

# The work of God that happens under the sun

A Janse

## Introduction

This English translation was prepared for the Christian Philosophy Conference 2011 to accompany my paper on Janse. The manuscript is in the HDC Archives, incorrectly identified as unpublished.<sup>1</sup> It appeared in **Opvoeding en Onderwijs**, published in 1957.<sup>2</sup> The following paper, Children and History, with which it seems to form a part, as indicated at the end where it states that the subject will be continued “in the next chapter,” was dated 1925.

Chris Gousmett

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## The work of God that happens under the sun

History taken in the broadest sense includes all that happened, all that has been done.

The sunrise this morning, the rays that slipped through our windows, the imperceptible expansion of metals by heat, the flight of the bird to a higher branch, his jubilant song of ever higher tones, the changing impressions of the honey-seeking bee, the business and life and suffering of the human world, the distress of births and the pains of dying - and also the flow of the letters from my pen in a certain order, which is controlled by my thought – yes, even that thought itself – that all belongs in the subsequent moment to **history**.

But which creature – even flowing in the stream of time - would be able to comprehend in his understanding even one second of this history?

God - exalted above time - knows the events of all that exists from moment to moment. According to the words of our Saviour, not a little sparrow, nor a hair of our head, falls to the ground without His will.

Also, **every thing** has its history.

The wood of my table was once a part of stately oak trees - the purchaser now rests in the bosom of the earth. The carpenter had a model, made a plan, worked that out in wood - and people bought his work...

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<sup>1</sup> [Janse, A. De werk Gods dat onder de zon is geschied. **Inventaris van het archief van A Janse**. Collectie 157. Bijlage 12, Inv. 92. Unpublished works. No. 13.]

<sup>2</sup> [Janse, A. De werk Gods dat onder de zon is geschied. In: **Opvoeding en onderwijs**. Rijswijk: 1957, pp. 227-235.]

And now it is an old table. What very intimate things could that furniture relate from its history! Interesting things that really happened – what was enjoyed in delight, what grief was suffered by many people around the table. Tell me, how thick would the book be, which recounted only the history of this table in its entirety from moment to moment? Do not say that the history of the table has nothing to do with what happens among the people around it. A family has sat at that table - and the shape and size of the table determined their seating. The dishes of food were put on it – they had weight and pressed on the table - they often had a high temperature and warmed the table. The father commanded silence and when the children did not listen there came a tap on the table with an object so that the oak-wood sounded - and the children obeyed because of the sound on the wood... Tears fell down on the edge, and the wood was wet and drank in the human sorrow... In all this there is also something happening with the table, and the table was a link in the chain of causes and effects, which got longer and longer. Take that table away from the family - they had another one suitable for mealtimes. Father had to express his command differently - it sounded different, it was heard differently - and the crying child could not lay his very tired head on his arms to as to weep /3/ tears running freely. Very, very much would have happened differently.

Also, every deed has its history.

While I sit here writing about this subject, I know I am not able to indicate all the factors that prepared for, made possible and brought forth this deed. I had to have been born, raised, educated in reading and writing, in history – I must reflect on it, study, be taught, give lessons, study methodology, seek my own path. And all the while still many small "accidental" circumstances occurred.

And then a colleague, who works together with me in practice, working with love for his profession, comes to his own method, working this method out with enthusiasm, drawing sketches, and teaching in a completely unusual way.

And then a highly valued member of the school inspectorate comes, advises and encourages me.

I have only touched on events of years and years back.

**God** knows the history of **every thing**, of **every act**, of **every thought** in its first origins. David sang of this: "You know when I sit down and when I rise up. You discern my thoughts from far away. You are acquainted with all my ways. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me." And he exclaims: "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, it is so high that I cannot attain it." [Psalm 139:2, 3b, 16a, 6. NRSV]

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If we want to describe history (and teaching), then we have to limit ourselves.

We can not describe everything that happened. Not even of a single second!

We can not tell about the history of every thing. Not even of our cooking utensils alone.

We can not explain each act or thought from its origins. Not one simple act, not one emerging thought.

The idea that we can write history in this way, that we search for as much data as possible so as to **explain what has happened as a product of factors**, is false.

In order to give a reconstruction of history along this line - so as to **explain** the course of things from **factors** - we should have to know all the factors.

But not all things and not all events are equally important. If we consider at some time that we have gathered all **relevant** factors, would we not be able to reconstruct history?

But that also is impossible, for the most fundamental essential factors are often beyond our field of view. There are things that elude all historical research and yet are of very essential significance for history.<sup>3</sup>

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Let us take as an example the history of Napoleon. Thick folios could be filled with historical data relating to him and which played a role in his life. But what is now important in that and what is not? Assume for a moment that among his ancestors around 1650 there lived a half idiot woman. Who would have paid attention to that woman? Even her very name was forgotten. And for the life of Napoleon, this fact seems not particularly of very much weight. Yes, definitely interesting! But important?

