"On the LOOKOUT to WELCOME the Reign of God"

What's wrong? Maybe the model is too small.

2537 17 Feb 92
ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS
309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636
Phone 508.775.8008
Noncommercial reproduction permitted

Each day my ten-minute reading in the Qur'an precedes my ten-minute reading in the history of science. This is having some peculiar effects on my intellectual formation. Time & again Western scientists have had to forsake beloved theories because further data & new-data-caused fresh hypotheses have shown up the former theories-models as too small. ("Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul," ever says the chambered nautilus of science.)

For instance? Well, take nonEuclidean geometry, which finally in our time successfully challenged millenia-sacred Euclid for failure to deal with curves: Euclid's plain-&-solid-geometry model was too small to encompass curvatures. On the larger scale, straight lines were shown to be circles, & vice versa (about the same time as light waves were shown to behave like particles, & vice versa). Come 1915, & Einstein proved gravity to be nonEuclidean, so--despite our impression of it--space itself is nonEuclidean. Our eyes see in straight lines on earth, which looks flat--a double deception, for our eyes seduce us into concluding for a video-model which "for practical purposes" is adequate but is actually, within the reach of mind, too small. The reach of mind, mind itself surmises, is too short to create an adequate mega-model of reality, a scientific conviction that joins with good religion in teaching humility.

One more instance? Chaos theory, the baby in the household of the natural sciences, seems to have convinced the majority of theoretical physicists that chaos is an illusion created by working with too small a model. Extend (by computer) the field of vision, & thus the model, & chaos fits into a hitherto undreamed of dimension of order.

You wouldn't have guessed it, but this Thinksheet is a meditation on **Mark 15.43**, which I translate thus: "Joseph of Arimathea...was **on the lookout to welcome the Reign of God.**" (Context: vv.42-46.)

1 Joseph, by his own courageous action in facing Pilate for Jesus' corpse, had the dead Jesus both on his hands & in his arms--a pietá no sculptor, as far as I know, has ever rendered. To his political courage was added his emotional courage in facing the agony of the "deposition" (the technical Latin term for taking Jesus' body down from the cross) & the burial. This was the black background for his bright hope. To see only that Jesus was dead & so probably also his mission & movement would have been too small a model of what was happening. He had made an anticipatory, prophylactic rejection of that model in favor of continuing to be "on the lookout to welcome the Reign of God." In this he was a proto-martyr, willing to go beyond Z in his witness, himself a model for oncoming Christian martyrs & indeed all Christian sufferers in body, mind, spirit, & relationships. And the resurrection of Jesus rewarded his refusal to accept too small a model.

2 When guests are coming to your house for dinner, you want to be right there, right on the spot, right at the door to welcome them, so you are on the lookout for them. Perhaps another member of the family is the designated lookout, to shout "They're here!" Two actions, not one: being on the lookout, & welcoming.

The Reign-Rule-Kingdom of God will come whether or not we're on the lookout for it. But being on the lookout for it is so vital as to constitute a definition of the Christian life--thus, many of Jesus' parables say "Be ready!" This hit me when, looking at an old Bible of mine (a 1935 printing of Moffatt's 1922 translation), I saw that in M.15.43 these words were underlined: "on the outlook for the Reign of God." And in the margin, a half century ago I'd written in red, "theme of Bible!" While the Bible is secondarily an ancient book throwing light on present & future, it is primarily a book whose light bathes us both from the future &, as a mirror behind us, from the past. Or rather it does so if we are facing the future, persuaded that the best (1) has not yet arrived but (2) is in the process of coming. That, only that, is biblical living. That, only that, is

praying the Lord's Prayer with one's being.

3 How did I get from "outlook" to "lookout"? I translated the British idiom into American. Why did Moffatt capitalize "Reign"? To signal that it's a technical term, a metaphor that no one English word can do justice to. "Kingdom" didn't quite do it for him, a Brit living in a kingdom, a (highly qualified!) monarchic realm--for "-dom" connotes territory. Why didn't he, then, choose kingship, a meaning closer to the biblical? Probably because it collapses the whole semantic field into a person, the person of the King. Joseph of Arimathea knew that God's kingship, kingness, is an eternal-present fact, not something to be on the lookout for. The trick is to find an English word capable of representing the tension between the eternal-present fact that God is King & the temporal-present fact that for the time being he refuses to function as King over territories with other rules, viz the hearts-minds of angels & humans who have not submitted to his rule, his dominion, his reign. Thus for Moffatt "Reign" covers both God's being as King & his functioning as King. This Scottish master of English wanted to remint the biblical idea, because "Kingdom" had worn too smooth to feel & read. ...My practice varies with context: usually just "Kingdom," sometimes "Rule" or "Realm" or "Kingdom-Rule-Realm" (or some other arrangement of the three).

4 Where did I get "**welcome**" in my phrase, "on the lookout to welcome"? It's a normal street-meaning of προσ-δεχ- *(pros-dech- [Vulg. "expectans")*. So I went on a hunt for it throughout the history of Mark translation, & was astonished to discover that it's never been used! Instead, we have "look for," "wait for," & (only the old Catholic Bible, following the Latin) "expect." NRSV's "waiting expectantly" improves on RSV's "looking for." REB's "looked forward to" revises NEB's "eagerly awaiting"--proof that revisions are sometimes the reverse of improvements....Another astonishment: no published version or translation uses "ready for." Phillips' "prepared to accept" comes close but is not as good. "Ready for" is in direct line with Jesus' frequent "Be ready!" Let's try it: "Joseph of Arimathea **was ready to welcome the Reign of God.**" But "ready" meaning "prepared" fails to catch the mood of eagerness.

5 Well, what is Joseph's mood, the mood he models for us in our dark times when in our arms are the corpses of our hopes? As a disciple of Jesus he's in the shock of grief, the pain of mourning, but our text--instead of mentioning that--directs our attention to his attending to the future, for which each moment (even the moment of his Master's earthly ending) is a new beginning. While attending to, seeing to, the deposition & burial, he was attending to, paying attention toward, God's future. While preparing Jesus' body for burial, he was unwittingly preparing his own soul for Easter & Pentecost....Conflating the four Gospels, we have Nicodemus (of Jn.3) helping Joseph: imagine the conversation between these two Jewish leaders who'd been secret disciples of Jesus & now were out of the closet. In the open, they'd been working with a model, the Jewish authority-sanhedrin-council that was to prove too small for the new community they had become a part of in becoming followers of Jesus.

6 For this new community, even the mighty Roman Empire was too small a model. Far more than he could have known, his asking Pilate for Jesus' body was an inchoate religious & political **subversive** activity. "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah" (Rev.11.15 NRSV). It took courage to come under the suspicion of Pilate, whose rule of terror was "When in doubt, crucify" (which he did to 5,000 Jews on a single day). But when the political prospect was for Rome's continued brutal tyranny, Joseph's theopolitical outlook was for the reign of God to replace the rule of Caesar. To pray the Lord's Prayer with your whole being is to be subversive, on the lookout for a better government, a better world of bread & forgiveness & deliverance from evil.

7 Said a Manhattan Jew to me a few days ago, "How different this city, this country, would be if you Christians took Jesus more seriously!" He understood the essential **radicality** of our faith, which finds actual religious, social, political, economic, & cultural categories & models too small.