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WISDOM, VANITY, AND "LESSONS" FROM HISTORY

by

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In the midst of a passage on the less-than-absolute character of progress, the Spanish-born Harvard philosopher George Santayana wrote, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."¹ His platitude has taken on a life of its own, abetted by at least some historians.² It has become a cliché among those who engage in what David Hackett Fischer calls "the didactic fallacy" in thinking historically, that is, "the attempt to extract specific 'lessons' from history, and to apply them literally as policies to present problems, without regard for intervening changes."³

When turning to the past, an expectation of lessons of some sort seems to be deeply embedded in many western-educated non-historians. When I have engaged students in discussing the question, why study history?, usually some cognate of Santayana's comment is offered by a student, amidst general agreement.⁴ I have no reason to suspect that my experience is unusual. Moreover, when it comes to advocacy in the public realm, how often do we in the U.S. hear editorialists, essayists, politicians, and others insert "History shows us . . ." or

¹George Santayana, *The Life of Reason or The Phases of Human Progress*, one-vol. ed., rev. idem in collaboration with Daniel Cory (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1953), 82.

²Charles T. Morrissey, "The Santayana Watch," *O[rganization of] A[merican] H[istorians] Newsletter* 20 (February 1992): 8.

³David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1970), 157.

⁴I gladly acknowledge my indebtedness to my students, especially those in my Philosophy of History and Historiography seminars of 1992 and 1994, for providing me with questions--implicit as well as explicit--that have nudged me along the way of wisdom.

"History teaches . . ." into their arguments? Historians themselves were a major part of the problem until the discipline began to move away from such conceptions in the nineteenth century.⁵

Yet, does avoiding truisms and didacticism mean that there is little, if anything, to be learned from historical studies? If, to paraphrase Michael Howard, history teaches no lessons, only historians do, then what is historical study good for?⁶ Put another way, what is to be learned from studying the past?

Of course, one response to such questions is to deny their validity. As some have argued "art for art's sake," so one could argue that the study of history needs no justification. The past exists, and it is worth examining in its own right. However, while there is some truth to such a position, it is insufficient to account for the nature and study of history within the context of a dynamic creation sustained by the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

Questions regarding the value of historical study cannot be fairly dismissed. A full answer to them is not possible within the limits of this paper. The beginnings of an answer, though, will be offered in what follows through a focus on the issue of "lessons" from history. First, some clarifications on the nature and possibility of

⁵On the history of historians and lessons of history, see the entries indexed under Purpose of history in Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

⁶Michael Howard, "'The Lessons of History': An Inaugural Lecture given in the University of Oxford, March 1981," in *The Lessons of History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 11.

historical knowledge will be made. Based on these, I will argue that the complexity of the past itself, the explanatory and narrative character of historical study, and the perspectival stance of the historian preclude lessons in the sense of universal principles or analogues. Finally, I will propose a biblically-based concept of wisdom as a more adequate goal for the study of history than that of learning lessons.

The Nature and Possibility of Historical Knowledge

The word "history" and its derivatives carry a number of meanings in common English usage. Clarifying a few definitions will be helpful for the following discussion. "History" is sometimes used to refer to human existence in the entire flow of time; I would suggest using the term "historical existence" instead. "History" is also used to refer to the past. A geologist, for instance, might speak of "the history of the Grand Canyon," meaning the geologic past of what is now the Grand Canyon, or one person meeting another might say "Tell me your history," meaning significant aspects of the individual's past. It is less confusing, I believe, to use "the past" instead of "history" for this sense.

Even with these distinctions, defining history remains complicated.⁷ For my purposes, the most helpful definition is one

⁷Two suggestive lists of the varied senses of the word history are in C.S. Lewis, "Historicism," in *God, History, and Historians: An Anthology of Modern Christian Views of History*, ed. C.T. McIntire (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 230 and Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History*, 3d ed. (Chicago: Lyceum Books, 1989), 6.

based on the work of historian C.T. McIntire: history is the study of human cultures and societies in the past.⁸

