

"INTERPRETING THE YEARS TO DAYS"

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The trouble with jettisoning old files to lighten ship for the final voyage is that if you don't look at every piece of paper, you might cause to predecease you some stuff worthy of surviving your demise.

In that category of worthfulness are at least some lines of the poems preserved, for the time being, in this Thinksheet.

1 I discovered the poems three days before Paul & Mary Sherry (Paul being president of the United Church of Christ) came to our home for a two-night stay. I've just written, on the poem-sheet, this note to him: "Anent our walk-talk around the Craigville ponds last night, on the lore & limits of language, these 47-year-old poems of a student of mine [& former fellow-student, Francis E. Whiting] still ring true to my heart-mind-life. Student revolt against my loss of the heresy trial included [Norman] Gottwald's refusal of his degree & [immediate] transference to Union Seminary, NY, for BD & PhD. ¶Then I preached, now I preach, to be 'free through, with, in, and from the Bible' (chap.35 of FLOW OF FLESH, REACH OF SPIRIT). But, as you know, I am deeply convictioned that we are **not** free to mock up an ideological rewrite of it: to do so is to violate 'Documentary integrity' (chap.34) and thus to dishonor truth & the God of truth."

2 Think about this Thinksheet's title. Do the days, these days today, want the years, the long past, to interpret them? Three days ago a tourist ran into, & totaled, son Mark's car, then physically attacked him, sending him to the ER (Cape Cod Hospital emergency room) for xrays. My cabbie to the ER said "People today are crazy. If it's not beach-weather, they jump in their cars & drive aimlessly all over the Cape, thickening the traffic. They're so damn restless." Hebrews (the Letter to) uses "rest" to describe the fulfilment of God's Promise, the antonym (describing the impenitent state of humanity) being "restless" (the Eng. wd. never in KJV, once [Jas.3.8, the tongue as--my tr.--"a most unstoppable, unrestable (Lat. "inquietum") evil"] in RSV. Behind such a tongue lies an inquiet heart unsubmissive to the One who said (Mt.11: "I will give you rest" [v.28], "you will find rest" [next v.]). In the case of Mark's being run into & then physically assaulted with screams (the attacker being booked by the police), we see a whole series of muscular unrests springing from a restless heart: total body (in driving), tongue (in screaming), arms (in assault). The NT uses one set of wds. (*kata-pau-*) to speak of stopping the restlessness & another set (*ana-pau-*) of the restorative-therapeutic effects from entering into the stopped state (twice in Mt.11.28-29)...Can you recall **hymns** on this theme? Here's one: "There is a place of quiet rest / near to the heart of God."

A few days ago, Charlie Brown, having as usual lost a baseball game, decided, instead of raging, to "feel philosophical about it." That was Emperor Marcus Aurelius' way of relieving the tensions of work (ruling & warring): by reflection, to (as our poet of this Thinksheet put it) "interpret[ing] the years to days." While the NT's way is primarily relation (in submission to Jesus), the reflection way is also present (e.g., "think about these things" [Phil.4.8 NRSV]).

3 The Christian's foremost way of interpreting the years to days is through **Bible** study-meditation-prayer-action. The occasion of the four poems here-below was my being "let go" after 3½ years of teaching the Bible languages at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary: my dear friend, former fellow-student, now student was thus expressing his appreciation for & suffering with me. Not in the eyes of president, faculty, or students but in the eyes of the control-trustees I was guilty of violating literalism in both lower (i.e., textual) & higher criticism. **Lower**: I had stated the plain fact that in thousands though minor instances, the Hebrew text as we have it (the *cathiv*) is defective, & 9th-c. Jewish scholars guessed at what should be read (the *keré*). The fundamentalist notion of a perfect-inerrant text is incompatible with this awkward fact; so the control-coterie among the trustees decided to kill (i.e., "let go") the messenger of bad news. But in their eyes I was even more guilty in the area of **higher** criticism (i.e., all biblical-study areas other than text). Two specifics: (1) I was guilty of teaching "the Samson saga" (that S., by the storytelling of successive generations of parents-to-children, was gradually

