

Writing is talking after listening.

Reading is being talked to, listening, & talking back.

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LET'S LET THE BIBLE READ US!

"Here's looking at you!" is a famous Bogey-to-Bergman line in "Casablanca." It's what the Bible says to you when you open it to read it aright. But if it's what you say to the Bible when you open it, you're about to read it awrong. This Thinksheet is about this aright against that awrong.

1 Almost all the Bible's writers (authors/redactors) were, when writing, conscious of Being Looked At (by God): that's the **primary** looking. The **secondary** looking? They were looking for God & seeing him in his works (history first, then nature), through which they believed God was looking at them. And the **tertiary** looking? God & they are looking at us when we read aright what they wrote (in the resultant sense, it's the Bible that's looking at us & inviting us to respond-look [which has some bearing on what's come to be called "response criticism"]).

2 Reading, as many disciplines have displayed since WWII, is a complex-reverberant activity viewable ontologically (how is being/becoming involved?), generatively (how does literature come to be?), sociologically (what is a particular writing's Sitz im Leben [Gunkel, 1096-], relation to its life-setting?), psychologically (what was going on inside the writer at the time of writing, as revealed in mood/intention/point-of-view vis-a-vis persons, events, ideas, times, places?), literarily (how is the particular writing related to the literary context, both narrow [the writer's other writing] & broad [other literature of which the writer is aware?]), & personally (how is the writer's mind-person revealed in the writing's unique structure of communication-devices ["rhetorical criticism," Jas.Muilenburg, 1968-]?).

All this has long been a concern of mine: my doctoral thesis 57 years ago had a section on "how life & literature are interrelated." And my diary of $\frac{1}{2}$ century ago today has this: "Life ever writes a commentary on this Book [the Bible]--in words that are events, in phrases that are eras, in sentences that are philosophies." (Commentaries are response-looks. The diary comment is metaphorically complex, as reading is actionally complex. I'd been leading discussions of Thornton Wilder's "Our Town," which our church-&-town had just put on. A great drama reads, & comments on, the audience. See the Thinksheet immediately prior to this one: "Antigone" reads & comments on us.)

3 The Bible itself plays with writing/reading metaphors. The most extended instance is at the beginning of 2Cor.3 (NRSV): Commendation letters are needed in neither direction: "You yourselves are our letter, written on our [alt., "your"] hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts." THE HARPER-COLLINS STUDY BIBLE here: "Paul uses letter-writing imagery to describe the Corinthians' conversion, which he attributes to Christ by means of the Spirit." And another metaphor: "The Ten Commandments (Ex.20.1-17, Deut.5.6-21) were inscribed on two tablets of stone (Ex.24.12, 31.18; Deut.9.10). For tablets of human hearts, see Jer.31.33; also Prov.3.3, 7.3; Ezek.11.19, 36.26."

4 An essential tension, in the best Bible reading, is the **mystery/history** dialectic. If we read with the "What happened?" question dominant (as do radical historicists), we (as Gabriel Marcel said) "degrade mystery to [the level of] a problem." But if we read mainly with "What really is?" in mind, "God goes to heaven" (as Coert Rylaarsdam, when Athens subverts Jerusalem [Winter/78 CRITERION p16]: "The redefinition of God in terms of what he is began to obscure the meaning of the stories about what he had done. The Word as verbal symbol began to displace the Word as divine action....The difference between today's experience of historicity and that communicated by the vision of Israel is that it has lost an awareness of the divine Mystery....that makes it less radical. And what is sad about it is that it impairs the integrity and wholeness of our experience.").

MYSTERY: The One who "breathed" (2Ti.3.16, & Lat. of 2P.1.21 [NRSV "moved"; Gk., "carried"]) on the writers & into what they wrote is the One who (1) looks on us as we read & (2) looks at us from what we read. If someone says "That takes

a lot of imagination!"--I reply "Rather, a lot of devotion, of practicing the Presence (prayerful reading, *lectio divina*), holy openness to the Voice."

5 Mystery, not mystification! No excuse for oracular obfuscation, sloppy research, illogical reasoning, turgid communication. (Translator James Luther Adams asked Paul Tillich for help on a tough German sentence the latter had written. T. himself couldn't make it out: "I haven't the slightest idea of what I was intending to say. Just skip it in the translation. Jim, I have learned one thing from having to speak English. I have learned that it is not necessary to be obscure in order to be profound." [*Ibid.*, p7])

6 Reading, when done well, is **interquestioning**, a two-way interrogation. But the writing has the initiative: the respectful reader earns the right to ask the text by first letting the text ask (& the Spirit ask through the text). Before & during WWII I knew many biblical scholars (Albright, Cadbury, et al) who, while highly competent in examining the text, showed for it a respect, almost a reverence, I've seldom seen in biblical scholars since. Why has the two-way street become one-way (from reader to text)? We've long words for clues: secularism, deconstruction, postmodernism, et al.

I was musing on this while reading "The Search for History in the Bible," a remarkably informative & suggestive issue of BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY REVIEW (3-4.00). Minimalist* contributors (e.g., Philip Davies) use a finer screen in searching for historical facts than archaeologists use in sifting for artifacts: almost nothing gets through, passes for "history" (meaning narrative supported by indubitable data). Everything's fiction till we get to the 9th-8th-c. Hebrew prophets. In violation of the historic scholarly rejection of the argument from absence (*argumentum e silentio*) these radical historicists argue that (as a letter-writer says on p71) "absence of evidence is in itself evidence of absence." (In the 9-10.99 issue, W.G.Dever & N.K.Gottwald review the latest of another minimalist, Thos.Thompson.)

*Maximalists, radical inerrantists (fundamentalist believers that the Book is errorless), hold that the Bible *is* history, so "The Search for History in the Bible" is nonsense....Me? I'm an optimalist: I want the best from both orientations while avoiding the extremes. To operate within the severe limits of reason, science must proceed as if (*als ob*) there were no transcendence (i.e., nothing real-&-operative beyond-&-within "nature," no transcendent/immanent deity). But is it truly rational to believe that, e.g., the Exodus is "pure fiction"? An oyster cannot produce a pearl without a grain of sand (an event generating the tradition). Fundamentalism on the left (minimalism) turns out to be as obscurantist (vis-a-vis the range of human ways of knowing) as fundamentalism on the right (maximalism).

The Bible/history debate is brought into **balance** (in the current issue of BAR) by the article by W.G.Dever & the article on Tel Rehov (high archaeological excitement).

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