Four aspects of this definition need elaboration. First, history is a discipline or field of study. The discipline has a past, and particularly in the last century it has broadened and deepened its scope, refined its methods, and spawned a plethora of professional publications and organizations. Second, historians focus on humans. The French historian Marc Bloch made this point vividly: "The good historian is like the giant of the fairy tale. He knows that wherever he catches the scent of human flesh, there his quarry lies."⁹ Institutions, ideas, buildings, economics, climate, and other inanimate things are examined by historians, but they are not the "quarry" per se. Third, historians study human phenomena. Humans are innately (by creation, according to a Christian world view) makers and "un-makers." Institutions, ideas, buildings, economics, climate and many other things, animate and inanimate, are either products of human thought and action or at least impacted by human behavior. Thus, the full purview of the field of history encompasses all aspects of human life and thought--i.e., social and cultural phenomena--in the past. Fourth, historians study human cultures and societies in the flux of past time. Time is fundamental to human experience. Despite important cultural and historical variances in the conception of time

⁸C.T. McIntire, "Historical Study and the Historical Dimension of Our World," in *History and Historical Understanding*, eds. C.T. McIntire and Ronald A. Wells (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1984), 17-40.

⁹Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, trans. Peter Putnam (New York: Vintage Books, 1953), 26.

and its significance, G.J. Whitrow rightly insists on "some awareness of duration and also of the differences between past, present, and future" as implicit if not explicit in all cultures.¹⁰ Moreover, both humans and cultural and social phenomena undergo a process which McIntire labels "becoming, being, and ceasing to be."¹¹ Historians are peculiarly aware of this developmental character of time. They seek to understand particular individuals and/or groups and/or human phenomena of the past and the interaction of such phenomena in the context of continuity and change.

If history, then, is the study of human cultures and societies in the past, what is the nature of historical knowledge? Historians are concerned to do more than just ascertain and convey the "facts" as to "what really happened" in the past. Certainly, accuracy and chronological sequence are foundational elements in historical method. Nevertheless, a history in the sense of a written product of historical investigation is a great deal more than an accurate chronological record, i.e., a chronicle. What the historian seeks, and what therefore constitutes historical knowledge, is to understand how the topic of inquiry fits into a larger context of social and cultural developments. In the words of Jesuit philosopher Bernard Lonergan, the historian endeavors to "grasp what was going forward in . . . particular places and times." This understanding entails,

¹⁰G.J. Whitrow, *Time in History: Views of Time from Prehistory to the Present Day* (Oxford, G.B.: Oxford University Press, 1988), 7. The Hopi have been cited by some as an example of a culture with no word for "time." Notwithstanding this, Whitrow points out that the Hopi have a calendar for measuring duration; they implicitly recognize distinctions between past, present, and future. See pp. 8-9.

¹¹McIntire, "Historical Study," 30.

continues Lonergan, interpreting data "to determine what, in most cases, contemporaries do not know." This is because "experience is individual while the data for history lie in the experiences of many" and "because the actual course of events results not only from what people intend but also from their oversights, mistakes, failures to act" and, it should be added, the effects of forces outside the individual and/or the group.¹²

Historians, thus, seek to "grasp what was going forward" at particular points in the human past through research and interpretation. Moreover, the presentation of such research and interpretation entails explanations. The "facts" seldom, if ever, speak for themselves. The explanations used by historians are distinguished by their "time-and-space specific" character. In other words, in answer to the kinds of questions historians ask about the human past, such as, "what really happened?" or "how possibly could this have happened?" or "what do these developments really amount to?" historians seldom, if ever, explain the past by universal laws. Rather, historical explanation is limited by the social and cultural context of the past under investigation.¹³ Why, for example, did the political leadership of Great Britain and France in the Munich Agreement of 1938 allow Hitler to absorb Sudetenland? A historical

¹² Bernard J.F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979; reprint, Herder and Herder, 2d ed., 1973), 178, 179. For a summary of Lonergan's critical philosophy of history, see Andrew Beards, "Reversing Historical Skepticism: Bernard Lonergan on the Writing of History," *History and Theory* 33 (1994): 198-219.

¹³ William H. Dray, *Philosophy of History*, 2d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1993), 23-33.

explanation would entail things such as the British and French publics' fear of war because of the still-fresh memories of the Great War, the military ill-preparedness of the two countries, and the prevailing mentality about the world among the British governing elite in the 1930s.¹⁴ These explanations are not generalizable to all diplomats and political leaders at all international meetings; they are time-and-space specific.

