

God in History

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As I thought about the intellectual and spiritual underpinnings of this symposium,¹ several questions and problems came to my mind. How does one even attempt to determine, understand, and integrate patterns of cause and effect in the vast sweep of human history, given the huge mass of information available and the fact that we can achieve an understanding of the past only through the myopic eyes of the present? Since historians—wanderers above a sea of fog—unquestionably exert a profound impact on the making of history, and history is in a sense what the historian determines it to be, can there be any objective history at all? Given that objectivity in history does not rest on a fixed and immutable standard but changes and evolves over time, how do we establish a coherent relation between past and future?

Even the words we choose in attempting to describe the past have current connotations that may well differ from those understood at the

time events occurred. Furthermore, with time, attitudes towards events change. Catholic historians of the sixteenth century, for example, had much different views of Martin Luther than do those writing in our day. Thomas More's unfinished biography of Richard III of England reveals more about the animus of More's Tudor masters than about Richard the Yorkist.

The same phenomenon can be observed in Latter-day Saint history. Nineteenth-century historians who were not faithful Latter-day Saints almost all concluded that Joseph Smith was a scoundrel, fraud, and charlatan. While that view is still held by some today, the obvious inability of such superficial and overtly biased examinations to adequately explain the Prophet has led historians to search repeatedly for other explanations of his life and accomplishments. That process undoubtedly will go on for some time, but time is on the side of truth, and the truth

about Joseph Smith—that he is the greatest prophet of all time—eventually will prevail.

Our understanding of history inevitably involves attempts to put ourselves into the hearts and minds of those about whom we are writing. For obvious reasons, even the best attempts to do so must fall short. For one thing, the so-called facts of history are at best only those that were recorded, and they reflect not only the bias or interest of the original recorder but also the point of view of the modern observer, who, unless he is careful, may well find only what he is looking for, to the exclusion of other information of greater explanatory value. Medieval historians, for example, recorded little about the lives of ordinary people, and modern historians trying to reconstruct that period are forced to deduce whatever they can from land sale documents, manorial court records, rental certificates, and the like. But the lives of the vast majority of those who lived even five centuries ago remain forever shrouded in mystery. Another example: Latter-day Saint recorders of the death of Joseph Smith understood a whole different set of “facts” than did the editor of the *Warsaw Signal*!

In his classical work titled *What Is History?*² given originally as the Trevelyan Lectures at the University of Cambridge in 1961, Edward Hallett Carr discusses with magisterial grace and eloquence these and numerous other problems with the making and recording of history.

What then *is* history? Is it just the point of view of the recorder, no matter how objective or nonobjective he or she may be? Certainly it is not merely, as Voltaire and Gibbon proclaimed, the record of the crimes and follies of mankind. Of course, history includes the dark side of the human journey, with its countless tears and sorrows, its evil and stupidity. But, as Will Durant has pointed out, history is also “the saving sanity of the average family, the labor of love of men and women bearing the stream of life over a thousand obstacles. It is the wisdom and courage of statesmen. . . . It is the undiscourageable effort

of scientists and philosophers to understand the universe that envelops them; it is the patience and skill of artists and poets giving lasting form to transient beauty, or an illuminating clarity to subtle significance; it is the vision of prophets and saints challenging us to nobility.”³ And God, as the “Great Parent of the universe”⁴ (in Joseph Smith’s words), is very much a part of it.

To be sure, however, when we introduce God into the equation, our attempts to understand history get even harder. How do we properly understand the Almighty’s intentions and interventions, given that, as 1 Samuel 16:7 says, “the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart”? Are His thoughts simply beyond the understanding of any mortal? How do we avoid falling into the trap of seeing the hand of God in events of purely secular causation, which, having worked out to our advantage, we in our hubris ascribe to our supposed unique favor with the Almighty? Is God always on the side of the big battalions, as Napoleon cynically stated? In other words, is history just an example of might making right, with no place for God?

