JESUS' VERTICAL JOURNEYS

I hate doorknobs & , when designing our house, couldn't get standard European levers, so made doorpulls appropriate to the 2" solid doors, which we made. If you live long enough, you'll have had one adulthood & two childhoods, & doorknobs are bad for both childhoods: too hard to turn. (*Now* you can get doorlevers.)

Why the architectural detail? It popped into my head when I heard about a girl so little that for her "doorknobs were too high & words were too long." She was vertically challenged even though a biped, having recently developed out of going it as a quadruped--recapitualating an evolutionary leap to homo erectus (with spine-hole in the center-bottom rather than back-bottom of the head), then to homo sapiens, us (a million or so years ago). If she outlives her first childhood, that little girl will grow into mastery of adult architecture, but at whatever age will die verbally challenged: nobody is wonk enough to know the long words in every field. And Loree, when I was using a stack of Greek commentaries to prepare for 9sm last Sunday (on which this Thinksheet is a reflection), said "Not too academic!"

1 I believe in no determinism (i.e., single-cause explanation of human reality; e.g., Marxism's economic d. & Darwinism's natural-selection d. & Freud's eros d.). ...except that the Maker of heaven & earth will ultimately work his will/way after permitting angelic & human creatures to rebel, working their wills/ways. In brief, I believe in-through the Lord's Prayer. This biblical (Jewish & Christian) determinism is to be distinguished from both (1) cosmic libertarianism, that we are on our own in an indifferent universe, & (2) fatalisms (e.g., Islamic kismet, Hindu-Buddhist karma, Greek moira, Confucian yang/yin--all of which leave us, as decision-makers, less free than does biblical religion).

2 Childhood (our little girl, again) believes in verticality but cannot acheive it: secularism is even more childish in refusing to believe in the vertical. The disbelief has two dimensions: (1) **cosmological**: up in NYC is down in Singapore (but only as NewYorkers, provincially, see it; everywhere, up is experientially up); (2) **social**: the anti-isms (i.e., egalitarianisms) hate the vertical dimension & are idealistically anarchist (against God the Father, patriarchy, racial-ethnic-religious-economic-national-gender superiority ["sexism" or "patriarchy" seen as gender superiority]).

3 The modern liberal proud prejudice against the "three-story universe" (earth, above-earth, below-earth) traps secular consciousness into what a great biblical scholar in 1880 called "Flatland." Science has no place for consciousness & so is blind to the vertical in consciousness (as it develops in our little girl as her body struggles to walk & her mind/soul/spirit to reach up as do her hands; & early she learns its hell to fall down). Do I, then, think that spirituality with its transcendence ideas (including "God") is nothing but matter (the physical body) imaginatively projected? I don't believe in "nothing but," i.e. reductionisms! (1) We don't know enough to know there's nothing beyond matter, i.e., to be materialists. (2) We do know that our experience of mind/soul/spirit consciousness is never sated, always reaches for the beyond, the more than. Kazantzakis' life-definition of life's purpose--"the transformation of matter into spirit"--speaks both against materialism & for a spirituality of ever-expanding (around/above/below, horizontal-vertical) awareness.

4 In logic, "cumulativity" is a force-assessment factor: something unprovable is/is-not convincing depending on (a legal term) "the weight of evidence" (as in law, "circumstantial evidence" may be sufficient to convict). So weighty, in the history of human consciousness, is the three-storey universe that the denial of it--either by challenging the evidence or by attributing the conviction to "prescientific" illusion--may justly be labeled a late-Western scientistic fad....

5 ....but the fad has so captured the West's thinking that a Westerner who

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enters biblical consciousness, as must be done for really reading the Bible, must abandon or at least suspend belief in the flat world (a cultural term: "flat earth" is a geographical term). Supremely, this must be done in the case of (ah! we've gotten to this Thinksheet's title!) **Jesus' vertical journeys.** Horizontally, he never went more than a hundred miles from his birthplace. But vertically he came down (the Incarnation), went up (the Resurrection), went down (the Descensus ad Inferos), went up (the Ascension), & will come down (the Parousia / Return / Second Coming). That's three downs (from the above-earth [Heaven], from earth to the below-earth [neutrally termed Sheol, negatively termed Hell], & from Heaven to earth); & three ups (from the grave, from the underworld, & from earth).