Further, historical explanations are commonly intertwined with descriptions into a historical narrative. Historical narrative is a more sophisticated form of historical explanation. Characteristic of historical narrative is what Dray calls "a dialectic of empathy and retrospection," in which a historian attempts to adopt both the standpoint "of the agents themselves in trying to make clear why they did what they did, and that of the hindsighted observer in judging its significance."¹⁵ The goal of this dual standpoint is to construct a narrative that synthesizes descriptions and explanations into a unity that is itself an explanation. Summarizing Louis Mink, William Dray astutely elaborates on the distinctiveness of historical knowledge or understanding through historical narrative:

Philosophers typically ask: What is the true nature of this thing?--going on to bring what is problematic under appropriately fundamental concepts. Scientists typically ask: What general theory is instantiated by this thing?--going on to classify it in ways that bring it under appropriate generalizations. Historians typically ask: How does this thing fit into its particular context of occurrence?--going on to trace its relations to other

¹⁴Howard, "The Lessons of History," 14-15; Alan F. Wilt, *Nazi Germany* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1994), 95-97.

¹⁵Dray, *Philosophy of History*, 100.

things, first contiguous ones, then more remote. Distinctively philosophical understanding could thus be called *categorial*, distinctively scientific understanding called *theoretical*, and distinctively historical understanding called *configurational*. And the way configurational understanding is characteristically achieved in history . . . is through narrative.¹⁶

This configurational character of historical understanding is, of course, incomplete and approximate rather than absolute. On the one hand, historical understanding is empirical in that it is based on evidence from the past that is subject to review by others. On the other hand, at least two factors ensure that historical knowledge is more or less relative. First, the past is only relatively accessible. Evidence may be nonexistent, incomplete, or, in the case of some aspects of the recent past, overwhelming in volume. Further, evidence can be puzzling, erroneous, or misleading, with or without design. Second, every historian is personally enmeshed in historical existence. Thus, each historian is not only physiologically limited but also comes from a perspective shaped by race/ethnic group, social class, gender, religion, education, and a host of other elements that are part of her or his personal and social and cultural context. The process of historical investigation is a selective one because not all the past is relevant to the questions asked by the researcher. Selection, though, is inevitably shaped to a greater or lesser degree by the historian's time-and-space specific standpoint and perspectives.

¹⁶ Ibid., 101.

Is history then "the invention of historians," as Napoleon reputedly said?¹⁷ Objectivity in any absolute sense is impossible, but relative objectivity in the sense of fairness is possible.

William Dray concisely defines this attainable objectivity:

To be objective . . . is to be open to alternative possibilities, to be willing to take criticism seriously into account, to be scrupulous and painstaking in presenting arguments, and to draw conclusions only where evidence for them can be adduced.¹⁸

Perspective per se, while inevitable in historical inquiry, is not intrinsically deplorable. A historian can be objective and still care where an inquiry leads. Such "perspectivism" is not bias.¹⁹ Bias is allowing caring where an inquiry leads to block or distort actually following the relevant evidence.

Indeed, I would argue that on the basis of a Christian worldview "perspectivism" should be affirmed.²⁰ The Christian God is the Creator of historical existence as well as human nature. Human depravity and cosmic evil have distorted creation, yet God is revealed to be persistent in both sustaining and redeeming creation. This

¹⁷Ferenc M. Szasz, comp., "The Many Meanings of History, Part I," *History Teacher* 7 (1974): 560.

¹⁸Dray, *Philosophy of History*, 56.

¹⁹See Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 217-220, for a discussion of perspectivism, which he coins as a term to denote the distinctive relativity of historical study without conceding solipsism. I am using the term in a broader sense, meaning self-consciousness about one's perspectives and an affirmation that historical investigation is value-based. In my view, Nicholas Wolterstorff is arguing to the same effect in his rejection of "foundationalism" and his discussion of the nature and role of "control beliefs" in *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1984).