Even this brief and incomplete discussion has shown us, I hope, that scholars must be humble in any attempt to define the role of God in history. In addition to all of the uncertainties inherent in any historical work, there are, I believe, two traps we must avoid falling into in attempting to describe a Latter-day Saint approach to history. The first—and it is, I fear, one that is prevalent among Latter-day Saint academic historians—is to go the way of most of the modern world, throw up our hands, and vacate the field, dismissing God from history, concluding that He has no role to play, or at least no understandable role, and has had no impact we can comprehend on the long, unfolding tale of mankind’s sojourn on earth.

If God intervenes in human history and loves His children, some such observers say,

where was He during the Holocaust? Why was He absent from the slaughter at the Somme in 1916, the killing fields of Cambodia, the “ethnic cleansing” of Bosnia, or a million other places where since time immemorial the innocent have been violated in body and spirit? Those who observe history in this way, and they are many, echo Elijah’s words to the priests of Baal: “Either [God] is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth, and must be awaked” (1 Kings 18:27).

The causation of human suffering, along with God’s role in it, has vexed and troubled mankind from the beginning. There is no simple or fully persuasive answer, and none of us, I think, fully understands what seems beyond human comprehension. It is well to remember that our mortal views on this and many other subjects are at best myopic and incomplete. We do not see the beginning from the end as God does. Although we are “spiritual beings having a human experience” in Teilhard de Chardin’s felicitous phrase, we simply lack an eternal perspective at this stage of our eternal journey. As Elder Neal A. Maxwell has wisely said, “We cannot do the sums because we do not have all the numbers.”⁵

It is a seductively easy step—and one aided and abetted by the adversary of truth—to go from saying God does not intervene in human history to concluding that He does not exist at all. That is the trap into which many fall. And then the devil laughs.

But there are, to be sure, many who do not go so far. They retain at least a residue of belief. “God exists,” they will admit, “but He is absent from history or if He is there, we can’t understand His role.” Some who subscribe to that view are, I believe, lacking in faith, “ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Timothy 3:7). They have forsaken the things of the Spirit and have yielded their faith for the acclaim of the world. Peter likened them to “wells without water, clouds that are carried with a tempest; to whom the mist of darkness is

reserved for ever” (2 Peter 2:17). To talk of God is embarrassing to them, especially when they are in the company of sophisticated, supposedly enlightened people who scoff at sacred things. Caring too much what the world thinks, they are, in a word, “ashamed of the gospel of Christ” (Romans 1:16). Unwilling to walk by faith, demanding what they mistakenly think of as objective proof, they dismiss any role for Deity in human affairs.

The other side of the coin is equally distressing to me. Some there are who see the hand of God in human affairs but believe He is always on their side. They and others like them, they proclaim, are uniquely favored of God. “We’re number one,” they announce in their religiocentric arrogance. “And we’re the best,” they aver, “because God loves us the most.” That is a view, I almost hesitate to suggest, which is not unknown among some Latter-day Saints who believe, in their foolishness and naiveté, that the Latter-day Saints have some sort of monopoly on goodness. They sometimes won’t even allow their little children to play with those of another religious faith and refuse to have a non-Latter-day Saint serve as babysitter for them.

Some American Latter-day Saints may view the world outside of America as second best. Americans, they believe, are uniquely free, uniquely favored of God. The world outside of America, they think, is composed of people who all want to become Americans. This imperialistic attitude, common throughout history in those who for the moment at least are at the top of the pile, obscures understanding of the truth. Most people in other countries may value, even intensely envy, American technology, consumer goods, aggressiveness, business acumen, and wealth, but they do not wish to become Americans!

Several principles can help guide our thoughts on the role of God in history. They include the following:

1. God loves all His children. Nephi perhaps put it best: “[God] doeth that which is good

among the children of men; and he doeth nothing save it be plain unto the children of men; and he inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile" (2 Nephi 26:33). In his famous speech to the Athenians on Mars' Hill, Paul echoed that same statement: "[God] hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth" (Acts 17:26).

