

"Why did You breach its wall....?"

How respond to the
special-revelation claim?

Meditating this morning on the Hebrew of Ps.80, I came upon this Thinksheet's title, which is the TANAKH translation of the first line of vs.13. The Holy Land has been overrun by "enemies" (vs.7), but the Psalmist is accusing God (the chosen people's "Yahweh" [vs.20]) of having done it, or--by removing the people's providential protection--having made the destruction possible.

By special revelation, the Psalmist knows that God is responsible as the Creator/Provider/Redeemer/Protector--for everything--well, isn't he? As Wesley said, "On your knees [i.e., at prayer], all depends on God." (Yes, he added "On my feet, all depends on me"--but our Psalmist is at prayer: he uses, in addressing God, "You/Your" 20 times!)

Now, as an examination of the range of prayer, let's take the letter "A." As I said, Ps.80 is a prayer of accusation: in "wrath" (vs.5; vs.17, "anger") God has changed from being friend to being enemy. We miss, from his prayer, any admission that the people had done anything wrong, anything in breach of covenant with their God. Nor is their any explicit grateful acknowledgement of God's gracious past dealings with his people (whom he delivered from Egypt [vs.9a] & [vss.9b-10a] settled in a land he prepared for them). No confession of sin or eucharist (thanksgiving), but of course asking (1) that the divine "shepherd" (in the political sense, "enthroned on the cherubim," in the "head" chariot of the people's counterattack on their enemies) will "appear...and come to our help!" (vss.1-3); (2) that God will "favor" (lit., "make Your face shine") his people with a "deliverance" (both terms at the ends of strophes 1,3,4--i.e., vss.4,8,20) which will (3) "restore" (vss.4,8,20) the former (Davidic?) glory.

A single analog--God's people as his vineyard--is sustained throughout the Psalm. He dug it up in Egypt &, after preparing the soil (by heathen land-clearance!--vss.9b-10a) in Canaan, he replanted it (vs.9b). Unstated is YHWH's wall-building around the transplanted vine ("the vineyard wall"

REB; "our walls" NLT). CEV is the best translation of vss.12-13: "Our Lord [Adonai], why have you torn down the wall from around the vineyard? You let everyone who walks by pick the grapes. Now the vine is gobbled down by pigs...and other wild animals."

Concluding notes on the Psalmist's "asking": (1) Implied is that the LORD should "grant...help" (vs.18) to the (probably Davidic) king whom he's appointed as his "own" at his "right hand"; (2) Though God has "burned by fire" & "cut down" the vine he calls his "own" (vs.17), on behalf of all the people the Psalmist promises faithfulness (vs.19a: "We will not turn away from You" ("again" implied?); (3) Repentance is turning not only from but also toward; here, a return to the people's mission--the reason they were chosen, viz., to "invoke Your name" (vs.19b)--which (in the Psalmist's view) cannot be done unless "You...preserve our life" (vs.19).

1 A people's story is its identity--its name spoke, its signature written. The Jews' story's central character isn't even a Jew, isn't a Jew at all! Their eponymous ancestor was (Jacob-) "Israel," but their sacred text (which TANAKH [JPS/1985] calls "The Holy Scriptures") begins not with "In the beginning, Israel," but with "In...., God."

Faith-based beliefs not key to spirituality

I support those youths who embrace spirituality without having to ascribe to the unsubstantiated, faith-based beliefs embodied in all religions and cults ("Young and spiritual," April 14).

Not only is it easy for human beings to be spiritual without faith-based belief, but they can be ethical and moral as well--even more so. Ethics, morality and spirituality that stay clear of faith-based dogma have the advantage of being universally applied to all feeling beings.

No group is excluded because this type of ethics is based upon empathy for pain and suffering in any feeling being and upon open scientific inquiry and reason. Nobody needs to be killed to be "saved" or exterminated to save those who "believe." Nobody gets a ticket to heaven by killing infidels. Nobody becomes a victim of crusading evangelical right-wing beliefs masquerading as universal "morality."

Our society needs to evolve a solid core of ethics and spirituality based upon empathy and free from faith-based dogma. Only then will each of us be strong enough to add religious beliefs as our private booster. Only then are we no longer in danger of repeating the history of perpetrating horrors on others.

