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Jonathan Edwards's Vision of History[*] by Avihu Zakai

Once dubbed by Perry Miller "the greatest philosopher-theologian yet to grace the American scene," Jonathan Edwards is now widely recognized as America's most important theologian. And he is no less celebrated as a prominent philosopher, ethicist, and moralist. Edwards's theology and philosophy are a matter of great scholarly interest today, and recent studies have dealt with almost every aspect of his thought. Strangely enough, however, there has been no serious attempt to explore Edwards's philosophy of history, let alone to analyze the content and form of his distinct mode of historical thinking.

Edwards's sense of time, his vision of history, and the development of his historical consciousness warrant serious attention. Without this, much of his philosophy and theology are unintelligible; moreover, the significance he accorded to his actions—as well as the ultimate sacred historical meaning he attached to his own time, as evidenced by his decisive role in initiating, advancing, and promoting the Great Awakening, 1740-43—remain uncomprehended.

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Edwards was the American Augustine, not least because like the Church Father he formulated a singular philosophy of history which exercised great influence on subsequent Christian generations and greatly conditioned their historical consciousness. Edwards's evangelical historiography had an abiding importance for American Protestant culture. His *A History of the Work of Redemption* (1739) was the most popular manual of Calvinist theology in the 19th century. One of the main reasons for the great success of this work was that Edwards placed revival at the center of salvation history, habituating American Protestants to see religious awakening as the essence of providential history and the main manifestation of divine agency in time. This evangelical theodicy of history signified that the heart of history is the revival, through which the Spirit of God consistently advances the work of redemption. So defined, these awakenings are the exclusive domain of God's will and power, and hence beyond the reach of human agency. Conceiving the locus of history in this way, Edwards made the phenomenon of revival the crucial element in the drama of salvation and redemption.

In order to understand Edwards's ideology of history, it is essential to analyze the slow and gradual growth of his historical consciousness before he came to compose *History of the Work of Redemption*. Such an investigation is necessary in order to follow the development of his ideology of history and of his unique redemptive mode of historical thought. Furthermore, it is important to place Edwards's philosophy of history in the wider context of sacred ecclesiastical history, as a Christian mode of historical thought. Edwards was an heir of Christian theological teleology of history—salvation history—though he transformed it radically in order to proclaim God as the author and lord of history.

Analysis of Edwards's historical thought will first of all recognize that the mental universe of this New England divine transcended his local setting in Northampton

and the narrow intellectual life of provincial New England. More specifically, it was Edwards's reaction to the metaphysical and theological implications of Enlightenment historical narratives, which increasingly tended to set aside theistic considerations in the realms of morals and history, that led in part to the development of his unique redemptive mode of historical thought—the doctrine that the process of history depends entirely and exclusively on God's redemptive activity as manifested in a series of revivals throughout time, and not on autonomous human power. The ideological origins of Edwards's historical thought must be situated in the broader context of the threat the Christian theological teleology of history confronted in the early modern period, with the emergence of a secular conception of history and the modern legitimacy of historical time. In contrast to the growing Enlightenment emphasis on human agency in determining the course of history, Edwards strove to return to God his preeminence within the order of time. Against the de-Christianization of history and the de-divination of the historical process, as evidenced in various Enlightenment historical accounts, Edwards looked for the re-enthronement of God as the author and lord of history, the re-enchantment of the historical world.

Edwards fully understood the serious challenges posed by Enlightenment ideas to religious faith and experience. He was alarmed by the conception of history as a self-contained and independent domain, free from subordination to God and not affected by His ever watchful eyes. With great dismay he observed that Enlightenment historical narratives not only deprived the realm of history of teleological ends and theological purposes, but stipulated that history did not manifest the presence of God's redemptive activity. In response, he constructed his own theological teleology of history which celebrated God's glory and sovereignty in determining and regulating its course. By providing an alternative view of the meaning of history that would lead eventually to the re-enchantment of the historical world, Edwards intended to demonstrate the infinite power of God's sovereignty in the order of time.