The Prophet Joseph Smith understood well that God loves all His children. He taught:

While one portion of the human race is judging and condemning the other without mercy, the Great Parent of the universe looks upon the whole of the human family with a fatherly care and paternal regard; He views them as His offspring, and without any of those contracted feelings that influence the children of men, causes "His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust" [Matthew 5:45]. He holds the reins of judgment in His hands; He is a wise Lawgiver, and will judge all men, not according to the narrow, contracted notions of men, but, "according to the deeds done in the body whether they be good or evil," or whether these deeds were done in England, America, Spain, Turkey, or India. He will judge them, "not according to what they have not, but according to what they have," those who have lived without law, will be judged without law, and those who have a law, will be judged by that law. We need not doubt the wisdom and intelligence of the Great Jehovah; He will award judgment or mercy to all nations according to their several deserts, their means of obtaining intelligence, the laws by which they are governed, the facilities afforded them of obtaining correct information, and His inscrutable designs in relation to the human family; and when the designs of God shall be made manifest, and the curtain of futurity be withdrawn,

we shall all of us eventually have to confess that the Judge of all the earth has done right.⁶

Note that there are no qualifiers in the scriptures or the words of the living prophets concerning the love of God for *all* His children, even those who deliberately disobey Him and His commandments. The Apostle Paul put it well when he proclaimed: "For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38–39).

We can thus be sure that God loves each of us, as He loves *all* His children, with a love that is eternal and immutable. But we should *not* think that He loves any group, race, or individual more than others because of any innate attribute they possess. *All* are alike unto Him in the sense that He loves *all*, both saint and sinner.

It is true that God has called covenant peoples throughout history, to be "peculiar treasures" unto Him (see Exodus 19:5; Psalm 135:4; Ecclesiastes 2:8). Covenant people have special missions in the advancement of the Lord's purposes. Most recorded instances of God's direct intervention have been associated with them. But are the covenant people more beloved of God as a group in and of themselves? Not to my thinking. They make covenants that are intended to bind them to obedience to God's commandments and are blessed to the extent they keep their covenants sacred. But that doesn't imply God loves them more, though He is well pleased by obedience. If anything, God demands more of His covenant people. To whom much is given, much is required. None of this suggests in any way that God is indulgent of wickedness; far from it. As has been said, those who choose wickedness and refuse to repent of it choose damnation to their souls. They forfeit blessings and deny themselves the approbation of a just God.

We must then look elsewhere than preferential love for an explanation of God's intervention in history. Let us now consider a factor of great importance: moral agency.

2. Moral agency is eternal. Moral agency—the right to choose good or evil—is an eternal principle that existed before the dawn of creation and will remain inviolable through a never-ending eternity. It operated in the great premortal Council in Heaven when Lucifer offered to save all God's children without any element of choice on their part, denying them their agency in the process (see Moses 4:1–3). The Father could not permit this to happen, and a great war was fought in heaven to preserve the agency of man, a war in which one-third of the hosts of heaven forfeited eternal happiness by following Lucifer, whom they loved more than God.

Agency thus is essential to salvation and an intrinsic vital component of the Father's great plan of happiness. That plan could not have virtue, force, or efficacy if God's children did not have agency. Agency is based in part upon the existence of opposites between which a choice must be made. As Father Lehi explained: "Wherefore, the Lord God gave unto man that he should act for himself. Wherefore, man could not act for himself save it should be that he was enticed by the one or the other" (2 Nephi 2:16). In the absence of opposites there could, in fact, be no existence. Lehi taught:

For it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things. If not so, . . . righteousness could not be brought to pass, neither wickedness, neither holiness nor misery, neither good nor bad. Wherefore, all things must needs be a compound in one; wherefore, if it should be one body it must needs remain as dead, having no life neither death, nor corruption, nor incorruption, happiness nor misery, neither sense nor insensibility.

Wherefore, it must needs have been created for a thing of naught; wherefore there would have been no purpose in the end of its creation.

Wherefore, this thing must needs destroy the wisdom of God and his eternal purposes, and also the power, and the mercy, and the justice of God." (2 Nephi 2:11–12)

In other words, in the absence of agency the very purpose of creation and existence would vanish, existence itself would disappear, and the plans, designs, mercy, and justice of Almighty God would fail. That is, by definition, impossible.

Agency rests upon four unchangeable principles: *opposites* that pull us one way or another, toward good on the one side and evil on the other; *eternal laws* ordained of God; *knowledge* of the choice before us; and last, the *freedom* to choose. Anything that interferes with one or more of those principles has eternal consequences.

