

"MOMMY, WHY DON'T SNAKES HAVE LEGS?"

2819 7 Nov 96

ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS

309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636

Phone 508.775.8008

Noncommercial reproduction permitted

an offtake on Bill Moyer's PBS'96 "Genesis," segment 3 (Gn.3)

Last night in bed, Loree & I finished reading (alternately, by nights) THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS: An American Translation, trd. by E.J.Goodspeed (completing "The [U. of] Chicago Bible"). I'll introduce this Thinksheet's theme by my own translation-paraphrase of this passage, Diognetus 11f, which concludes a 3rd-century homily. Note especially how, in this elegant and profound discourse, the Fall (Gn.3) is used:

If you have been paying close and careful attention to what you have been hearing (about [chap.11] the Father's sending the Son to us, who have given our pledges of faith, sung the fear of the Law, known the grace of the Prophets, and found the faith of the Gospels established and the tradition of the Apostles guarded and the decrees of the Fathers not transgressed), and have taken to heart the gifts God bestows on those who love him correctly [Gk., "ortho"], who thus become a garden [Gk., "paradise"] of delight, raising up within themselves a fertile tree bearing every kind of fruit, adorned with fruits of many colors--all this you have become within the grace of the Church.

The Fall having de-gardened us, the gospel does more than re-garden the "ortho[dox]" God-lovers: they "*become* a garden [Gk., "paradise"] of delight...within the grace of the Church." The New Eden is internalized: within the believer & the believing community, the Tree of Life springs up....My point? Give some thought to the **meta-phorical freedom** of early Christian preaching....

1which is continuous with the OT's **picture playfulness**, a poetical aspect of the biblical mind & speech such as we have in Gn.3. One who becomes aware of this form of consciousness-communication will (1) not fall into the prosaic false consciousness called literalism, but (2) credit the Bible with a subtle sophistication commanding respect, rather than dispraising it from the supposedly loftier standpoint of "the modern mind."

2 In Diog.12, note **love**, loving God, as the prerequisite to becoming a garden, viz. the New Eden with one tree (Etz Chaim, the Tree of Life) that has everything--in contrast to the old Eden, which had a tree unavailable to Adam & Eve. Loving God is the open sesame to (1) the biblical poetic mentality & thus (1) the New Eden....Look at Phil.1.9f: "my prayer, that your **love** may overflow more and more with knowledge [Gk., "full-knowledge"] and full insight [NIV, "depth of insight"] to help you determine what is best." I cannot arrive at the vision-knowledge-insight I need merely by exercising the powers of my own consciousness (as Descartes' "I am aware & can think, therefore I am" [*Cogito, ergo sum*]). Nor will any knowing (Gk., "gnosis") explain & advance my being (as ancient & modern Gnosticism's "I know, therefore I am" [*Scio, ergo sum*]--most recently in literary critic Harold Bloom's OMENS OF MILLENNIUM: THE GNOSIS OF ANGELS, DREAMS, AND RESURRECTION [Riverhead Books/Putnam/96]). Rather, on the Cartesian model, the Bible's message is *Amo, ergo sum* ("I love, therefore I am"). (This is a close relative of Anselm's "I believe [trust], so that [in order that, with the result that] I understand": *Credo, ut intelligam*.)....Back to Phil.1.9f: "full insight" (Gk. root for "aesthetics," "an-esthesia" [no-feeling]), experience yielding moral-spiritual understanding) is here associated with love & knowledge: in Diognetus 2.9, its association is with "reasoning" [Gk., root of "logic"].)

3 Poetry & prose are equally conveyers of **truth**, though each in its own dimension. Poetry conveys truth of the tangible & of the intangible. In his BIOGRAPHIA LITERARIA, Coleridge says that he & Wordsworth, when living together, decided that W. would poetize on ordinary life "such as will be found in every village and its vicinity," & C. on invisibles demanding "that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes **poetic faith**" (Untermeyer.TREASURY.666). One further distinction: the invisibles may be realities or fantasies--both, in Jn. Lefton's "Jesus and the Beasts of Both Comings" (my title: he gave it to me untitled--reproduced on p.8 of my FLOW OF FLESH, REACH OF SPIRIT--dealt with in detail in chap.2, precis on p.162). Dominating the foreground is the Gn. **snake** facing Peter's betrayal-reminding rooster & about to be stepped on by Jesus' Palm Sunday donkey after passing a unicorn. In §1 I spoke of "picture playfulness": here it is, visually!