This one-person, two-way traffic is, to nonChristians, merely mythical, a descending-ascending deity-story of overworld/world/underworld vertical traffic. We Christians believe only this one "myth" (deity/humanity story, in this instance deity become humanity [the Incarnation]). Why this is so is an apologetic for another time. In this Thinksheet I'm narrowing down to what we dealt with in class last Sunday, viz. the Descensus ad Inferos (in the Creed, "He descended into Hell"). First, here are the PASS ALONG THE FAITH Catechism questions on this rarely preached, rarely discussed doctrine:

31. What does it mean to say he descended to the dead? It means that Jesus entered that bleak sense of being totally alienated from God, the faithful, and all that is good. But God can be present and can redeem those who seem to be beyond reach. We can never be in such a condition that God does not love and care for us. Mark 15.34-37; Eph.4.8-10; 1P.3.18-20.
32. Could even hell detain Christ? No, our Lord could not be held by the principality of evil or the power of death. After three days, he rose triumphant from the grave, victorious over sin and guilt. Mt.28.1-8; L.24.1-12.

Observations

(1) "In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity" is a variously attributed Christian wise-saying. This Descensus (Descent [into Hell/Hades]) doctrine is second-class, an adiaphoron (Gk. for something making "no [essential] difference"), on which interpreters/theologians have indeed exercised "liberty," running the gamut of possible views. Don't sweat it!

(2) The biblical principle of inclusion says Jesus preached "to those who [living before, during, or after his earthly life] have never heard." As the biblical prophets became convinced that Yahweh, who had chosen Israel to illumine the nations with the knowledge of God, was "the Maker of heaven & earth" & thus intentionally the God of all peoples, early Christian thinkers answered "Yes" to the question "Will all have opportunity, beyond if not during this life, to hear the gospel of God's grace through Jesus Christ our Lord?" Hearing, of course, is not believing: universalism (everybody saved) is, in the Bible, a hope, not a doctrine. Note how 1P.3.18-22 ties together Jesus' post-Crucifixion preaching to "Imprisoned spirits," the Noah saga, salvific baptismal water, the Resurrection, & the Ascension.

(3) Pray, a current joke says, & "Your call will be answered in the order in which it was received." But near the end of Jesus' first journey, he seems to have become convinced that his call would not be answered: "Why have you abandoned me?" (the Mark passage, above). It was as though he were let down on a rope from heaven, then the rope was dropped on him, so he couldn't return even in prayer. (In ancient Greek drama, the "deus ex machina" [god/dess let down "by machine" to untie a human tangle, so saving the day] didn't have to go back up.) For reasons clouded over in the mystery of evil, to "deliver us from evil" God in himself had to suffer & even die (as foreshadowed in the mystery cults of Mesopotamia, Egypt, & Greece--the god leading the devotee up out of the underworld).

(4) God's vertical triumph in Ps.68.18 is appropriated to Jesus in Eph.4.8-10, which concludes with this affirmation of the cosmic Christ: he "went up above and beyond the heavens, to fill the whole universe with his presence" (TEV). How far up (Gk., "an")? All the way! How far down (Gk., "kat")? The exuberant cosmic logic answers All the way (& so "the lowers" [vs.9], which could mean the earth, is taken to mean the underworld/afterlife)....Dawning consciousness of the Trinity....Some additional texts taken as open to cosmic-Christ interpretation: 1P. 4.6 ("the Good News...preached to the dead" [TEV]); Mt.8.11; L.13.29; Jn.5.25-29; Ro.10.6-7; Heb.9.15; Rev.21.23-25.