²⁰My argument in this paragraph is heavily informed by Mark A. Noll, "Traditional Christianity and the Possibility of Historical Knowledge," *Christian Scholar's Review* 19 (1990): 388-406.

divine grace in creation, providence, and redemption gives dignity to the particularities of historical existence. It also provides the basis for affirming the possibility of historical knowledge. The reality of the world outside ourselves is dependent on God, not ourselves, and, as historian Mark Noll trenchantly observes,

humans may trust that there is some sort of meaningful correspondence between external reality and their own internal mental capacities because they themselves, along with external reality, all flow from a single coordinate act of divine creation and all share in the same providential maintenance.²¹

The relativity of historical understanding is, on such Christian assumptions, set in a larger context of the unity of human nature, made in God's image, finite, fallen, yet sustained by grace. The differences between historians, whether Christian or not, will never be absolute.²²

Lessons of History?

Where has our discussion thus far taken us? History is the study of human societies and cultures in the past. Based on the selection, examination, and interpretation of relevant evidence, historians seek a configurational understanding of what was going forward. Such historical knowledge is conveyed through time-and-space specific explanations and through narrative. Moreover, such historical knowledge is relative, but not absolutely so. Finally, a Christian

²¹Noll, "The Possibility of Historical Knowledge," 399.

²²On the possibility of historical knowledge on the basis of a Christian worldview, besides *ibid.* see also George Marsden, "Common Sense and the Spiritual Vision of History," in *History and Historical Understanding*, eds. McIntire and Wells, 55-68.

view of the God of the Bible as Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer more than adequately grounds not only the possibility of historical knowledge but also the dignity of historical particularity and the viability of perspectivism.

How does all this bear on what is to be learned from history? French historian Lucien Febvre is to the point: "If History teaches any lesson at all, it is that there are no historical lessons."²³ The past is accessible only through the interpretation of memory, documents, and material artifacts, and historical inquiry is a complex critical process of selection and construction. Further, historical knowledge affords only a relative certainty. Historical objectivity entails explanations that are usually not generalizable to timeless principles. That Great Britain and France, for instance, were unprepared to fight Germany in 1938 at the time of the Munich Agreement does not necessarily mean that the "lesson" of Munich is that giving in to aggression merely postpones rather than averts war later on.

The Munich Agreement, in fact, raises another problem with looking to history for lessons. This is the problem of analogues. Historical analogies can be made, and they can be enlightening. However, as Mark Twain quipped, "The past does not repeat itself, but it rhymes," and savoring the rhyming all too easily leads to overlooking the obvious and not so obvious differences between past

²³Ferenc M. Szasz, comp., "The Many Meanings of History, Part II," *History Teacher* 8 (1974): 63.

and present when drawing analogies.²⁴ The eventual failure of the Munich Agreement to halt aggression was, for example, used as an analogue for shaping U.S. foreign policy decisions in the Cold War, such as Korea and Vietnam.²⁵ (The Vietnam War has itself become a more recent and dominant analogue for U.S. foreign policy.) It is fallacious, however, to use historical analogies as short cuts to thinking through the historical particularities of the situation in the present.²⁶ James Bryce was only slightly overstating the case when he commented, "The chief practical use of history is to deliver us from plausible historical analogies."²⁷

The past, studied critically, does not provide lessons in the sense of principles or analogues that are other than time-and-space specific. So what, then, can historical inquiry provide?

²⁴ Szasz, "The Many Meanings of History, Part I," 561.

²⁵ On the uses of the Munich analogy, see Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies*, 248-251 and Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers* (New York: Free Press, 1986), 34-48, 89.

²⁶ Neustadt and May, *Thinking in Time*, 89-90 give the following advice about using historical analogies:

We put in three words what [we] . . . have endeavored to convey about analogies: *Stop! Look! Listen!* Invoking them often substitutes for thinking hard about things as they are. A first line of defense is to separate out what is *Known, Unclear,* and *Presumed*. That focuses thought on the situation at hand. A second defense is to reach for possibly relevant analogues, the more the better, spelling out *Likenesses* and *Differences*. That helps guard against illusions. We recommend alertness to the various disguises worn by analogies as they occur to people, whether irresistible or captivating, seductive, scarcely seen, or hidden behind catch phrases.

²⁷ Szasz, "The Many Meanings of History, Part II," 62.