4 That **snake**: in the PBS hour, nobody got child-playful enough to mention an

illuminating etiological (origin-cause) speculation, viz. that the story in its present shape is a parental response to a child's "Why don't snakes have legs?" (Sometimes, a parent's response to a child's question is almost as illuminating as the question.) To catch a glint or two of the illuminating force, imagine the child's response to the parent's Gn.3 story. The more responses you imagine, the more illumination....Children die, but their questions never do (& are always alive, whether or not easily accessible, in that child-of-the-past within you). (Need I tell you? Parent/child conversation is a contact sport, playful though serious business.)

5 The PBS hour failed to treat the **snake** story with the awesome seriousness it deserves as our civilization's earliest & abiding narrative statement of what's wrong with humanity. *Something's* wrong: every civilization/culture has, as part of its identity, a what-went-wrong tale. Cultural anthropologists have gathered fistfuls of them. In the Franz Boas / Margaret Mead tradition of Rousseau's noble savage, such stories are less negative-thinking than, superior to, Gn.3. Their myth of primitive harmony (good aborigenes v. bad EurAmericans) is powerfully retold in Hollywood's "Dances with Wolves." Columbus Day has been changed to Indigenous Peoples' Day. The deity has been so redesigned as to trivialize Gn.3 & the Cross (atonement through Jesus)....But some anthropologists are free of that propaganda. Two instances of 1996 books: Lawrence H. Keely's *WAR BEFORE CIVILIZATION: The Myth of the Peaceful Savage* (Oxford), & Lyall Watson's *DARK NATURE: A Natural History of Evil* (HarperCollins).

6 As if parents weren't in enough trouble from this Thinksheet's question-title, consider the child's follow-up (the prior question): *Why was the snake bad?* The flip-side question *Why is God good (the mysteries of evil & good being coeval)?* is too philosophical a response for this 2nd(3rd?)-grader. And it wouldn't be much help to point out, as Watson does, that some animals do evil: gorillas are sometimes selfish & deceptive, & chimps (the animals most like us, only 1% different DNA) sometimes premeditate gratuitous violence. Or that people have a bad streak (like Augustine's "original sin" transmitted from the Fall, Gn.3): Watson says people have "an inherited, genetically related system that is unrelentingly selfish, ruthless, and cruel." "Nature is morally bankrupt and stands condemned." In §5 I said "something's wrong" with humanity: in this §, science ratifies the biblical insight that there's something wrong with nature, of which our species is a part. Watson says it as biologist-naturalist: Keeley, as archaeologist, says that civilization has *reduced* violence: "small societies" are, proportionately, more violent, & always have been....In this light, the modern superficial analysis of evil, such as in Marcus Borg (& the Jesus Seminar generally) is seen to be pre-scientific. And such as in the Moyers' PBS on Gn.3....So's not to be too gloomy, I mention a contra-movement in humanity. In their *ON THE MORAL NATURE OF THE UNIVERSE* (Fortress/96), Nancy Murphy & Geo.F.R.Ellis integrate ideas from cosmology, theology, ethics, & the social sciences to reveal a tendency toward self-sacrifice & nonviolence.

7 This PBS Gn. segment was more **reactive** than reflective--the current individualist tendency of conversation groups-sessions to be collective monologs rather than dialogs. If the same group were to meet a second time, I suspect they'd get beyond personal announcements to interpersonal engagement. If that were to occur, doubtless the text itself would be more deeply engaged. Eg, the feminists might become aware that the story is harder on Adam than on Eve. The 28Oct96 *TIME*, on the series, quotes Moyers: Many now have "a yearning for authentic experience"; & Rabbi Visotsky: "Conversation leads to community, and that's what we're all desperate for."....At Riverside Church, Moyers said the series is to counteract the Christian Right....Doubleday (1996) published the series as *GENESIS: A LIVING CONVERSATION* & a study book on it, *TALKING ABOUT GENESIS: A RESOURCE GUIDE* (incl. info on how to form groups).

8 Gn.3 is is a multiple **separation**-divisions story (from God, one another, nature, our own nature) & a **limits** story (the snake being, & calling others to be, off-limits; cp. Prometheus, Meursault [in Camus' *THE STRANGER*], deSade, J.Robt.Oppenheimer, the Human Genome Project--says Robt.Shattuck in *FORBIDDEN KNOWLEDGE: From Prometheus to Pornography*, St.Martin's/96)).

