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Modernity and Nihilism: Secular History and Loss of Meaning

The problem with history is intractability: it proffers an obscure, if not a totally opaque, vision of the human condition. Whether conceived as a record of human past or perceived as the matrix of human existence, history, as science and as philosophy, reveals the unfathomable ends of Man. As science, it collapses before the question of meaning; as philosophy it exhausts itself overcoming the antinomies of reason. While to be human and to strive for a meaningful existence is to impose on the infinity of the world a structure and a form, to bestow it a finitude and a temporality, the paradox is that such a partial world of history and society can only be constructed from some premonition of the whole. It can only be derived from a cosmology that is trans-societal and trans-human. History, in other words, acquires its meaning from a perspective which itself is meta-historical. Or, at least, this was true of all traditional civilizations. Modernity however is a different breed. As culture, it creates its meaning by obdurately refusing to scan beyond the horizons of man and by confining the meaning of history to history itself. Little wonder that by so doing, it also abandons the quest for the ultimate meaning. Despite

the lushness of its empirical pastures, the modern epistemological project thus ends in the normative wasteland of nihilism. All the works reviewed here, notwithstanding their dissimilar disciplinary moorings and disparate ideological assumptions, amply testify to the suffocating embrace of nihilism which wrecks all modern courtship with the 'historical truth'. Indeed, even modernist Islamic thought, resolutely committed to preserving a normative vision, seems unable to avoid the unsettling gaze of modern nihilism.

The two works on Biblical archaeology presented here, *The Mythic Past* and *The Bible Unearthed*, are unabashedly heretical in that both are sustained by a historical vision that is immediate, modest and amenable to rational argumentation, but which is also quite radical, iconoclastic and sweeping in its theoretical import. The immediacy, concreteness and sincerity of the empirical vision is, as everyone now recognizes, a gift of modernity. In modernity, we shift our gaze from the distant to the close, from the heavenly to the terrestrial, from the cosmological to the historical. However what this paradigm shift accomplishes, undoubtedly against its own intent, is to disfigure beyond recognition the glorious visage of the erstwhile sacred history. More specifically, when examined under archaeological searchlights, the holiest myth of the West, the Biblical narrative of salvation through suffering and faith, is found without any reliable historical foundation. For what the sub-terrestrial science of archaeology now reveals of the Biblical world is a world that is a creation of the literary imagination. The historical world, which is the existential home of the Bible, on the other hand, appears to be a world bereft of the material testimony of the fabulously pious and the powerful, without any traces of the austerity of the Patriarchs or the splendour of the Kings; indeed without any inkling of the tribulations of the Exile and the triumphs of the Promised Land. Biblical history may now be written off, if we are to believe modern archaeologists, as a pious dream.

For a most candid, provocative and disarming statement on the havoc that

modern archaeology has wrought on the once glorious mansion of 'biblical history', we must listen to Thomas Thompson, an expatriate American, professor of Old Testament Studies at the University of Copenhagen and a leading spokesman of the 'minimalist school' of biblical scholars. He summarizes his conclusions as: 'Today we no longer have a history of Israel. Not only have Adam and Eve and the flood story passed over to mythology, but we no longer can talk about the time of the patriarchs. There never was a "United Monarchy" in history and it is meaningless to speak of pre-exilic prophets and their writings. The history of Iron Age Palestine today knows of Israel only as a small highland patronate lying north of Jerusalem and south of Jezreel valley. Nor has Yahweh, the deity dominant in the cult of that Israel's people, much to do with the Bible's understanding of God. Any history we write of this people would hardly resemble the Israel we thought we knew so much about only a few years ago. And even that little will hardly open to us the Bible's origins in history. Our history of the biblical tradition has come topsy-turvy. It is only a Hellenistic Bible that we know..... We can now say with considerable confidence that the Bible is not a history of anyone's past. The story of the chosen and rejected Israel that it presents is a philosophical metaphor of a mankind that has lost its way.' (p. xv.) Or, in plainer language, the Bible is myth or literature but not history.

Works Discussed in this essay:

The Qur'an: An Introduction. By Mohammad Abu-Hamdiyyah. Routledge, 11 New Fettes Lane, London EC4P 4EE, 2000. Pp. 136. ISBN 0-415-22509-4.