Historical Understanding and Wisdom

Bernard Lonergan points us in a fruitful direction. In describing and characterizing historical understanding, he writes the following:

It is the content of a habitual accumulation of insights that, by themselves, are incomplete; they are never applied in any situation without the pause that grasps how relevant they are and, if need be, adds a few more insights derived from the situation in hand. . . . Its generalities are not principles, relevant to every possible instance, but proverbs saying what may be useful to bear in mind, and commonly rounded out by a contradictory piece of advice. Look before you leap! He who hesitates is lost!²⁸

Proverbs? The wisdom literature of the Hebrew Scriptures comes to mind. Contradictory pieces of advice?

Do not answer fools according to their folly,
or you will be a fool yourself.
Answer fools according to their folly,
or they will be wise in their own eyes. (Prov. 26:4-5)²⁹

* * * * *

Then I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness.
The wise have eyes in their head,
but fools walk in darkness.
Yet I perceived that the same fate befalls all of them. (Eccl. 2:13-14)

What is going on here? What is wisdom from a biblical perspective, and how is it relevant to historical understanding?

Wisdom literature was an important phenomenon in ancient civilizations.³⁰ Ancient China, Mesopotamia, and Egypt saw the

²⁸Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 229-230.

²⁹All Scripture passages are from the New Revised Standard Version.

³⁰For gaining an overview of Old Testament wisdom literature, I have found the following sources especially helpful: Paul J.

production of important collections of sage advice on life. Hebrew wisdom literature bears the marks of a larger ancient Near Eastern wisdom tradition that included not only oral and written material but also wise men and women who served as advisors to rulers. In the Protestant canon of the Old Testament the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job reflect the distinctives of Hebrew wisdom. On the one hand, they are notable for the absence of any reference to the key historical experiences of the Hebrew people with Yahweh. On the other hand, God is assumed in these books to be Creator, Sustainer, and holy and righteous. Wisdom in these books is seeking to understand the particulars of human life in the context of God's unfathomableness. Proverbs offers counsel for the ordinariness of life. Ecclesiastes derives wisdom from questioning wisdom. Job seeks the presence of God in the midst of undeserved suffering. Paradoxically, these books that seem so removed from Israel's history are peculiarly grounded in the reality of historical existence "under the sun."

Taking the biblical wisdom tradition as a whole, there are at least three voices that sound in counterpoint. The first voice is that of wisdom as propriety and prudence. This voice predominates in Proverbs. For example:

Those who are kind reward themselves,

Achtemeier, gen. ed., *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), s.v. "wisdom," by R.E. Murphy; Robert Coughenour, "Beginnings in Wisdom," *Perspectives* 5 (September 1990): 4-7; James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981); and William Sanford LaSor, David Allan Hubbard, and Frederick William Bush, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1982), 533-546.

but the cruel do themselves harm. (11:17)
One's own folly leads to ruin,
yet the heart rages against the Lord. (19:3)
Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler,
and whoever is led astray by it is not wise. (20:1)
To watch over mouth and tongue
is to keep out of trouble. (21:23)
If you have found honey, eat only enough for you,
or else, having too much, you will vomit it. (25:16)
Do not boast about tomorrow,
for you do not know what a day may bring. (27:1)
When a land rebels it has many rulers;
but with an intelligent ruler there is lasting order. (28:2)
Better to be poor and walk in integrity
than be crooked in one's ways even though rich. (28:6)
To show partiality is not good--
yet for a piece of bread a person may do wrong. (28:21)

This voice assumes that God and life are good and that "a search for and maintenance of order" is at the center of a godly and sagacious life.³¹ Wisdom, in fact, is even personified as a special servant of God.

The Lord created me at the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts of long ago. (Prov. 8:22)

A theology of divine creation, then, is stressed instead of a theology of divine intervention in history.

A wisdom derived from the study of the past can also speak with such a voice. J.M. Roberts, for example, concluded his very wise *The Pelican History of the World* with a passage reminiscent of Proverbs 26:4-5:

Only two general truths emerge from the study of history. One is that things tend to change much more, and more quickly, than one might think. The other is that they tend to change much less, and much more slowly, than one might think. Both truths tend to be exemplified by any specific historical situation and so, for

³¹Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 19.

good and ill, we shall always find what happens somewhat surprising.³²

In other words, both change and continuity are constants in historical existence, inbuilt into the structures of life. It is prudent to take both into account in any given situation and to be prepared for a mix of the expected and the unexpected.