9 Not ten minutes ago, I said to a counselee "You are guilty of romantic idealism," as though the Bible stopped after its first two chapters: chap.3 moves from the ideal to the actual condition of humanity, that we are existentially (whatever we are essentially) enemies of Life & therefore subject to death: "death is [not] in the natural order of life." To be honest to Gn.3 (& also to 1Cor.15), I had to add the [] to the quotation from the UCC section of KNOWING MY NEIGHBOR (Springfield [Mass.] Council of Churches/95), which thumbnails the death-&-funeral views of a wide variety of denominations & religions. Correctly, the section says of Eccl.3 "All living things move from birth toward death." But to eisegete that sentiment into Gn.3 misses the **moral** dimension of the snake story as a tale intertwining **sin**-&-death. Prior Near Eastern versions said (1, the Gilgamesh epic) that the snake stole the life-giving plant [so humanity's not guilty] & (2, the Adapa epic) that the whole thing was a misunderstanding due to misrepresentation [so humanity's not guilty]. Gn. (1) theologizes the story, the primary action being degenerated Creator/creature conversation, & moralizes the scene, identifying the root of evil as the God-defying human will. A church, mine or any other, that interprets Gn.3 through Eccl.3, misses the Bible's major motif of Fall & Redemption, Crucifixion & Resurrection. Shallow Gn., shallow theology & church. Not so shallow are the three Near Eastern origin-stories: all are cast as loss-of-immortality tales. Many Christian funeral liturgies, including the UCC's, see no possible loss of immortality, so all the way distort the Christian Story, turning it into an "immortal soul" tale such as could have been told if Adam & Eve had eaten of the tree they were chased out of Eden to prevent their eating of (Gn.3.23f).

10 Of course everything in Gn.3 can be accounted for otherwise than the Bible does. Eccl.3, eg, is thin but not necessarily wrong (& is even marginally biblical, though its basic anthropology, *humanity paradigm*, is pragmatic rather than [as the Bible's] theocentric). The issue: Which is one's **primary paradigm**, thinking sphere? Mine is Scripture, into which I dissolve (or incorporate) whatever the acids of the Bible will dissolve. The reverse is to incorporate into one's thinking whatever in the Bible is soluble in it by (a 75-year-old phrase) "the acids of modernity" (as E. S.-Fiorenza blantly accepts of Scripture only what's conformable to her particular feminism). The snake is at work both in the extreme form of the former (viz, self-blinded fundamentalism) & in the extreme forms of the latter (eg, feministicism, including the bowdlerized "Inclusive Language Bible").

11 Gn.3 is not univocal, having only one possible meaning (Lat., "speaking with [only] one voice"). (The direct antonym is "multivocal" [speaking with many voices]; the indirect is "multivalent" or "polyvalent" ["having many values"].) My introduction to Mel Yosso's TRANSCULTURAL ALLEGORIES describes the magnetic power of open stories to draw many persons/cultures into such com-m-unity as conversation can create (an indirect virtue of historic stories, the direct purpose of Greenwich-Village-poet Yosso's "transcultural allegories").

As you look back over this Thinksheet, what "voices" or "values" or coigns of vantage (angles of vision) do you find? If for you the story has a single voice-value-meaning, as a rigid component in your theological architecture, you may think me to have been too playful, even cavalier, in handling Gn.3; but history is on my side. Not that I don't take the snake story seriously: I affirm its fundamental use in canonical/classical/orthodox Christian doctrine. But for me, that use does not **exhaust** the usefulness of the tale, which can profitably be viewed as an origin-story (etiological myth) of death/knowledge/evil/sin/sex/temptation/disobedience/alienation/deception/pain/work/choice/punishment/Godlikeness/immortality. (The range of ethical, intellectual, & sexual angles is well displayed on pp38-42 of THE TORAH: A MODERN COMMENTARY [UAHC/81].)

