history (:10-11). History does matter (contra Egypt) but it is not out of control (contra Mesopotamia). Hence the believer has both hope and security as we

⁵ A particular unique aspect of the biblical view is the assertion that Yahweh controls not only the fortunes of Israel but of all nations, even those who do not worship Him and without the direct agency of His people. cf. Wright 2006:84-85.

⁶ Cf. Waltke 1980:371.

see history moving towards a climax, which the biblical authors call the 'Day of the Lord.'

In later times, the Jews would encounter the view of the Greeks who tended to see history as moving forwards and downwards. The golden age was past, and time was marching towards death, darkness and suffering. The Jews knew that the best was yet to come.

They looked ahead to a day when affliction and suffering would end and when justice would prevail. They knew that the present state of the world was abnormal. They recognised that this world is not all that there is. Hence, they avoided the stagnation that inevitably contributed to the collapse of the Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Greek civilizations.

In their history, Israel saw the hand of God at work, moving them and the rest of the world towards a final goal. Suffering and affliction was part of that plan; most often depicted as a punishment for sins, a means by which God sought to restore His people to fellowship with Himself, or, on the other hand, as a means of developing and revealing spiritual maturity in the lives of His people.

Sometimes, however, suffering has a value in the mind of God that is known only to Him and was not necessarily to be understood as a means of divine punishment or discipline.⁷ In such cases, it is enough for the child of God to know that God watches over even the dark and obscure ways (Gerstenberger & Schrage 1977:115). As we see in Genesis 3:14, God's plans for restoration require conflict, suffering and bruising of His people. It is true, as we shall see in the history of Israel, that sometimes God chose to use suffering to punish and restore the people to fellowship. Sometimes He used it for the spiritual training of His people. At other times, however, God's people suffer for reasons known only to Himself but which serve to effectively accomplish His purposes in history (:116).

Gerstenberger and Schrage (:116) rightfully point out that there is no unitary meaning of suffering to be drawn from the Old Testament. Attempts to find such inevitably come to a point where they fail because the attempt, itself, exhibits a lack of a basic attitude of trust in God. The call to the sufferer is to entrust the distress to One who is mightier and who understands all things.

⁷ Cf. Psalm 23:4; Gerstenberger & Schrage 1977:115.

Suffering in the historical texts

Discipline as punishment

It is at this point that we need to pause and discuss the biblical theme of ‘discipline’ because it is here that people often trip up. When we hear the word ‘discipline,’ we tend to think primarily in the context of punishment.

Christians in Sudan, for example, often see their suffering as punishment from God for sin. They are not sure what that sin may be, but they often speak of their suffering in this context. To be sure, discipline does involve punishment, but this is not the whole picture. Let us, however, begin from the familiar and move to the unfamiliar.

Throughout Israel’s history, as the people of God moved towards the Day of the Lord, the following cycle emerged:⁸



Looking at their life, they saw how their sins had resulted in God's punishment, as He withdrew His favour and protection from them. They also knew that this same suffering could lead them to repentance and to a return to God's covenant. Hence, suffering could also be the catalyst for their deliverance from sin and its consequences. Suffering could, thereby, result in God's glory. In Leviticus 26:18, 24, 28 and Judges especially we see how God used suffering in the sense of corrective discipline for sin.

⁸ Chart adapted from Kreeft 1986:111.

Thus, in the history of Israel, we see:

- Sin and suffering are not permanent (history is going somewhere).
- Suffering may be a fruit of continuing sin.
- Suffering can be used by God to lead to repentance from sin and ultimately to the glory of God.

However, seeing the suffering of God's people in this context alone is inconsistent with the full revelation of God.⁹ Indeed, it is this author's conviction that one of the consequences of not having a solid biblical understanding of persecution is the tendency to confuse divine punishment and persecution.

A prime example of this was the weblog posted by James T. Draper, president of LifeWay Christian Resources of the Southern Baptist Convention for Baptist Press in August of 2005 entitled *They Are Praying, Watching And Waiting; What's Our Response?* (Draper 2005). This article was widely distributed, referenced and praised over the Internet for its call to a level of Christian commitment among Western Christians as evidenced by persecuted Christians in China. Unfortunately, for all of its merits, Draper demonstrated his misunderstanding of the nature of persecution when he suggested that persecution is one of the ways that God punishes His people when he stated that the American church may be "on the road to persecution, brought on because of our own arrogance." Persecution, he suggested, may be the means by which God will renew the Western church. As well meaning as Draper was, there is no biblical evidence to support this hope. He unfortunately confused God's judgment with the cost of discipleship. Persecution is the price that God's people experience due to their faithfulness in bringing the gospel to a fallen world, not God's punishment or disciplinary process. Taking Draper's statement as it stands, one might be led to believe the persecuted suffer due to sin in their lives or because they have done something wrong.