Agency is inextricably and inherently operative in the unfolding of history. From time immemorial, individuals, groups, and governments have chosen good or evil, and God has honored that choice, even when those who have done evil have worked unspeakable outrage and suffering on others. Thus, He *permitted* the Holocaust to occur, since to have stopped it—and He assuredly had the power to do so—would have broken the inalienable law of agency. Agency is so important, so crucial to man's very existence, that God will not deprive His children of it under *any* circumstances. Of course, those who misuse their agency, rebel against the light, work wickedness, and do not repent, reap damnation on their souls and may lose their agency by reason of their deeds. Even those who repent of the evil they have done may have forfeited eternal blessings.

President Joseph F. Smith put it this way:

God, doubtless, could avert war, prevent crime, destroy poverty, chase away darkness, overcome error, and make all things bright, beautiful and joyful. But this would involve the destruction of a vital and fundamental attribute in man—the right of agency. It is for the benefit of His sons and daughters that they become

acquainted with evil as well as good, with darkness as well as light, with error as well as truth, and with the results of the infraction of eternal laws. Therefore he has permitted the evils which have been brought about by the acts of His creatures, but will control their ultimate results for His own glory and the progress and exaltation of His sons and daughters, when they have learned obedience by the things they suffer. The contrasts experienced in this world of mingled sorrow and joy are educational in their nature, and will be the means of raising humanity to a full appreciation of all that is right and true and good. The foreknowledge of God does not imply His action in bringing about that which He foresees, nor make Him responsible in any degree for that which man does or refuses to do.⁷

President Smith continues:

The only reason I have been able to discover by which we should acknowledge the hand of God in some occurrences is the fact that the thing which has occurred has been permitted of the Lord. When two men give way to their passions, their selfishness and anger, to contend and quarrel with each other, and this quarrel and contention leads to physical strife and violence between them, it has been difficult for me to discover the hand of the Lord in that transaction; other than that the men who thus disagree, quarrel and contend with each other, have received from God the freedom of their own agency to exercise their own intelligence, to judge between the right and wrong for themselves, and to act according to their own desire. The Lord did not design or purpose that these two men should quarrel, or give way to their anger to such an extent that it would lead to violence between them, and, perhaps, to bloodshed. God has never designed such a thing as that, nor can we charge such things to the Almighty. . . .

The agency that [God] has given to us left us to act for ourselves—to do things if we will that

are not right, that are contrary to the laws of life and health, that are not wise or prudent—and the results may be serious to us, because of our ignorance or of our determination to persist in that which we desire, rather than to yield to the requirements which God makes of us.⁸

3. Liberty is the inalienable right of all.

Closely related to the principle of agency is that of liberty—the quality or state of being free to choose various social, political, or economic rights or privileges. In the absence of liberty, one’s ability to exercise agency may be impeded, even denied. It follows, therefore, given the pre-eminence of agency, that liberty is the inherent right of all God’s children. The Prophet Joseph Smith put it this way: “All men are, or ought to be free, possessing unalienable rights, and the high and noble qualifications of the laws of nature and of self-preservation, to think, and act, and say as they please, while they maintain a due respect to the rights and privileges of all other creatures, infringing upon none.”⁹

In an address given in Independence Hall on February 27, 1861, less than two months before the American Civil War began, Abraham Lincoln, speaking of the Union that he loved, inquired:

What great principle or idea it was that kept this Confederacy so long together. It was not the mere matter of the separation of the colonies from the mother land; but something in that Declaration giving *liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but hope to the world* for all future time. It was that which gave promise that in due time the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men, and that all should have an equal chance. This is the sentiment embodied in that Declaration of Independence.¹⁰

As Locke, Jefferson, and Madison understood, liberty then is the inalienable right of all people, everywhere, in every land and in every era of history. It is a natural right, universal in its application to all human beings everywhere,

regardless of status, origin, or place. How sad it is that even in our supposedly enlightened day so few enjoy it. Any system of government, any individual, society, or group that denies liberty, denigrates man and denies God. Margaret Thatcher, the former British prime minister, has observed that societies founded on the basis of morality and freedom prosper but that those not formed on these principles do not survive for long. A case in point would be the rapid demise of the Soviet Union.¹¹