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Ps.80 demonstrates this theocentricity, that the "Israel"ites' deity "YHWH" (Ex.3) is the central character, the Prime Mover, in this people's story: since "The Buck Stops Here," he gets the blame (as well as the credit) for everything. But (& here's a startling distinctive in this deity's identity) YHWH is no puppeteer: he can be talked to, argued with, even sassed & persuaded (unlike Allah, whose special-revelational words are fixed, in heaven & on earth, as the Qur'an: let's call that **hard sp.rev.**, & the Jewish holybook **soft sp.rev.**).

2 The range of responses/reactions to a special-revelation claim is from total "sub-mission" (Arabic, "islam") to total rejection. Wahabism is an example of the former: voting, as ascertaining a determinate will other than Allah's, is blasphemous. At the other extreme is the spirituality-vs.-revelation CCTimes 4.24.05 letter (over). Let's look at the latter example first:

3 "That's what a lot of people think" is what a prominent UCC minister said as the first rejoinder yesterday after I read the letter to a clergy group. The second was this: "That's 1/3rd of each of our UCC congregations." Religion is divisive, spirituality (as do-it-yourself) is, as undebatable (like taste: "De gustibus, non disputandum"), undisruptive of human community at any level. Says the letter: not only don't you need religion to be "spiritual," but "without faith-based belief" you can be "more" "ethical and moral"--the "base" being (1) "empathy for pain and suffering" & (2) "open scientific inquiry and reason"--so "no group is excluded"--so, no religious victimizers or "victim[s]." The future? Once "our society" evolves "a solid core of ethics and spirituality...free from faith-based dogma," "each of us [will] be strong enough to add religious beliefs as our private booster."

What's wrong with that picture? For starters: (1) Taking "numinous" as inclusive of "religious" & "spiritual," the letter suggests a humanity-wide remedy for numinous violence, yet has a provincial ("our society") goal; (2) Naively, the letter proposes eliminating a universal-essential element of human nature, viz. the sense of being spoken to, addressed, *particularly, specially* (& thus "special" revelation)--whether from beyond (in poly/theism) or from the beyond that is within (in mysticism); (3) Innocently (in the bad sense), the letter assumes (a) that human nature as we know it has no "yetzer ra" (evil tendency, corruptive entropy), so eliminating religion would delete violence, & (b) that historical research would provide some support for this vision, instead of (the reality) exposing it as utopian folly, deceptive promise, & vain hope.

4 Now let's look at the former example, violent-jihadist-reformist-expansionist Islam, rejective of what Robt.Kuttner in today's BOSTON GLOBE calls the "triple triumph" of "the American Revolution--political democracy, religious tolerance, and the free enquiry demanded by the scientific method." "9/11" was a counter-triple-triumph, using against us all three freedoms (political, religious, intellectual)--historically, pushing us back to what R.K. (in another connection) calls "the predemocratic world of absolutes circa 1500." His reference, of course, is to the West: Muslim Arab lands are still predemocratic (last week, 40 Pakistani Christians were imprisoned in Saudi Arabia for worshipping together--in private!).

But absolutist thinking isn't limited to Islam. In 4.18.05 SIGHTINGS, M.Marty says "Frist and company...sound more like jihadists...." The Enlightenment's arrogance of reason continues to repress faith, relativize truth (cp. "multiculturalism"), & deify the individual. Marxism's arrogance of "scientific history" is now of declining historical force. The last two examples prove that not all absolutisms are motored by religious "special revelation," but all--including the "spirituality" of our letter-writer, are "faith-based." *

5 Yesterday, an 18-year-old graduate of an excellent highschool, when I suggested that he read the Gospels daily, asked "What is a gospel?" I explained, & said "Please start with John." He found a KJV & looked for an index for "J." I had to tell him to look in the contents.... Jn.Dewey's humanistic absolutism has achieved its 1933 aim to drive religion out of the American public school. (A favorite teacher of his described him as "a good student.") When a spiritual crisis hit him, he had no inner resources or outer reliances to clue him in: zero religious (or spiritual!) background. I'll try to help him see that the biblical God has a "maker's knowledge" of him & of everything, & that in Jesus Christ his Son our Savior & Lord, the Creator-Maker's knowledge meets our need of repair.