But, do you ask, while accepting these multiple discursive functions, what was the **original intent** of the story? Unavailable. Not like the debate on the "original intent" of the U.S. Constitution (with Bork on the rigorous right), where we have masses of collateral material (such as the Federalist Papers & Founding Fathers' correspondence): Gn.3 is already an ancient tale by the time it gets into the Bible. But if we can't get back to the story's origin-time, can't we at least get at the "original intent" of those who put the story in Gn.? Depends on your view of the composition of Gn. We canonicalists (viewing each thing in Scripture in light of everything in

Scripture) work on the assumption that Gn.3, as it lies before our eyes, has been given--under the inspiration of the Spirit--a **structure** (1) inclusive of the many doors of commerce between the story's layered inner truths & the theme-paths of its usages through the centuries, & (2) suggestive of new usages in our time. For us, it is revelation; but that fact, instead of freezing it for dogma, should free it for every form of study, including reverent playfulness....ANALOGY: An electronic chip, while in itself rigid, is capable of multiple connection-patterns....A half-century ago today, in the chapel of the seminary where I was teaching Hebrew & Greek, I preached against "Handling Holy Things Without Feeling." Gn.3 is a holy thing, to be studied & played with but not without reverence. Not all recent treatments of it manage that balance. Judge for yourself on, eg, Harvey Cox's ON NOT LEAVING IT TO THE SNAKE & Elaine Pagel's ADAM, EVE, AND THE SERPENT.

12 We may profitably proceed to enter Gn.3 through any of its many doors (themes, conceptual categories). I'll mention only a few:

(1) The **personae dramatis**. If there's a central character, who is it. Is the snake Satan (as in Milton)? Are Adam & Eve equally guilty? What title(s) would you give God in this story? (My Buddhist student at U. of Hawaii names the snake the Enlightener, & at first couldn't make sense of the God of the Garden.)

(2) Our human location vis-a-vis **nature**. How are knowledge & death related? Did sex precede disobedience (as Maimonides, GUIDE, 1.2)? The good/evil potential of physical touch: Eve lied in claiming that God had forbidden her to touch the forbidden fruit (& some ancient rabbis said that this exaggeration, this embroidery of the truth, was the opening wedge of sin (San.29a). In Gilgamesh, a woman by seducing a savage, brings him to wisdom & civilization. We are both continuous with & discontinuous from nature: "Man is the being who shudders at his own naturalness" (C.F.vonWeitzsäcker).

(3) Is humanity-constituting **freedom** from or through obedience?

(4) Biblical religion being grounded in **history** rather than nature, does Gn.3 evidence this?

(5) Is Gn.3 more than **psychodrama** (God & snake being interiorized in Adam & Eve)? So, Jung. So, earlier, Goethe, in psychologizing Homer: Iphigenia is rescued not by divine sympathy but by human empathy, which ultimately assuages all guilt.

(6) Gn.3 being not a what story (as the Big Bang) but a who-why existential (ie, decisional) story, how does it speak to the **individual**/community tensions in human life? Cp. the O.J. story (including as a tragic collision of America's celebrity, or star, system with death). Malachi Martin brilliantly describes what has happened as values have been reduced to commensurables, & by false compensation, the individual has been inflated into the "Me Empire" of "Me primacy" (chaps.27f of JESUS NOW [E.P.Dutton/73]).

(7) The human need for order & therefore for **authority**. In MORAL POLITICS, Geo. Lakoff (U. of Chicago/96), says that the dominant metaphor in American politics is the nation as family, & the main division is between conservatism's "Strict Father" model & liberalism's "Nurturant Parent" model. (Theologically, a fatal law/grace split.) I see uses for this twin metaphor in church (eg, the present struggle in UCC over the incursion of radical, "antipatriarchal" feministicism) & state (the deep issues our present Congress will, I hope, agonize over)....In Gn.3, God, who's been Nurturant Parent, comes on strong as Strict Father: would it be accurate to describe the Bible as a book about the Strict Nurturer?

(8) The story raises the **instrumentality** question. The apple, the computer (no, not Apple Computer). Do we already know more than's good for us? Scifi author Ray Bradbury, 31Jan97, speaking to a Silicon Valley audience about the Internet: "It can't offer the intimate and aesthetic experience of books....Who do you want to talk to [through this instrument]? All those morons who are living across the world somewhere? You don't even want to talk to them at home!"

(9) Knowing one's place, & staying in it. The story says that A&E encroached on God's sovereignty (v.5, "you shall be as God"). Only where God is not forgotten, but honored, can this sin of **hubris** be avoided. It was a temptation for would-be know-it-alls: "good & evil" = not the power to distinguish the two, but "everything." The lust for something humanity didn't have, viz. omniscience, overwhelmed gratitude, love, & duty (obedience).