The Mythic Past: Biblical Archaeology and the Myth of Israel. By Thomas L. Thompson. Jonathan Cape, Random House, 20 Vauxall Bridge Road, London SW1V 2SA, 1999 (U.S. Edition by Basic Books).

Pp. 412. ISBN 0-465-00622-1.

The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of its Sacred Texts. By Israel Finkelstein & Neil Asher Silberman. Touchstone, Rockefeller Centre, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020, 2002. Pp. 385. ISBN 0-684-86913-6.

Thompson also argues that the Biblical tradition, pre-eminently literary, moral and religious, has been excessively historicized, just as the questions of its origin have been the paramount concern of everyone, including those of secular researchers. The fascination with origins however is a hangover of the creationist Biblical worldview itself and reveals not historical but theological and literary concerns: the preoccupation with origins is the obverse of the search for meaning. History, in his view, does not deal with origins and meanings, but with events and change, not with the creation but with the flux. Thus, from the historical point of view, the question about the origin is not an answerable one. However, for all the sobriety of his historicist vision, it is extremely doubtful whether Thompson's own account, which runs into some four hundred neatly printed pages, remains entirely within the parameters of 'history' and shuns the questions of meaning altogether. In fact, his historical study is an exegetical tract, a creative attempt to instil meaning in a Bible which has been released of all its claims to historicity.

The most frustrating aspect of biblical studies, according to Thompson, is the lack of a reliable historical context. Biblical scholars have simply accepted the Bible's own 'historical' account as true and have merely looked to archaeology for corroboration. However, whenever the archaeological evidence refuses to redeem the biblical claims to historicity, which it does more often than not, it does so at its own peril: it is never allowed to enter the departments of biblical studies. Biblical textuality, without the contextuality of history, it appears, is the sole norm

in this discipline. In fact, the theological circular logic has even prevented the emergence of a disinterested account of Near Eastern history as a whole. For 'the study of all the texts from the ancient Near East and of all the excavations in Israel and Palestine has been infected by a rather singular aspiration of biblical scholarship: to understand the Bible as an account of the historic past.' Only in very recent years, Thompson maintains, has archaeology begun to develop a history of Palestine independent of such theological prejudices. For him, the crucial question then is why our theology should be willing to pay such a price to protect its vision of the world. 'Why is an understanding of the Bible as fictive considered to undermine its truth and integrity? How does historicizing this literature give it greater legitimacy?' Though he himself opts to relinquish 'the fictive historicity' of the sacred text for the sake of preserving its genuine, timeless truth, he does so at the cost of debunking the biblical claim of the identity of its truth and history. What distinguishes the Bible from other sacred texts, it has always been claimed, is its historical character: it deals with history while others indulge in mythology. The Bible, Thompson seems to imply, is as mythological as any other Near Eastern text.

The significance of the Bible for him is not its history but its myth; not the history of its myth, a disinterested account of what actually happened, but the myth of history that it generated and which has been central to the shaping of the Christian, European and Western identities. Further, hand in hand with Europe's claim on the Bible have been its claims on the cultural and intellectual heritage of ancient Egypt, classical Greece, ecumenical Hellenism and imperial Rome. Since the Enlightenment, the paradigm of (appropriated) Eurocentric history lies at the heart of modernity and its putative universalism. The past, which belongs to so many civilizations of the Orient, has been made to speak directly to the Western man as his story, as the unbroken progress of the human spirit of which the enlightened Westerner is the ultimate inheritor. However, even if the primary heuristic purpose of such chains in the West's self-

understanding is stability, the nostalgia that it begets causes both amnesia and myopia in order to reduce the past's otherness. 'Accepting ourselves as the lords of history', Thompson opines, 'comes at a price: that of the past's identity. The self-absorbed perspective, which characterizes European historicism, is reflected today in the ideas of progressive evolution that has taken on such a central role in European scholarship's uncritical view of the past as a preparation for Christian Europe.'