Another example of historical study as prudence is the book *Thinking in Time*. Authors Richard Neustadt and Ernest May carefully construct and demonstrate a method of examining the past for the purposes of making public policy that is worthy of an advisor of King Solomon. "Our aim has strict limits," they write.

We offer suggestions as to *how* officials and their aides might do their work. We say little about *what* they have done or ought to do. That our suggestions about procedure stress question-asking and presumption-probing mitigates, we think, any charge of Machiavellian indifference to the morality of governmental action. If our approach prompts an alternative charge of encouraging conservatism in expectation, caution in conduct, so be it. We argue at various places in the book that use of history can stimulate imagination: Seeing the past can help one envision alternative futures. But we concede that analysis can also be an enemy of vision. Columbus probably would never have sailed had he been more aware of the flimsiness of his premises. Still, our own experiences, vicarious through reading as well as direct, tell us that caution is a virtue, never more now in the third decade of the missile age. To this extent, we plead guilty.³³

"Look before you leap" is useful advice, but it has to be applied in a time-and-space specific way; "He who hesitates is lost" may be more relevant in any given instance. The voice of caution, prudence, and propriety, whether spoken by historian, pundit, or advisor, can

³²J.M. Roberts, *The Pelican History of the World* (Harmondsworth, GB: Penguin Books, 1983), 1019.

³³Neustadt and May, *Thinking in Time*, xv.

become an end in itself, thereby subverting itself. Wisdom itself is contingent and relative, as the Bible itself recognizes.³⁴

Indeed, the second voice of wisdom in the Hebrew Scriptures is that of wisdom ambivalent about itself. This is the predominant voice in Ecclesiastes.³⁵ Qohelet (the Hebrew name assumed by the book's author) tests the limits of wisdom and finds it and all else in life "under the sun" insubstantial and evanescent:

I, the Teacher, when king over Israel in Jerusalem, applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind. (1:12-14)

And I applied my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a chasing after wind.

For in much wisdom is much vexation,
and those who increase knowledge increase sorrow.
(1:17-18)

Yet, though wisdom is vanity, "wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness" (2:13). The paradox of historical existence that Qohelet grasps is that God "has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end" (3:11). We are the sort of beings, in other words, who find ourselves compelled to "search out" all that is "under the sun," but the yearning for meaning in our historical existence is

³⁴ See Dennis and Diane MacDonald, "Jeremiah and Jerusalem's Wisemen: An Ancient Conflict and its Relevance Today," *Reformed Journal* 29 (November 1979): 8-11 on the tension between wisdom and the prophets in ancient Israel.

³⁵ My understanding of Ecclesiastes has been profoundly shaped by the late Jacques Ellul's work *Reason for Being: A Meditation on Ecclesiastes*, trans. Joyce Main Hanks (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1990).

Hebrew word as vanity]. We find no compromises here, no gray areas. The thing that gives us existence, truth, and reality, the thing that suddenly creates us, is our relationship with God. This relationship constitutes the whole person, since stripping him of it leaves him with nothing else: we found that everything else was vanity.³⁷

Echoes of this wise ambivalence can be heard in historical writing today. William J. Bouwsma has pointed out how historians "have all become intellectual historians" now, however reluctantly or unintentionally, in that historical studies have taken a decisive turn toward a "concern with meaning."³⁸ This turn derives largely from the influence of cultural anthropology and linguistics on the kinds of questions historians are asking about the past. A notable example reflecting this turn is Natalie Zemon Davis' *The Return of Martin Guerre*, an examination of a famous legal case of identity in sixteenth-century France. The book was written following the production and release of the film of the same name in order to explore, in Davis' words, "the problem of truth and doubt; . . . the difficulty of determining true identity in the sixteenth century and . . . the difficulty in the historian's quest for truth in the twentieth."³⁹ Even in the more conventional approaches of historians, agnosticism over "lessons" reflects an ambivalence over the

³⁷ Ibid., 296.

³⁸ William J. Bouwsma, "Intellectual History in the 1980s," in *The New History: The 1980s and Beyond*, eds. Theodore K. Rabb and Robert I. Rotberg (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 280, 283.