Edwards owned and read many works by Enlightenment historians, among them more specifically Pierre Bayle's *Historical and Critical Dictionary* (1702), Samuel Pufendorf's *An Introduction to the History of the Principal Kingdoms and States of Europe* (1702), Henry St. John, Lord Bolingbroke's *Remarks on the History of England* (1731), and *Letters on the Study and Use of History* (1752), Gilbert Burnet's *History of his Own Time* (1724-1734), John Oldmixon's *Critical History of England* (1724), Paul de Rapin-Thoyras' *Histoire d'Angleterre* (1721-1731), and David Hume's *Essays Moral, Political and Literary* (1742), which included "Of the Study of History." In these works he discovered, to his great dismay, that the divine agency was no longer considered intrinsic to history. Hence, against the Enlightenment notion of *Historia Humana*, Edwards declared that history is a space of sacred time designated by God from eternity for the execution of his work of redemption. In response to endeavors by Enlightenment historians to liberate history from its traditional subservience to theology, Edwards contended that the entire historical process is inextricable from God's redemptive activity, and vice versa. Rather than conceiving history as the direct result of human action, and hence as a manifestation of immanent human progress, as Enlightenment historians believed, Edwards constructed it from the perspective of God and the manifestations of his redemptive activity in creation in the form of revivals and awakenings.

Clearly, the content and form of Edwards's philosophy of history needs to be examined in the light of the wider ideological and theological context of his thought. Not only did he live in an age of rapid and dramatic intellectual changes which characterized early modern European history, such as produced the

Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, Deism, new theories of ethics and mortals, and so forth, but he self-consciously took upon himself a mission of their refutation, setting him apart from other Protestant evangelists. The historian of early modern European intellectual history and of early American history may trace through Edwards's many theological and ideological controversies the process that was to turn him into one of the most acute critics of the scientific culture of his time and the new concepts of ethics and modes of historical thought engendered by the Enlightenment. Simply put, Edwards's life of the mind can be described as evolving along three main stages; during the 1720s, following his conversion, he formulated his natural philosophy in order to provide an alternative to the dominant mechanical philosophy view of the essential nature of reality; during the 1730s he developed the premises of his philosophy of salvation history, whose full and systematic exposition appeared in the *A History of the Work of Redemption*; finally, during the 1750s, after his expulsion from his parish and living in exile at Stockbridge, Edwards immersed himself in the task of responding to the Enlightenment debate on moral philosophy. In these three spheres, he tried to explain the meaning of divine agency in time and the Deity's redemptive work for fallen humanity. Thus, in discussing Edwards's philosophy of history, it is necessary to deal as well with his explorations in the realms of science and ethics since these issues were closely intertwined in his mind with the dimension of history.

What is most remarkable about Edwards's ideology of history is his radical departure from the traditional ecclesiastical history which constituted the dominant mode of historical thought from the rise of Christianity during the 4th century until the secularization of theological teleology of history announced by the Enlightenment of the eighteenth. This mode of thought regards the Christian church as the locus of history, and thus deals chiefly with the events affecting this body in the world. This is how, for example, Eusebius, the "father of church history," defined sacred, providential history. Edwards, however, attempted to write a history as it lies in the mind of omniscient God, a history based on God's redemptive activity in the form of revivals and awakenings. Eusebius's primary concern was to describe "the many important events recorded in the story of the Church," as well as the many vicissitudes this body endured. Edwards's narrative deals primarily with the content and form of divine activity, the power of the Spirit, and its historical manifestations in the form of conversion and revival. Eusebius wrote his history from the point of view of the church's affairs in the world. Edwards wrote his from the perspective of God and his redemptive activity. Hence, the first dwelt at length upon the persecutions and sufferings of God's people in the world, while the later emphasized almost exclusively the rise and decline of revivals and awakenings throughout history. In contrast to Eusebius, therefore, Edwards's history is not ecclesiastical history per se. It is a history of God's work of redemption.

Similarly, Edwards's narrative of salvation history differs from Augustine's *City of God*. While Augustine saw the course of history as predominantly characterized by a perpetual and uncompromising struggle between the earthly city and the city of God, the world and the church, Edwards does not base his historical thinking upon such a dichotomy. Given his central premise of the universal character of God's redemptive activity, his narrative of history deals with the universal power of the Spirit as evidenced in revivals and awakenings. Augustine distinguished between redemption and history-divine providence is concerned with salvation, not with history-while to Edwards they are inextricable-there is no history without redemption and no redemption without history.