elevated from a Paul-Bunyanesque muscleman in an ascending spiral to national hero & even saint--the process being, as I see it, more revelational than a factual account, photolike, of an ancient Israelite). (2) I was guilty of teaching that "On Easter morning, the most surprised person was Jesus." (This was printed in the seminary paper as one graduating senior's response to the interview question "What is the most helpful thing you heard in your seminary years?") If you bake a three-layer cake, you can lay the layers side by side & eat them one at a time. That's an analog of the linear view of historiography: something happened & then something else & then something else. Jesus taught & was executed & rose from the dead. But the gospels are written as the three-layer cake assembled, on a vertical axis. Since the last layer tells us Jesus rose from the dead three days after death, they're written as if he knew that three days after death he'd rise up out of death. As a Jew in the pharisaic tradition, he believed in an ultimate resurrection & died with that belief. But that he foresaw his death as lasting only three days would be a denial of the common humanity he shares with us, & thus a diminishment of the incarnation. The force of my statement was to shock students into realizing that Jesus really was a real human being, "who in every respect has been tested as we are" (Heb.4.15 NRSV; as the Creeds say, "fully man" as well as "fully God").

The paradox I've been teaching for almost 60 years is that surrendering biblical literalism makes the Bible more, not less available to the human mind & heart. Liberation from the letter make the letter itself, the actual words (Hebrew-Aramaic-Greek) of the Bible, more accessible to the soul & thus the soul more accessible to the Spirit.

4 Time to share with you the poems. I've underlined words/phrases that for me are slow-downs, giving me pause to think.

THE WORD-MASTER

Within a narrow score of years
Beyond the nascent days of youth
You've lived with centuries of seers
And found the very heart of truth.
Beyond the ever-changing times
You've found the one Reality
And learned beyond the paradigms
The truthful face of God to see.
You've ministered to dread and doubt
And know 'tis hearts, not words, that beat
And drive the blood of meaning out
Into compassion's hands and feet.
You know that words like mighty tides
Increase and wane, and rise and fall,
And back of both that God abides
And gives His meaning to them all.
You do not scorn the ancient word
Or lay aside the new-born phrase,
But see in each the heart of God,
Interpreting the years to days. (Jan 49)

THE NEW SCRIBE

We want today the fearless man who seeks
The fullest light which from God's written page
Breaks forth for him who thinks with open mind,
Who dares to seek the help of both the sage
And saint, who fashions from the new and from
The old a flaming faith for a new age.
You've drawn men's hate by hurling forth such fire
Into their flameless hearts. You've made to blaze
Once more the fires of God's great certainties
Which spurred their souls in other, better days
Before their minds grew tired of thinking hard
And turned to take tradition's easy ways.
Keep on! until the whole wide world has heard
Your voice and felt within it God's own word. (7 Dec 48)

GOD'S HERETIC

With no well schem'd concern for self
You've dared to be God's heretic
And nobly desecrate a faith
As static as arithmetic! (13 Jan 49)

5 Would your underlinings have been otherwise? In other words, what in these poems gave you pause?

6 While the poems are addressed to me in my situational suffering (& are to be embarrassingly effusive, excessively laudatory), I who well knew the poet feel his own language-anguish, the suffering of the preacher-pastor with fire in belly & bones but parishioners with philistine ears. Through imperfect words, God is to be glorified, human beings & societies are to be converted-transformed, & wordsmiths are to receive the satisfactions of their craft. But the sweaty efforts to communicate "the very heart of truth" yield the preacher-poet at least the rewards of living "with centuries of seers," learning "beyond the paradigms," driving "the blood of meaning out" into action ("hands and feet"), participating with God as he struggles to "give His meaning to...all," bringing the long past into the short present ("interpreting the years to days"), humbly enjoying the striving to keep an "open mind" toward "the fullest light." God's scroll is complete, but our unrolling of it is centuries-slow; and we cannot know the full beauty of it till the full truth lies before our eyes of flesh & our eyes of faith.