The ability of an individual to develop his or her talents, abilities, and potential as a human being is related to the presence or absence of liberty. But there is within us another great drive—the need for order. To fill both of these hungers is a difficult and never-ending task. The dimensions of the dynamic tension between freedom and order, while always present, vary in their nature, depending upon the circumstances: sometimes the need for order may predominate temporarily, while at other times it may be liberty which takes first place. While both are important, an inordinate emphasis on the one will destroy the other. As Will Durant noted, “When liberty destroys order, the hunger for order will destroy liberty.”¹² His words echo those of Socrates, who proclaimed “the excess of liberty, in states or individuals, seems only to pass into slavery, . . . and the most aggravated form of tyranny arises out of the most extreme forms of liberty.”¹³ Much of the history of mankind revolves around the tension between order and liberty. That should not surprise us: in the premortal Council in Heaven we agreed to freedom, with all of its attendant, inherent risks.

That is not to say, however, that we eschewed order, which also is essential. The scriptures are indeed replete with references to the fact that God’s work is one of order. The Prophet Joseph Smith noted that the “Almighty is a lover of order and good government.”¹⁴ The poor are to be cared for by a “permanent and everlasting establishment and order” (D&C 78:4; see also

D&C 82:20), and the First Presidency is to “set in order all the affairs of this church and kingdom” (D&C 90:16). Records of baptisms for the dead are to be had “in order,” that they may be “held in remembrance from generation to generation” (D&C 127:9). In His call to the Saints to build the Kirtland Temple, the Lord stated they were to “organize [themselves]; prepare every needful thing; and establish a house, even a house of prayer, a house of fasting, a house of faith, a house of learning, a house of glory, a house of order, a house of God” (D&C 88:119; emphasis added). God’s house, we are told, “is a house of order, . . . and not a house of confusion” (D&C 132:8). How then does one reconcile the need for liberty with the need for order, given that both are essential? Obedience to that which is right and true, the obedience upon which God’s order depends, must be given freely, voluntarily, by one who is at liberty to do so. In other words, order in its finest expression flows from the wise use of freedom. Order obtained by coercion, by the negation of freedom of choice, is inimical to the development of the human personality and leads inevitably to wickedness and tyranny. On the other hand, those who do things in God’s order because they love the Almighty are willing to give away all their sins to know Him (see Alma 22:18) and have no more inclination to do wrong and thus retain and indeed strengthen their liberty while sustaining and promoting order.

President Joseph F. Smith wisely observed:

We do not preach the gospel of fear. We do not seek to terrorize the souls of men. We do not ask a man to be righteous because of the terrors of the damned. We do not want you to be good because you fear the punishment of the wicked. We do not want you to do right because of the penalty that attaches to the doing of wrong. We want you to choose the right because it is right, and because your heart loves the right, and because it is choice above everything else. We want you to be honest, not merely because it is the best policy, but because in so doing you honor

God and you carry out His purposes in your lives; for “an honest man”—it is an old, and perhaps a hackneyed, saying—“is the noblest work of God.” We want to be honest because we love God, and we cannot be the Saints of God [unless] we are. We should be good because we love to be good, and not because we fear the consequences of evil.¹⁵

Liberty thus carries with it the need for responsible use of agency, if it is not to be corrupted and used for less than noble purposes. A great university that I am pleased to have had some relationship with has as its motto “freedom with responsibility.” Since many who are free do not use their freedom wisely, harming themselves or others in the process, and using their agency to reject liberty, it is obvious that freedom is a risky business and a heavy responsibility. The risks and uncertainties inherent in life’s challenges require those who love freedom to be alert, informed, and willing to fight for and, if need be, die for it. Such societies of freedom lovers are not common. Sad to say, most of us are “inconsistent and uneven in our devotion to liberty,” as Elder Maxwell has pointed out.¹⁶ Nephite history, as recorded in the Book of Mormon, has as a recurring theme the ebb and flow of righteousness and of liberty as spiritual excellence rose and fell in a recurring rhythm of divine approbation of righteousness, spiritual apathy, open wickedness with its attendant spiritual captivity, and eventual repentance.