Discipline as a means to spiritual maturity

The concept that God's discipline can be a means to bring about spiritual maturity is probably most clearly seen in the New Testament but it is not absent in the Old Testament.

⁹ And would lead us to commit the error that Gerstenberger and Schrage warn us against.

In Deuteronomy 8, the suffering of the people in the wilderness is referred to as ‘discipline’ to discover what was in the heart of the people (8:2). By this they were to learn that man does not live by bread alone but by everything that comes from the mouth of the Lord (8:3). In this, they were to know that God was disciplining them as a father disciplines his son (8:5).

Elsewhere in the Old Testament we see this same imagery of God training, correcting, instructing and providing for his children as a Father. Discipline gives the assurance of sonship, seeking to create in the life of the child a God-centred way of life that expresses itself in obedience and ethical behaviour.

In Psalm 94:12-14, it is God’s discipline through the teaching of His Word that is evidence that the Lord has not forsaken His people:

Blessed is the man whom you discipline, O Lord, and whom you teach out of your law, to give him rest from days of trouble, until a pit is dug for the wicked. For the Lord will not forsake his people; he will not abandon his heritage.

Understanding discipline in this manner, it is not hard to see how God can use persecution as an instrument of discipline for spiritual maturity but not as punishment for sin.

Suffering specifically for God’s sake

The Old Testament historical books record several incidents of what we would commonly understand as persecution; suffering for doing what is good or, more specifically, because of one’s allegiance to the living God.

1. David was described as a man after God’s own heart. Yet we read that Saul “was determined to put David to death” (1 Sam 20:33; cf. 1 Sam 18-27) because of God’s appointment of him to be Saul’s successor.
2. Eighty-five priests of Nob were killed by Saul and Doeg (1 Sam. 22).
3. God’s prophets were hunted and killed by Queen Jezebel and King Ahab (1 Kgs 19:10, 14). One hundred of them were hidden and fed by Obadiah, head of the king’s household, in direct violation of his orders (1 Kgs 18:3-4). We find here perhaps the earliest example of civil disobedience. We may

deduce, as well, that the care of these one hundred ‘dissidents’ was likely done, illegally, at the expense of the royal treasury, at great risk to Obadiah. To feed and water one hundred men over an extended period of time, even if only on bread and water, was no small task and would have taken considerable resources in the midst of a drought and famine.

4. Elijah was persecuted by Ahab and Jezebel, leading to his flight to the desert (1 Kgs 18:10-19:2).
5. The prophet Micaiah was imprisoned by King Ahab, falsely accused of troublemaking rather than prophesying in the name of the Lord (2 Chr 18:12-26).
6. Elisha was threatened with death by the king (2 Kgs 6:31).
7. The prophet Hanani was imprisoned by King Asa (2 Chr 16:7-10).
8. The prophet Zechariah was executed at King Joash's command (2 Chr 24:20-22).
9. We are told that “Manasseh shed very much innocent blood, till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another” (2 Kgs 21:16).
10. In 2 Chronicles 36:16 in words reminiscent of Jesus’ in Matthew 23:23-35, we are told that God, because of His compassion persisted in sending messengers to His people, but they were consistently mocked and rejected.
11. In the book of Esther, the Persian King Ahasuerus persecuted the Jews under the influence of his advisor Haman. Mordecai was a special object of Haman’s attacks (Esth 3:1-12; 5:14).

Conclusion

A study of the Old Testament historical texts is essential in developing a biblical theology of persecution. First, an understanding that history has meaning and is under divine control helps us to see persecution as not being outside of God’s plan but as being even essential to His method of reconciling the world to Himself. An understanding of the biblical view of suffering helps us to avoid simplistic answers, concluding that all suffering is the result of sin or a means of bringing about spiritual maturity. The historical books also clearly provide examples of suffering for righteousness or because of one’s allegiance to God, identifying with His people or participating in His purposes.

Persecution is clearly not simply a New Testament phenomenon and a true biblical theology must acknowledge this. Present-day persecuted Christians will find comfort and hope in knowing that persecution has been the lot of God's people from the very beginning and that it has significance in fulfilling the purposes of God.

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