For all its radicality, *The Mythic Past* is an impressive work; it is challenging and provocative, but also illuminating and absorbing. Needless to say, its author refuses to promote Western origin myths as history. For such an attitude, Thompson is convinced, not only hides their meanings but also 'ignores the strong anti-intellectual stain of fundamentalism that underlies so many of the historical interests invested in biblical archaeology.' Despite his banishment of the biblical narrative from the realm of history, Thompson nevertheless wrestles with the demons of nihilism. However, by endorsing a theory of history which construes it as literature and as a product of the historian's imagination, he takes a postmodern turn that makes any escape from the nihilistic wasteland almost impossible.

In contrast to Thompson's book, which seeks a meaningful co-existence, albeit at the cost of relinquishing the Biblical notions of 'historical truth', between the cognitive claims of archaeology and the transcendentalizing discourse of the Holy Scripture, Finkelstein and Silberman are concerned solely with the history of ancient Israel as revealed by recent archaeological excavations. Both of them are eminently suited for this task, having spent most of their life in the field; Finkelstein is the director of the Institute of Archaeology at Tel-Aviv University, Silberman the 'director of historical interpretation' for a similarly prestigious institution in Belgium. None of them, in other words, may be accused of professional incompetence or indicted for indulging in gentile, anti-Semitic polemics.

Yet their 'theory' of the historical origins of the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament of the Christians, is as much at odd with any orthodox, 'literal' reading of the Scripture as are the more radical, revisionist accounts of the so-called minimalists. Indeed, no matter how one may appraise Finkelstein and Silberman's work, any thought of finding a meaningful synthesis between the findings of their scholarship and the claims of Biblical faith must be squarely renounced. The epistemological gulf that these works open up between the conflicting visions of science and religion, historicity and meaning, salvation myth and secular narrative, are far too fundamental and seminal to admit of any meaningful cognitive compromise.

The Bible Unearthed is not, in all its sincerity, a statement about faith, theology or meaning, but about science, archaeology and artefacts. It does not meddle with religious or ideological disputes; only pronounces on chronological controversies. Thus, though the authors' scientific vision shuns spirituality and transcendence and searches for materiality and immanence, it nonetheless does not fall prey to the facile temptation of debunking the worldview of faith that sustains them. Still, there's no mistaking that the niceties of chronology and method, the handmaidens of immanence as it were, impinge upon faith and its historical claims with a ferocious, irreverent vengeance. Hence, for all their reticence and tact, the authors cannot help spelling out their conclusions as: 'It is now evident that many events of biblical history did not take place in either the particular era or the manner described. Some of the most famous events in the Bible clearly never happened.' Not surprisingly, the authors confess that their story departs 'dramatically from the familiar biblical narrative.'

The significance of this work is that to the *how* of history, it adds the *why* of meaning. It does not merely recount the story of 'ancient Israel', disassociating itself from the biblical narrative, but also opines as to why and how this account came to be what it is. Inconsistent with their calling as historians, thus, Finkelstein and Silberman pursue the non-historical

question of the *origin* of the biblical texts and advance plausible arguments for establishing their chronology. Taking their cue from the fifth book of Deuteronomy and its possible connection with the mysterious “book of the law”, discovered, as narrated in 2 Kings 22:8-23:24, in 622 BCE during the reign of King Josiah, and examining this fact in the light of their own researches, the two authors come to the conclusion that ‘archaeology has provided enough evidence to support a new contention that the historical core of the Pentateuch and the Deuteronomistic History was substantially shaped in the seventh century BCE.’ Hence, the focus of the study is the late eighth and seventh century BCE Judah, when, according to the authors, the literary process of writing the biblical texts began in earnest. Accordingly, ‘much of the biblical narrative is a product of the hopes, fears, and ambitions of the kingdom of Judah, culminating in the reign of King Josiah at the end of the seventh century BCE’ and, as such, advocates the ideology and needs of that period. Indeed, not only does the Torah carry ‘the unmistakable hallmark of its initial compilation’, but also ‘much of what is taken for granted as accurate history – the stories of the patriarchs, the Exodus, the conquest of Canaan, and even the saga of the glorious united monarchy of David and Solomon – are, rather, the creative expressions of a powerful religious reform movement that flourished in the kingdom of Judah in the Late Iron Age.’ (23)