One of the continuing risks entailed in the use of liberty is that the selfishness of the natural man, who is an enemy of God (see Mosiah 3:19), will overwhelm the “better angels of our nature” in Lincoln’s famous phrase, to produce the monstrous aberrations with which history abounds. When this occurs, men see others only as things to be exploited and then thrown away, objects to be used and discarded. It is ironic indeed that Adolf Hitler, one of the great monsters of history, who destroyed his nation, whined as his life dragged on to its ignominious end that his fail-

ures occurred not because of any fault of his but because the German people were not good enough for him! Thus, the father of all lies “will not support his children at the last day, but doth speedily drag them down to hell” (Alma 30:60). And hell, we can be sure, is where Hitler resides.

One of the inherent uncertainties of liberty, then, is that it cannot be taken for granted. Those who do so stand in grave danger of losing their freedom. It is a sad portent of our time and the harbinger of a dismal future, if we persist in our folly, that fewer than half of eligible Americans routinely vote in federal, state, and local elections. America, for the moment at least, is the only true superpower on earth. But we are vulnerable, less from assault from without than from rot within. Samuel P. Huntington, the great Harvard scholar, has observed: “The vulnerability of democratic government in the United States thus comes not primarily from external threats, though such threats are real . . . but rather from the internal dynamics of democracy itself in a highly educated, mobilized, and participant society. ‘Democracy never lasts long,’ John Adams observed: ‘It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself. There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide.’ That suicide is more likely to be the product of overindulgence than of any other cause.”¹⁷

Adams’s gloomy remarks should not be read as indicating that democracy, as an institution, has a fatal flaw that causes it to implode. When democracy fails, it is not because the institution is fatally flawed but because the participants do not live worthy of its blessings.

Latter-day Saints also exhibit a similar vulnerability. President David O. McKay wisely pointed out that “the Church is little if at all injured by persecution and calumnies from ignorant, misinformed, or malicious enemies; a great hindrance to its progress comes from faultfinders, shirkers, commandment breakers, and apostate cliques within its own ecclesiastical and

quorum groups. So it is in government. It is the enemy from within that is most menacing.”¹⁸

4. *Mankind is progressing.* The concept of progress is neither Greek nor Roman; both viewed history as an endless cycle without any notion of progress. The writers of classical antiquity were in general concerned neither about the past nor the future. Thucydides was indifferent to the past, believing that nothing significant had happened before the wars that filled his lifetime and that nothing very momentous was likely to happen in the future either. Any ideas about a future golden age were simply that it would represent a return to the past. History, with no sense of past or future, simply was going nowhere.

The idea of historical progress is rooted in Jewish and Christian thought, with their ideas that history had a beginning, with Adam and Eve.¹⁹ Daniel’s interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream (see Daniel 2) tells of the kingdoms of the world, which come and go, each puffed up in its self-importance, each with “an hour of pomp, an hour of show.” But the “stone cut out of the mountain without hands,” the kingdom of God, supersedes them all, and rolls forth to cover the whole earth. The wicked world as we know it will have an ending, so far as Christians are concerned, when Jesus returns to the earth in triumph, to rule as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Putting a beginning and an end on history gives it meaning and purpose while asserting that it has more than a purely secular character. Until recently at least, traditional Christianity viewed history as a defense, or at least an explanation, of God’s goodness and omnipotence in the presence of evil—a cosmic morality play pitting good against bad.

The exuberant optimism of the nineteenth century, which was, in the main, a time of peace and increased scientific knowledge leading to enhanced material well-being (at least in the West), gave way to the bitter pessimism of the twentieth century. Expectations of beneficent science conquering disease and poverty, coupled with pie-

in-the-sky ideas about the inevitable spread of human freedom around the world and the belief that war was economically irrational and thus would not happen, died in the trenches of Flanders. Perhaps the deepest impacts of World War I—above and beyond the loss of a whole generation of young men and the resultant political, economic, and demographic effects—were psychological. Many in the liberal Western democracies lost faith in the progress of man and in any notion that God plays a role in history. Totalitarian regimes of the right and left took root and flourished. World War II, with its unprecedented carnage involving the mass destruction of civilian populations and economic resources on a scale not technically possible in earlier times, served only to reemphasize in the minds of many that history has no meaning and that claims for the progress of man are obscene aberrations of reality. Nightmarish scenarios involving all-out nuclear war or man-made plagues that sweep away whole populations give rise to deep concerns in the hearts of many of our contemporaries about the longtime survival of the human race.