But now have a look at this family tree.

Napoleon

Father Mother

Father Mother Father Mother

Father Mother Father Mother Father Mother Father Mother

F. M. F. M.

F. M. F. M. F. M. F. M. F. M. F. M. F. M. F. M. F. M. F. M. F. M. F. M. F. M. F. M. F. M.

Delete from over there that half idiot little woman. With that the birth of her child becomes impossible, her grandchild falls away and so forth, so that the

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<sup>3</sup> [Up until now Janse has used **geschiedenis**, but here he uses **historie**. There does not seem to be any significance in the variations of his usage.]

great Napoleon also falls away, and the history of the world would be different.

Whoever wants to explain the historic appearance of Napoleon, must take account of his two parents, four grandparents, 2<sup>3</sup> great grandparents 2<sup>4</sup>..., 2<sup>5</sup>..., 2<sup>6</sup>..., 2<sup>7</sup>..., 2<sup>8</sup>..., 2<sup>9</sup>..., 2<sup>10</sup>..., etc. etc. ancestorship [voorouderschap].

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The Oriental history description, which we find in the Bible, sometimes deals with data, which our description of history simply conceals.

Take away Gen. 4:25 from history, and then the genealogy of Noah also disappears, and with that contemporary humanity also disappears.

Certainly, it is generally not desirable to begin every life story with conception - or - in the sensitive words of Dante - it is better to remain silent than to speak. But if someone pretended to **explain** a person such as Napoleon historically **from factors**, this would still be the main factor. Napoleon can not be explained without taking this into account.

That Napoleon breathed, slept and drank, that he thought and acted with his whole heart in it, yes the whole of his **ordinary** human life - the historians slide almost imperceptibly over these. And yet that has all been of fundamental significance for his life's work. Whoever seeks to **explain** his life out of **factors** would continually need to postulate these facts.

Complete reconstruction of world events - or even of only one person, one fact, one thought - is impossible.

God writes history. **He** prepared the coming of Napoleon in his family tree. **He** caused him to be born, **He** gave /7/ the breath in his nostrils, life and all things. **He** made France and Europe to be his, for the dominion of this scourge of Europe.

History taken in the widest sense is the happening of what was concealed in His eternal counsel. And that, man can not reconstruct at all. Solomon says:

When I applied my mind to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth ... Then I saw all the work of God, that no one can find out **what is happening under the sun**. However much they may toil in seeking, they will not find it out; even though those who are wise claim to know, they cannot find it out. (Ecclesiastes 8:16 and 17).

That may certainly be said to the generation of our age, which speaks of **the** history and by that they mean what is written in history **books**.

That may certainly sometimes be thought by those who teach **the** history, and sometimes unintentionally give their students the impression, that they have mastery over history, that they are "qualified", that they have had "everything."

And not least may they who think the above, who **demand** of their students, they must know **everything** from the three times diluted extracts from large textbooks, which extracts are called textbooks - and which then were considered to be inclusive of **the** history.

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Because if **the** history is considered in the way Solomon saw it, we will then need to request a very different way of teaching.

We will then lose the illusion of teaching and knowing **the** history.

But we will with that gain the whole object. All that happens, all line and law and order and regularity, every principle, cause and effect - in short, **all the work of God under the sun** will then be able to be the object of history teaching.

We will know very little, be able to explain very little - not very often – know, how much we must seek - and our books will be our main resource – it is not our books, our knowledge which will be the object but **history** itself.

And our children will not say: I have **learned my** history lesson already, I have mastered **my** dates, but they will say, how very fine history is, and interesting, what a lot has happened which I previously did not know of.

Then the teacher will not growl if a student does not know everything. Who scolds his brother for a tramp in the presence of a millionaire, if he owns 50 guilders and his brother five? Only the insane do that, who consider their shabby 50 guilders for 50 million!

Are there not such people?

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God writes the history.

But the man created in His image labours to **seek** all the work of God that happens under the sun.

He will not rest until he knows something about what happened earlier. He asks about the history and the origin of things. He looks for line and direction and order in the course of things. He also seeks to trace the chain of cause and consequence, principle and effect. And God has led mankind in this way in science and has given her this "difficult travail."

People have distinguished the **daily course of nature**, all that which in the course of things regularly returns. That of which Solomon said, "all things are so wearisome, more than one could express. A generation goes and a generation comes, the sun rises and the sun goes down, round and round goes the wind... all streams run to the sea..." [Ecclesiastes 1:4-8 NRSV]

All those events of nature - of so great importance for the history of mankind - will be brought under **natural history**. And we do not seek so much to describe the **event itself**, but the regularity, order, coherence, the causality and teleology, the **law** of things, the **law** of the events - that is paramount here.

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**History in the narrower sense therefore does not pay attention to the ordinary course of nature.** That after the day of Caesar's triumph in Rome it was again night – that the triumphant emperor went to sleep - that the stars twinkled above the sleeping city... for historical writing that speaks for itself.