Mindful of the nihilistic drift of their argument, the authors’ then make, what to the outsider appears, a half-hearted attempt to salvage the wreck of the biblical ‘grand narrative’ from the abyss of total historical darkness. The Bible may not be an accurate record of Israel’s historical vicissitudes prior to the seventh century BCE, but it is not without its own historical moorings, seems to be their final, tactical ruling: ‘But suggesting that most famous stories of the Bible did not happen as the Bible records them is far from implying that ancient Israel had no genuine history,’ The damning of the sacred history of faith, one is tempted to construe, is for the sake of legitimising the secular Zionist enterprise. The Jews as a faith community may not have claims to the ‘four thousand years’ of uninterrupted dialogue

with the Lord through their historical enterprise, through suffering and redemption, but Israelis, as a nation among nations, may certainly look back to over two millennia of historical presence in 'their' land, not the Holy Land of the Bible but the seized one of the settlers!

Obviously, the radical claims of biblical archaeology, whether minimalist or revisionist, will be decided on the strength of the scientific evidence and on details that proverbially are the lodgings of the devil. Anyone aspiring to follow this debate must not ignore these works, simply because they incarnate a variety of historicism which appears fundamentalist. For despite their revisionist stance and iconoclastic zeal, these scholarly studies argue their case with calmness and present their evidence with assiduity. As such, they also afford a convenient access to a crucial discipline, along with its polemics and controversies, that has largely remained outside the purview of Muslim thought. Nor may we deny that the Muslim is not without his/her own stake in the outcome of this debate, even if orthodox Islam, which has never accepted the authenticity, and hence the authority, of the extant biblical text, may prefer to stay aloof and remain unaffected by this disputation. Nevertheless, even if the direct addressee of this archaeological call is the biblical exegete, the larger issues of the interface of faith and science, truth and history, meaning and nihilism affect us all. Further, given the fact that modern Orientalist scholarship situates the Qur'anic revelation within a framework of history that is largely founded on the authority of the Bible, that the academic canon for the appraisal of the Qur'anic message is none other than the biblical conception of redemptive history, that the Bible is accepted as the yardstick for the Qur'an own pronouncements on historical matters, all this is unmistakably implicated in the question of Bible's relationship to 'scientific' history.

For a Muslim attempt to assimilate the consciousness of both transcendence and historicity, to render the concept of revelation meaningful in the age of science, we must turn to Mohammad Abu-

Hamdiyyah's slim volume, *The Qur'an: An Introduction*. It is an intelligent and gratifying study that distinguishes itself by the clarity of its vision and the lucidity of its expression. Immediately accessible to the modern reader, exemplary in its pedagogical skills, and free of all jarring polemics and apology, Abu Hamdiyyah's book makes a very welcome contribution to the contemporary Muslim effort to solicit the Qur'an to speak to our own generation. Indeed, its virtues are far too many, its blemishes almost imperceptible, and its benefits for the modern reader, both Muslim and non-Muslim, enormous. Rejecting both the mindless literalism of the tradition and the heartless positivism of modernity, Abu Hamdiyyah's work stands alone in the repertoire of contemporary literature. As an exegetical exercise, it is informed, reflective and inspiring, and acts as a potent antidote to the apathy, homelessness and spiritual vacuity of our times.

Self-confessedly, the author, a former professor of chemistry at the University of Kuwait, 'interacts directly with the text of the Qur'an in a straightforward and objective manner to produce a fresh presentation of the Qur'anic discourse from a modern perspective.' The deliberate bypassing of the Muslim exegetical tradition, including modern commentaries and academic studies, does not however lead to any radical or heretical insights. Indeed whatever the author says of the Qur'anic worldview and teachings is not only gratifying for the modern reader; it is unlikely to offend orthodox sensibilities either. The Qur'an is envisaged to be 'a preaching discourse occupied to making human beings conscious of God' and, accordingly, is presented in lucid, semantic and thematic 'units'. Included in these units are the Qur'anic statements and principles that, according to the author, 'form a plan which establishes the position of man on earth, points to the purpose of life, provides guidance and freedom of choice as well as the necessary tools for the trust or mandate given to mankind.' Further, though the Qur'anic discourse addresses two situations: 'the general and global and the local and particular', the work focuses mainly on the universal aspects of the Qur'anic teachings. The beneficiary of this discriminating approach, no

doubt, is the modern reader who'll find these disciplined discussions amply rewarding.