Events of the last decade or so, however, suggest that this extreme pessimism is not warranted. The world still is a dangerous place, to be sure, but in some ways it is getting better. Modern science and technology are doing much to improve the well-being of many of the earth’s inhabitants. Communism, the source of so much blood and horror for over half of the last century, has collapsed throughout much of the world, and authoritarian dictatorships on both the right and the left have been disappearing. Not all such regimes have given way to humane, democratic political institutions governed and bound by law, but all have been shown to be rotten to the core. Their days seem numbered. Furthermore, the spread of the free market has brought unprecedented economic prosperity to scores of countries, both developed and underdeveloped. Francis Fukuyama even has gone so far as to suggest that “liberal democracy may constitute the

'end point of mankind's ideological evolution' and the 'final form of human government,' and as such constitutes the 'end of history.'"²⁰

Latter-day Saint views on the progression of mankind are rooted in our theology. We aver that as God's nature forbids Him to create slaves, so too it forbids Him creating sons and daughters intrinsically and eternally destined to be forever inferiors. God's work and glory is to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of His children (see Moses 1:39), to have them grow ever more like Him, progressing towards godhood itself. Jesus said, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48), and to the Romans Paul wrote, "We are the children of God: and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ" (Romans 8:16–17). The view that mankind's eternal destiny is to progress, that in a sense our very nature demands it, and further that history, as we know it on earth, has a beginning and an end, puts new perspective on who we are and who we may become and underlines the need to spend our mortal probation in endeavors that will further our eternal progression.

5. Without infringing on agency, God works assiduously to shape history. God's love for His children, His work and glory, His very nature, requires that He be concerned that they attain immortality and eternal life, which are His most deeply held desires for them. This process is perhaps best observed across the sweep of centuries, but it must ever be kept in mind that a single life, or even a single event within a life, may serve as the hinge-pin around which world history revolves. The classic example of such is, of course, the birth, ministry, death, and Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Of the perhaps one hundred billion of God's children born into this world since the beginning of time, that solitary life has had more impact than any other. How fitting it is that Jesus's life and ministry, including His death and Resurrection, took place in relative obscurity, outside of the pomp and ceremony, the publicity

and prominence associated with worldly greatness. "My kingdom," He said, "is not of this world" (John 18:36). I testify that He who was born in a manger because there was no room for His mother at the inn will return again as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Our Heavenly Father in His omniscience recognizes that the ability of His children to achieve immortality and eternal life rests upon the foundation stones of agency and liberty. When a revelatory restoration was required to bring back to earth saving truths and priesthood authority, the Father knew that this could be done only if an appropriate seedbed was prepared in which the gospel message could grow and flourish. And thus, in a sense, history was pointed towards the achievement of that objective, without any infringement on man's agency. The rebirth of intellectual and spiritual freedom in Renaissance Europe, the work of the great religious reformers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the labors of men and women of technological and scientific genius throughout the ages—all were preparatory to the Restoration of the gospel in the nineteenth century. The gospel message could take root only in a land where there was sufficient liberty and in a time when that liberty was buttressed and protected by law. In 1830 that situation prevailed only in America, but America had been in preparation for the Restoration for many, many years.

That is not to say, of course, that all who were involved in preparing the way for the Restoration were knowing participants in God's work. Most probably were largely unaware of their role in a work greater than can be conceived by man's intellect. But God used them to accomplish His work, whether or not they believed in Him. He was their Protector in their great preparatory work, the source of their genius and passion.

