

Providential History as Divine Metanarrative in Baptist Missionary Publications, 1799-1840

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The British missionary societies formed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries produced extensive literary documentation of their work. Most of the societies shared a distinctive narrative understanding of God's activity in the world, and the place of missionary effort within that divine story. Missionary publications claimed to describe the unfolding of God's plan.

This narrative framework common to many missionary texts arose from the doctrine of providence—the belief that God acted in history, carrying out his plan for the salvation of the world in part by mysteriously bringing Christians into situations where they could further that end. Though members of the Baptist denomination generally avoided overly eschatological language in their writings, missionary records indicate that the doctrine of providence, perhaps more than any other teaching, helped Baptist missionaries to explain their own role in this divine story. The belief that God worked in the world to extend his kingdom, using his followers as instruments to that end, informed every missionary decision, and retrospectively revealed the hand of God in events that, at the time, might have seemed disastrous. Providence also helped missionaries to process and address uncomfortable realities, like the failure of evangelistic efforts to produce significant fruit in India, or the lack of significant contributions during a fiscal year. Providence could even explain why a new missionary was struck down just days after reaching his field of labor.

Significantly, the providential worldview also allowed missionaries to look at institutions and individuals in terms of God's will. Thus government, though worthy of respect and obedience at times, could be seen simply as a vehicle of the larger providential plan, and therefore an institution that could be defied, or utilized, to further religious ends. The providential narrative framework is key to understanding missionaries' view of themselves in the context of God's grand narrative, as well as their responses to the people, institutions, and often difficult experiences they encountered in the mission field. Drawing on the *Periodical Accounts of the Baptist Missionary Society*, BMS minutes, and circular letters from British Baptist congregations, this paper examines the ways in which missionaries used the providential narrative to make sense of their own identities and experiences.