³⁹ The book is Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983); the quotation is from Robert Finlay and Natalie Zemon Davis, "AHR Forum: The Return of Martin Guerre," *American Historical Review* 93 (1988): 572.

possibilities of wisdom. Military and political historian Michael Howard, for example, has written:

The past is infinitely various, an inexhaustible storehouse of events from which we can prove anything or its contrary. Do arms races always end in war? The longest and perhaps the bitterest arms race in modern history was that between the French and British navies between 1815 and 1904, a period of 90 years in which peace was successfully preserved between two powers who had for 125 years before that been engaged in virtually continuous official or unofficial conflict. Does 'appeasement' never pay? It paid off handsomely enough when the British settled their differences with the French in Africa in 1904 and with Russia in Central Asia three years later. Does neutrality, or non-alignment, enhance national and international security? The example of Switzerland and Sweden argues one way, that of Belgium, of Holland, and of the smaller Italian states in the eighteenth century quite another.⁴⁰

Yet, the ambivalence and ambiguity of historians can be frustrating. To many, historians probably appear either pedantic to point of being jejune, or they are oracular to the point of Delphic mystification. Of what use is historical study?

There is a third voice of biblical wisdom. This voice is the fulfillment of the first two. It is the voice revealed in the New Testament:

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1 Cor. 1:20-25)

In the New Testament, the theme of Lady Wisdom in Prov. 8 is transposed to a new key in Jesus Christ, the wisdom and logos of God

⁴⁰ Howard, "The Lessons of History," 11.

enfleshed. This one who in the words of Col. 1 "is the image of the invisible God" and in whom "all things in heaven and on earth were created" and in whom "all things hold together" is the Crucified One, God's incarnate Wisdom. The foolishness of the incarnation and the cross places the wisdom of prudence and order and of wisdom's vanity in a larger context of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation which answers, even if it does not fully explain, why historical existence is fundamentally paradoxical and ironic in character.⁴¹ Historical existence is contingent and dynamic. More than this, it is not and had not been what it was made to be "in the beginning." Rather, it is fundamentally distorted. Yet, existence not only continues but develops toward the full revelation of a New Creation in Jesus Christ, who stands at the beginning, in the midst, and at the end of human history.⁴² Put another way, the larger wisdom in which the penultimate wisdom of historical study needs to be grounded is that, in the words of Hendrikus Berkhof, "cross and resurrection are both together the secret of history."⁴³ Historical existence since

⁴¹An "explanation" is not the same thing as an "answer"; the former implies a more complete intelligibility than does the latter. See Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World: The Full Wealth of Conviction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), p. 78.

⁴²I have in mind here the sort of perspective exemplified by Albert M. Wolters in his *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985), p. 38, where he argues that "human history and the unfolding of culture and society are integral to creation and its development" and "that they are not outside God's plans for the cosmos, despite the sinful aberrations, but rather were built in from the beginning . . ."

⁴³Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christ the Meaning of History*, trans. Lambertus Buurman (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979; reprint, SCM Press, 1966), 177.

intended it for good" (Genesis 50:30). From the monarchy, which Israel had erected in defiance, God raised up the house of David in whose seed all nations would be blessed. In history's ultimate irony death and hell were crushed at the cross even as they exulted in momentary triumph.⁴⁵

A study of the past, then, cannot really offer "lessons," if by lessons is meant general principles for action in the present. Yet, a study of the past from within an understanding of biblical wisdom can offer the kind of perspective on historical existence that can help anyone live wisely. History is not an automatic way to wisdom; it is not the only way to wisdom; it is certainly not wisdom in any ultimate sense. It is, however, by God's providential grace a tool for growing in wisdom. The English historian and Catholic Lord Acton got it right when he observed, "The study of history is not to make us cleverer for next time, but to make us wiser forever."⁴⁶

⁴⁵Mark A. Noll, Nathan O. Hatch, George M. Marsden, *The Search for Christian America*, exp. ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: Helmers & Howard, 1989), 154. In addition to Berkhof's *Christ the Meaning of History*, three other works are particularly insightful for the relation between a Christian worldview and history: Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and History* (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1950) and *Herbert Butterfield: Writings on Christianity and History*, ed. C.T. McIntire (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); and Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1952).

⁴⁶"The Many Meanings of History, Part IV," *History Teacher* 8 (1975): 219.