Unfortunately, as a natural scientist, Abu-Hamdiyyah also brings to his study a kind of naturalism that is philosophically naïve and rests, in view of the recent postmodern critique of reason, on unexamined doctrines and unproven assertions. It emanates from scientism, the spurious ideology of our times that turns science into a cosmology, a meaningful vision of the whole, which is able see through 'the human condition' and may therefore legitimately pronounce on the 'problem of man' – indisputably a non-scientific question. Historicism, an offspring of scientific positivism, further, reduces human existence to a putative 'historicity' that is intelligible without any extra-historical or trans-historical referent. Little wonder that God becomes indistinguishable from 'the concept of God' which 'evolves with [the growth of] mankind's empirical knowledge' (3). Abu-Hamdiyyah also situates the 'event' of the Qur'an in an academic, historical and phenomenological, discourse which itself is premised on biblical claims that have been transported to secular history. The same rationale pervades all those 'historical' schemes, such as 'axial' age, 'scriptural and pre-Scriptural times' etc. that re-establish the centrality of the Bible in a secular perspective and which the author accepts without a protest! From the Muslim perspective, they do not carry any 'scientific' legitimacy. Abu-Hamdiyyah is not without his own critical dissent, just as he seems to be aware of the dispute between archaeology and biblical history (40). Nevertheless, he ends up endorsing a relativist discourse that abolishes the rule of norm. Nihilism is not far away. Despite his familiarity with the field, his comments are too terse and missing in those details where the devil loves to hide, to merit an extended comment. Fortunately, his own discussion of the Qur'anic message is hermetically sealed off from all extraneous discourses, hence the sincerity and originality of his approach.

Interestingly, Abu-Hamdiyyah's approach and the disposition of his study may also serve as a backdrop to our own reflection on the reciprocity of

secular history and loss of meaning. The volume is composed of two parts: part I surveys the ideational landscape of the ancient Semitic and Mediterranean world from the vantage-point of the academic discipline of 'the history of religions'; part II presents the universalist message of the Qur'an from a consciousness that itself is, as it were, a gift of the Qur'an. The two sections are quite disparate in their intellectual and moral presuppositions; the former works within the empirical premises of science and construes religions or worldviews as the constructs of human imagination that evolve with the accumulation of knowledge; the latter addresses 'the problem of man' from a perspective that is transcendental; it elucidates a message that descends from above. One is critical in tone, citing an impressive number of scholarly studies; the other represents a personal encounter with the text of the revelation without the intermediaries of the tradition. One may also contend that the first one perceives humanity as a story without meaning, while the second one prescribes a goal for Man and provides a sense of meaning that transcends history.

It is now generally recognized that the biblical concept of history, when freed of its transcendent moorings and secularized, inaugurates the reign of relativism and nihilism. Nihilism, of course, represents the reverse side of the modern, secularized consciousness; the obverse one, which is displayed far more often as the real face of modernity, reflects the conflict between science and religion, reason and faith; or between secular history and redemptive history (*Heilsgeschichte*). The upshot of this nihilism however is that the story of humanity becomes 'a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.' In stead of the humanity, it is the nation that takes on the challenge of making history and of defining the goal of collective existence. For, while partial history, history as the march of a nation or a state in time, may retain some semblance of meaningfulness, universal history (*Weltgeschichte*), history as the story of humanity, looses all claims to meaning when viewed empirically and without the imposition of any pre-conceived pattern. It opens up that

fateful divide between the real and the rational, between history and theory that, pace Hegel, cannot be overcome. Consequently, world-history either remains a philosophical theory that is without any collateral in actual history; or it becomes a historical chronology that is devoid of all normative meaning. In short, on closer reflection, 'the philosophy of history' reveals itself either as history and facts, or as philosophy and norms. No wonder that from within the perspective of secular history, from the cognitive premises of immanentism, the antinomy of norm and history can never be overcome and the demons of relativism and nihilism can never be defeated