That it was a **Friday**, when our Crown Prince so bravely stood in Quatre Bras<sup>4</sup>... and that the storm was brewing and broke in the evening... and that it was pouring with rain, and the battle of Waterloo happened on the steaming fields on a peaceful sunny Sunday ... that is important for history writing only inasmuch as the rain made operations difficult.

In her desire to give an **overview** of the whole history, and in its struggle with the overwhelming abundance of data, historical science **must** silently pass over the **actual events of nature**.

Moreover, the history of science has more or less taken over the method of the natural sciences and looks for the order, the coherence, the **law** of the historical event, the causality, the principal, the outcome, that which is in it which science seeks in the series of facts. And therefore the **fact itself** is pushed into the background and the **law, rule, and causal principle** of history comes into the foreground.

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In this way the facts are more or less attenuated into data, out of which the discipline of **the history** is constructed, whereas in essence of course the facts themselves constitute history. Not the reflection on the facts (or the history books), but the facts themselves in their coherence with everything that happens (including the happenings of nature) **that** is history.

So it has come about that the writers of historical novels have been left to describe the facts **as facts**. The historical novel can be seen as a product of modern times - born from the need to present the facts themselves as actual events - and romantic history writing was a reaction to the natural scientific method of historical science. In olden times, the historical novel was not necessary, because history writing placed **the facts themselves** in the foreground.

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<sup>4</sup> [The Battle of Quatre Bras, between Wellington's Anglo-Dutch army and the left wing of the Armée du Nord under Marshal Michel Ney, was fought near the strategic crossroads of Quatre Bras on 16 June 1815. This was an important event in the Waterloo campaign. Wikipedia]

The colourful history writing of old stands in relation to that of the modern history writing<sup>5</sup> as the simple story of salvation facts in the Bible is to dogmatics.

We do not want to dispute the value of modern history writing nor that of dogmatics if they only recognize **the correctness** of the simple communication of the facts without elaboration.

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Historically faithful historical novels also give history. And their representation of the facts is fresher, more lively, more real than the scientific historical description.

The modern historian has brought much - very much - to light. He has enabled us to see rule, order, law, coherence, principle in the event. Our understanding of history was illuminated by that. But he should not dominate over his object.

The history itself - the fact in all its connections with the course of nature - like the novelist, as the witness can tell you – that **is** and **remains the** history.

Not dogmatics or the knowledge of dogmatics makes us blessed, but the fact that **really happened** under the blue sky of Palestine in the days of Caesar Tiberius on the hill of Golgotha. And no dogmatic exposition of the doctrine of salvation can be truly compared in value to that simple story of the Evangelists.

And that is why the principle thing in our schools is not historical **science** - or extracts from it! - but **the simple story of what happened**.

We relate the story of the Evangelists - what happened there. We relate the stories of eyewitnesses and search /13/ in the sources of history for the **fact** of what actually happened. That and that alone is the object of history education in our common primary school.

And when we say this we fight not against science as such, but against the unfortunate exploitation of **science** in primary school.

What mankind has thought about the great works of God has become a powerful edifice of science. And we teachers have, some more, others less, stood in the porch of this temple, and have discovered and wondered about things here and there... and we shall there participate in its benefits.

But we do not go along with the spirit of the age so as to bring our children to admire that temple – just see how much science knows and can know – we are not going to give silver shrines of science so that they can kneel before them in blind humility - but we will first bring them to the great works of God themselves and earnestly hope that there will always be those, who as a

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<sup>5</sup> I think here of the historical description of historical materialism!

privilege will go into the temple of science, there to learn even more of God's great works.

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The modern worldview wants the school to be a children's forecourt to the worship of **science**.

And this has consequences also in our history lessons. The children do not understand. Look at it, but not into it, they see the temple, but not the works of God and soon think that the temple is history itself. And then, science is more than the facts. Then knowing **about** is knowing **of**.

Then history is identical to the history **lesson**.<sup>6</sup>

And if there is then a "will to learn" then it was perhaps also - if God does not prevent it - "Great is Diana of the Ephesians" out of enthusiasm for the temple itself - or – still worse - because they will soon **make a profit** with the selling of small silver shrines to the "studious" youth.

Again - we want to honour science, and gratefully make use of her results, but it is **not** science but the great works of God also in the events of centuries past which is our **object** - and we do not teach **science**, but **tell /15/ of what happened**. And so that the children as it were see events as facts in a certain environment and in an **earlier** time.

The manner in which we want to do that, we will discuss in the next chapter.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> [Deleted in manuscript: And the student says: fine, that the king has not done especially much - then I have not so very much to learn. Or: I wish I had lived before the French Revolution, then I would at least not have to struggle with the Napoleonic wars.]

<sup>7</sup> [A Janse. Het kind en de geschiedenis. In: **Opvoeding en Onderwijs**. Rijswijk, 1957, pp. 236-259.]