6. All of history points toward Jesus. The Latter-day Saints proclaim that "all things which have been given of God from the beginning of

the world, unto man, are the typifying of [Christ]" (2 Nephi 11:4). All of history, all of science, all of nature, all divinely revealed knowledge (both spiritual and temporal) testifies of Him. When we learn to read the "signs and wonders and types and shadows" properly, with the eyes of faith, we will realize that *all truths* testify of Him. He is the very personification of truth and light, of life and love, of beauty and goodness. And let us not forget that He stands at the center not only of earthly history, the hinge-pin around which it all revolves, but also at the center of cosmic history, the Creator of "worlds without number" (Moses 1:33).

Finally, then, *does* God play a role in history? Of course He does! Having said so, however, I aver we must be ever so humble in our interpretation of the ways in which He acts, "for my thoughts," He said, "are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. . . . For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8–9). Even the prophets of God, those holy men to whom God "revealeth his secret" (Amos 3:7), struggle, pray, and ponder to know more of His will, to understand Him better, wearing out their lives in service to Him. Joseph Smith, the greatest prophet of all time, who saw the heavens opened and the Father and Son in all Their glory, noted that "God would work a work in these last days that *tongue cannot express and the mind is not capable to conceive*."²¹ The task of striving to know God and progress to become like Him is one which will never be completed to perfection in mortality, even by the most godly among us. It awaits completion beyond the veil of death. The Prophet Joseph Smith declared: "When you climb up a ladder, you must begin at the bottom, and ascend step by step, until you arrive at the top; and so it is with the principles of the gospel—you must begin with the first, and go on until you learn all the principles of exaltation. But it will be a great while after you have passed through the veil be-

fore you will have learned them. It is not all to be comprehended in this world; it will be a great work to learn our salvation and exaltation even beyond the grave."²²

To whom shall we turn, then, to learn of God's role in history? As with so many other things, the best sources available to us are the voices of His prophets. Through them He gives "unto the faithful line upon line, precept upon precept" (D&C 98:12). They are His servants and speak for Him. They know the things of the Spirit. They understand, in President Boyd K. Packer's great phrase, that "the mantle is far, far greater than the intellect."²³ They see God's hand in history, including the miracle of the Restoration. Particularly do they "see in every hour and in every moment of the existence of the Church . . . the overruling, almighty hand of [God]."²⁴

NOTES

1. This paper was presented as the keynote address at a symposium, "A Latter-day Saint Approach to World History," Brigham Young University, February 6–7, 2003.
2. Edward Hallett Carr, *What Is History?* (New York: Random House, 1961).
3. Will Durant, *Heroes of History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 19–20.
4. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 218.
5. Neal A. Maxwell, *All These Things Shall Give Thee Experience* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980), 37.
6. Joseph Smith, *Teachings*, 218.
7. Joseph F. Smith, *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph F. Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1998), 286.
8. Joseph F. Smith, *Teachings of Presidents of the Church*, 286–87.
9. Joseph Smith, *History of Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 5:156.

10. Abraham Lincoln, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basher, M. D. Pratt, and L. A. Dunlap (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 4:240; emphasis added.
11. See *Church News*, March 9, 1996, 3.
12. Will Durant, quoted by Virginia P. Frobes, "Living in My Father's House," 32nd Annual Frederick Williams Reynolds Lecture, University of Utah, February 19, 1968 (Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 1968), 5.
13. Quoted in Durant, *Heroes of History*, 102.
14. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:339.
15. Joseph F. Smith, *Teachings of Presidents of the Church*, 291.
16. Neal A. Maxwell, "Some Thoughts about Our Constitution and Government," in *"By the Hands of Wise Men": Essays on the U.S. Constitution*, ed. Ray C. Hillam (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1979), 113.
17. Samuel P. Huntington, "The Democratic Dis-temper," *Public Interest* 41 (Fall 1975): 37.
18. David O. McKay, *Gospel Ideals* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1953), 308–9.
19. See Carr, *What Is History?* 145.
20. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon Books, 1992), xi.
21. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:176; emphasis added.
22. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, 6:306–7.
23. Boyd K. Packer, "The Mantle Is Far, Far Greater Than the Intellect," *BYU Studies* 21 (Summer 1981): 259.
24. Joseph F. Smith, in Conference Report, April, 1904, 2.