Edwards's historical narrative differs also from the Protestant and Puritan apocalyptic tradition in England, which developed during the 16th century around the doctrine that the struggle against the Church of Rome constituted the hallmark of salvation history. Since Edwards's historical thought was written from the point of view of God's mind and is based on the universal character of redemptive activity, he could not accept that divine agency might be limited to any particular national or geographical center. Hence his strong belief that the aim of divine dispensation during the Great Awakening was to reveal the "day of God's mighty power and glorious grace to the world of mankind." Edwards's narrative differed, for example, from John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, which represented the whole span of English history as based upon the Church of Rome's persecution of the true church, the Church of England. Edwards, in other words, does not deal primarily with the persecution and suffering of God's martyrs, early Christian or others.

Finally, Edwards's historical vision is very different from earlier New England Puritan narratives, which may explain the transformation he caused in the concept of the Puritan "errand into the wilderness" in America. In contrast to his forerunners who sought to explain the meaning of their migration to America by propounding an unbridgeable gulf between the Old World and the New, thus cutting the history of New England off from England, Edwards's history is not based on such eschatological expectations and apocalyptic visions. According to Gerald McDermott, he did not believe the millennium would take place in New England, but rather "prophesied that the millennium would be global; hence" the attempt to ascribe to his thought "every form of tribalist nationalism is inherently misconceived." Instead of refurbishing his predecessors' perception of New England's particularistic role in salvation history, Edwards described its fate as inseparable from that of the Old World. The power of the Spirit knows no boundaries, and God's redemptive activity can not be limited to a specific geographical space. Hence he consistently examined the New England revival of 1740-1743 in light of the general context of the "outpouring of the Spirit of God" in Germany and "the hopeful state of reviving religion in England." He understood the Great Awakening as inseparable from the revivals characterizing the Protestant evangelical movement in early 18th-century Europe, such as the "remarkable reviving of religion" in Saxony, or God's "glorious work" in the revival in Kilsyth, Scotland, 1740. Defined as the work of the Spirit, the history of revival becomes a universal history.

The fullest and most systematic exposition of this philosophy of salvation history is contained in Edwards's thirty sermons on the *History of the Work of Redemption* (1739). The construction of the historical narrative in these sermons may be seen, in part, in the larger context of the early Enlightenment. Instead of conceiving history as the direct result of human action, and as a manifestation of immanent human progress, as Enlightenment historians believed, Edwards constructed it from the perspective of God and the manifestations of his redemptive activity in creation. In such a theological and teleological context, history is designed by divine providence as a special dimension of time meant solely for the accomplishment of the plan of redemption, and therefore it should be understood exclusively from the perspective of its maker and author. History, then, is a sacred space of time destined from eternity for God's self-glorification—the display of the Deity's excellence in creation—as evidenced in His work of redemption; hence human beings' existence as well as their history is totally dependent on God.

Edwards's main achievement in the field of historical thought was the development of a singular evangelical historiography according to which revivals

and awakenings constitute the heart and core of the historical process. This philosophy of salvation exercised an enormous influence in New England and America in general. The publication of Edwards's *History of the Work of Redemption* in the 1770s, according to John Wilson, "helped to fuel the transference of religious convictions into the political realm," a transference that was noticeable during the American Revolution and later crucial to the "revival of interest in eschatology" and the millennium "that occurred in the 1790s." Later on, as Joseph Conforti showed, this book went through a "process of canonization during the Second Great Awakening, 1800-1830, and added to [Edwards's] stature as the preeminent authority on revivalism." Further, as H. Richard Niebuhr held, Edwards's philosophy of salvation history influenced 19th-century evangelists' understanding of "the coming of the kingdom," leading them to believe that "the divine sovereignty was the fruition not only of divine goodness but of human badness in conflict with that unconquerable goodness." Edwards's theology of history was thus installed at the center of the story of the predominant Protestant culture of America.

Jonathan Edwards's reaction to scientific, historical, and moral thought in early modern history contributed much to the creation of a distinct Protestant culture in America with a lasting influence on American history. In terms of the formation of American identity, Edwards's thought shows that the development of an American culture during the 18th century did not depend on a simple and linear transference of ideas from the core culture in Britain, nor on an easy accommodation of them in America. Rather, in some matters it was the rejection of certain well-established European intellectual traditions in the early modern period that helped the formation of a well-defined Protestant cultural space in America. Avihu Zakai is professor of history at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Cambridge University Press recently released his *Exile and Kingdom: History and Apocalypse in the Puritan Migration to America* in paperback.

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[*] This essay is adapted from Professor Zakai's *Jonathan Edwards's Philosophy of History: The Re-Enchantment of the World in the Age of Enlightenment* (Princeton University Press, 2003).