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RETRIEVAL PRECEDES RESTORATION PRECEDES RENEWAL

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"Behold, a good doctrine has been given you, My Torah; do not forsake it. It is a tree of life to those who hold it fast, and all who cling to it find happiness. Its ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its paths are shalom."---GATES OF PRAYER (Central Conference of Ameican Rabbis, 1975), p.424

This morning, in my daily reading of this prayerbook, I came upon the majestic Hebrew words & then this equally majestic English rendering whose last word I've changed from "peace" (because that English word usually means only non-war & because "shalom" is so much richer, of which these words from the Lord's Prayer are accurate & adequate: "your will be done on earth as it is in heaven").

My underlinings are of the verbs revealing the prophetic force culturally explaining the survival of the Jews, to whom God had revealed ("Torah") himself toward their becoming "a light to the nations--so that all the world may be saved" (Is.49.6 TEV). The OT is upfront about the dismal fact that time & again God's chosen people did forsake God, did wander away to idols, did fall into spiritual **amnesia** both by choice & by neglect, but were called to heel by their own prophets, who retrieved for their people the living Word ("the tree of life," in OT only Gn.3.22,24; in NT Rev.2.7 22.2.14.19--fullness of life here/after, a shalom symbol stylized as the menorah, the cultic lampstand signaling both the presence of God & [later] the light-bearing mission of God's people).

A concluding comment on this beautiful-powerful Jewish-liturgical saying: All human beings dream of "happiness" & "pleasantness." Here they are associated with, indeed flow from, **faithfulness** to God's teaching, revelation, Torah. Pastor Jn. Robinson's last sermon before the younger members of his congregation set sail on the Mayflower in 1620 did not include the now popular liberal notion of continuing revelation, that "God hath yet more light and truth to break forth." To those words he added the prepositional phrase indicating that what he had in mind was not revelation but illumination: "...from his Holy Word." He was profoundly concerned that in the new world his people not forsake, but hold fast & cling to, Scripture.....What this means to their descendants & others in the United Church of Christ is now the central debate in that denomination, whose survival, I am convinced, is at stake.

1 In pre-Christian biblical history, the classic story of Torah **retrieval** is the discovery of (?) Deuteronomy ca.620 BC/BCE (2K.22; resulting covenant, next chap.). "The book of the law" was discovered in the course of temple repairs. Note the order (as in this Thinksheet's title): Torah was retrieved, the covenant was restored, then Josiah's renewal-reform got under way. The negative motivation for Josiah's reform movement was God's threat (speaking through a woman, the prophet[ess] Huldah) of nonsurvival ("because they have abandoned me," 22.17). The ground-issue was not the survival, then or now, of a particular people but of the mission of God, who chooses agents to minister toward the restoration-restitution-regeneration of creation, which has been "subjected to futility" & is "groaning in labor pains" (Ro.8.20-23 NRSV).

How come "the book of the law" got put in storage & forgotten? Meanwhile, was nothing going on in the temple, or something other than what Torah taught? The latter. For one thing, the goddess kept sneaking in when the Levites weren't looking--or, worse, even though they were. That lady deity was laid back about much that the LORD God was uptight, strict, rigorous about. So retrieval of Torah always entailed temple-cleansing, clearing out the pagan idols, renovating away the innovations. (Of the Thinksheet just before this one, the subtitle is "The Mainline Churches' INNOVATION/RESTORATION Debate."

2 Then (in the days of Josiah) & now, the **upsurge of the feminine** (1) repressed the masculine (then, the Lord's Torah put in storage; now, pressure to eliminate "Lord" from the active Christian vocabulary) & (2) introduced novelties (then, the goddess in the temple; now, tritheistic substitutes for the trinitarian Father-Son-Spirit).

No, this is not being written by an antifeminist. I qualify as a feminist

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in holding that the present upsurge of the feminine is doing more good than harm. But I am a critical feminist, with questions such as these: (1) Is there any evidence that the leakage of the goddess into ancient Yahwism improved the condition of women? None. I broaden the question: Has the goddess anywhere-anytime been good news for women? No evidence on the affirmative side, despite such fanciful reconstructions as Riane Eisler's. (2) Is the current refurbishing of goddess religion a + or a - to the women's movement, to women? More - than +, I think. For one thing, it's further alienating goddess devotees from God religions, from the biblical God. (3) To further women's cause (however defined), need the temple services be cleansed of socalled hierarchical-patriarchal-androcentric ways of addressing God & speaking about him (sic)? Or does the biblical language have amplitude for honoring the feminine in God & in humanity as consciousness-raising convinces us of the need of these honorings? The latter, I think.

6 Those who think the former make two major difficulties for themselves:

(1) By their reductionism, they put in temple storage some terms--"Lord" is only one instance--vital to the biblical word-world & thus deliberately begin the slide into amnesia for themselves & the children.

(2) By their word-repressions, they make enemies of many who otherwise are their friends, supporting their major goals. We who thus without our consent are made enemies must set our minds & mouths to retrieval, resisting the word-expurgators' efforts to pro-fan-ize (put out of the temple) words we consider essential to living & traditioning (handing on) the Faith.

7 "Retrieval" is French for "finding again" something deliberately or unwittingly **lost** or in danger of being lost. Radical feminist linguistic reduction is an instance of something in danger of being lost, viz essential biblical words. These determined radicals are hot for publishing exclusive texts (texts that exclude some vital words) called, with no intentional irony, inclusive texts (inclusive language lectionary/Bible/hymnal).

But some lost things are not in danger of being lost: they've been lost for a long time. One way to frame the debate going on in all but the extreme right wing of Judaism & Christianity is this: Of what's been sacrificed to modernity, what should/not have been sacrificed? Attendant questions are: Have we cheap serenity from accepting what should have been changed as in the category of what cannot be changed? Have we changed what should not have been changed? "In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty." But whence the wisdom to know what's non/essential? (Ah, yes, "in all things, charity.")

The three dimensions of the retrieval (or innovation/restoration) **debate**: Of what should not be lost, what's now in danger of being lost? what's been lost recently? what's been lost for a long time?

8 The Lord Jesus says that an educated, "trained" disciple "is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old" (Mt.13.52 NRSV). The innovative/restorative **tension** is within us. We may relieve it by archaizing (forgetting-denying the need to innovate) or futurizing (forgetting-denying the need to be stewards of the old, including retrieving ["accessing"] what-when-where necessary). This mature, educated disciple (a "scribe...trained for the kingdom of heaven") cannot be either (to observe Jesus' sequence) a modernist or a fundamentalist, two characters who when dug in against each other make the devil smile. In honesty & charity of debate, we must pray & work against that stupid, fruitless polarization. But this caveat does not demand that the debate be tepid, without passion. Only that passion not overwhelm reason, civility, or love. PURITY OF HEART IS TO WILL ONE THING is the title of Soren Kierkegaard's devotional classic, & what can save passion from fanaticism is the continuous self-examining question, Is the one thing I'm now willing God's will for me here & now?

Two retrieval pictures from out of my past: (1) Tennis: retrieving a ball isn't finding it after it's been lost, it's hitting a hard-to-reach ball; (2) Dogs: I've always loved 'em, love to throw things for them to retrieve ("fetch": get & bring back); Tippy singlemindedly catching frisbees high off the ground.