True enough; the revelation is presented in the Hebrew Bible as the participation of God on the side of the Israelites in actual history. Such a claim was instrumental in fostering a view of history (of a specific nation) as sacred. Or, as expressed by a modern philosopher: 'Since biblical times, the Western, Judeo-Christian world has found Transcendence in history. This has happened for better: in the midst of human historical world was found a Transcendence other than human and higher-than-human which gave meaning, if not to all of history, so at any rate to crucial, epoch-making events in it.' (Emil L. Fackenheim: 'Transcendence in Contemporary Culture', in H.W. Richardson & D.R. Cutler (Ed.): *Transcendence*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1969. P. 144.) Leaving aside the moral discomforts of a universal God taking sides in history, or the logical incoherence of transcendence within immanence, there's no denying that not only is the biblical proclivity for historicizing the truth, or sacralizing history, always under the assault of the immanentist, secular consciousness (the sin of idolatry in its own parlance), it also becomes vulnerable to the judgment of the empirical vision, once the latter has freed itself from its sacred moorings. Or, stated differently, as long as the premise that God has a special covenant with the children of Israel remains valid, biblical history retains both its 'historicity' and legitimacy. However, once that premise is set aside, as happens in the Enlightenment's secularized version of the universal history, the truth of

the Bible itself comes under the scrutiny of historicizing sciences which, paradoxically, care nothing for the kind of transcendence which is the *sine qua non* of the biblical vision of history.

Fortunately, the Qur'an has a view of history, revelation, truth and man that avoids the conundrums and aporias of biblical *Heilsgeschichte*. To start with, the Qur'anic perspective, whether theological, cosmological or anthropological, is that of unity. However, this unity is not ontological; for God remains distinct from his creation, but it is a unity of purpose, goal and meaning that all are expressions of God's will. From this perspective, both the concept of nature and that of history appear problematical. The created world (nature) and the temporal one of man (history) are certainly real, indeed even indispensable for the fulfilment of man's mandate of vicegerency. Nevertheless, the Greek concept of "nature", whether postulating a self-contained, self-sufficient, self-regulating universe, or signifying the intrinsic disposition of a thing to obey immanent laws, is alien to the Qur'anic worldview. The world exists, according to the *Qur'an*, not due to any intrinsic necessity but because of the gratuitous act of a transcendent will: it is radically contingent rather than naturally necessary. The same is true of history: the very concept of history – pure immanence and temporality that is self-referential and immediately accessible - is missing in the Qur'an.

As befits the transcendental worldview of the Qur'an, the addressee of its discourse is a universal, archetypical and trans-historical human being. Even the covenant that God has with man is primordial and is contracted prior to the advent of the historical time. Man enters his/her historical existence only after submitting to the sovereignty of God (7:172). Further, Adam, the first man, stands for all humanity and inasmuch as he is recognized as the first prophet, mankind has never been without divine guidance. Hence, when the Qur'an speaks of historical men and women, especially former prophets, it does so without the least regard to chronology. The Qur'an does not concern itself with the historical

succession of messengers and prophets but with the proclamation of the unity of the trans-historical revelation. Neither does it make any distinction between former prophets. The unity and identity of divine guidance, available to all prophets and preached by all of them, renders all historical, ethnic and geographical distinctions superfluous.

The very notion of faith, *Islam* (Surrender to God) also presupposes a trans-historical and transcendent disposition of man (*fitra*). Surrender to God is not something that may be realized, gradually and progressively, within the flux of time. It is an instant decision of the individual soul: one either surrenders himself/herself to God or one doesn't. Consequently, God's guidance (*huda*) is not a progressive march towards a single, climactic event, but a here-and-now that is forever eternal, forever available to every human soul. Thus, a modern Muslim may confidently pronounce that the Qur'anic idea of revelation is trans-historical: 'It is also impossible on the basis of the goal and mean (of divine guidance) to construct a history of salvation which is gradually realized either in a Christian or non-Christian [secular] sense, neither Muhammad (S) nor the Muslims thought of such a possibility. For the Koran recognizes no original sin and no corresponding redemption; hence it presents no salvation history comparable to the Christian tradition. *But if salvation is understood, as it is in the prophetic religions, as "the individual's encounter through faith and grace with a personal God", then salvation is contained precisely in the human surrender to God (Islam) and that divine guidance (huda) which according to the Koran remains or should remain forever unaltered by time and history.* Accordingly, there's no reason to conceive of revelation as something temporal or historical.' (Abdoldjavad Falaturi: 'Experience of Time and History in Islam', in Annemarie Schimmel & Abdoldjavad Falaturi: *We Believe in One God*. Burns and Oates, London, 1979. P 65. Emphasis added).

Far more radical than the Qur'anic disregard of history as a chronicle of events, is its perception of time. Time, according to the Qur'an, is not the

perpetual flux that results in a linear or cyclical conception of temporality, but an eternal present that always carries with it the possibility of surrender to God (*Islam*). Again, the Greek term for times, *Xronos*, which is usually translated as *zaman* (not of Arabic origin) does not occur in the Qur'an. The proper expression for time in the Qur'an is, of course, *waqt*. According to Falaturi, an analysis of the term shows that 'it does not imply progressive enactment, and that it has no regulatory character, as is the case with *Xronos* (*zaman*), a character which every concept of history presumes as its basis. *Waqt* is rather spatial, a self-enclosed, static, unalterable *where* of an event.... In *waqt*, [in] an ever-present area of events created by God, all events are independent of one another, yet have a direct relation to their omnipotent, omnipresent Creator.' (pp. 68-9). It is the consciousness of the transcendence of God which shatters, as it were, the fluid temporality of ordinary experience into an infinity of static 'nows'

Another comment by a perceptive non-Muslim also reinforces this insight about the 'atomistic' nature of the Qur'anic temporality. Commenting on Surah 18 (*Al-Kahf*), Norman O. Brown, a non-specialist on Islam but a celebrated American thinker of our age, makes the following statement: 'Massignon calls the Sura 18 the apocalypse of Islam. But sura 18 is a résumé, epitome of the whole Koran. The Koran is not like the Bible, historical, running from Genesis to Apocalypse. The Koran is altogether apocalyptic. The Koran backs off from that linear organization of time, revelation, and history which became the backbone of orthodox Christianity and remains the backbone of the Western culture after the death of God. Islam is wholly apocalyptic or eschatological, and its eschatology is not teleology. The moment of decision, the Hour of Judgment, is not reached at the end of a line, nor by a predestined cycle of cosmic recurrence; eschatology can break out at any moment. Koran 16:77: "To Allah belong the secrets of the heavens and the earth, and the matter of the Hour is as the twinkling of an eye, or it is nearer still." In fully developed Islamic theology only the moment is real.' (Norman O Brown:

‘The Apocalypse of Islam’, in *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis*. University of California Press, 1991. P 86.) Brown is also cognizant that the rejection of linearity involves rejection of narrative and that ‘the Koran breaks decisively with that alliance between the prophetic tradition and materialistic historicism – “what actually happened” – which set in with the materialistically historical triumph of Christianity.’ (87). Finally, in his judgment, ‘Islam is committed by the Koran to project a metahistorical plane on which the eternal meaning of historical events is disclosed.’ (88). Or, returning to our own query, the transcendent worldview of the Qur’an is not affected a whit by the cognitive haggling between archaeology and the Bible.

The cult of history is a modern heresy, just as the philosophy of history is a supremely arrogant and narcissistic form of reflection on the meaning and goal of western civilization. In postmodern times, however, the grand narratives of both the Christian redemptive history (*Heilsgeschichte*) and the Enlightenment’s universal history (*Weltgeschichte*) have been abrogated by the new logic of globalization and Empire. The message today is that history has come to an end and the current hierarchy of powers represents the permanent state of humanity. And yet, humanity’s search for a meaningful, moral existence has not come to a halt. It is the Muslim’s duty to delineate the Qur’anic vision of the *Khilafa* of Adam in such a way that mankind’s collective responsibility for the moral ordering of the single human world becomes the paramount focus of the socio-political discourse.

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