

IS REVELATION A WORK-IN-PROGRESS?

An open letter to a complimenting-complaining reader of Thinksheet #2944--an admirable fellow who's missed none of "the movements" of his time & now, after decades of national leadership in liberal Protestantism, is pastoring a rural church & giving piano recitals in the classics.

Dear _____,

We've agreed on so much through the years that it's painful to me to have to reject your "yes" to the question that forms this Thinksheet's title. The question is of sufficient weight to merit wide consideration, wider than just a conversation between the two of us. Thus this open-letter Thinksheet.

1 In addition to being bilingual, you are bicommunical: you communicate with words (language) & sounds (music, which was your college major). While I'm a music lover, I'm not the music master you are; & it should surprise no one that, having also the leg of music, you do not take the leg of language as seriously as I do. No criticism of either of us here: we are two quite different birds in God's flock. And presumably each can learn from the other's leg: here, just now, I'm asking you to hear me out on language as the primary medium of revelation (including "the Word became flesh").

2 As you've known me to be liberal & in some ways even radical, you're puzzled by my "consistent and unwavering use of the concept '**biblical God**'....I do not believe there is a biblical God....God in no way is contained in or limited by the Bible or the human concepts presented therein." A few responses:

(1) The biblical (or canonical) God chooses to be **self-limiting**. By a profound mystery, he limits himself reflexively by creating us in his image (as children, made in their parents image, by their parents' will limit parents). He limits himself by self-revelation to a "peculiar" people, us the biblical folk, Jews & (by grafting & adoption) Christians, whom he calls to be "a light to the nations," to magnify-sanctify his name (to this extent, his reputation depending on us). He limits himself literarily to the sacred writings (the "canon") of this folk. He limits himself incarnationally by coming only once & only as a man, whom I call "the canonical Chirst" (Raymond Brown's "gospel Jesus" in contrast to the scholars' "historical Jesus" [made "in their image"] & the "actual Jesus" [data-unavailable]).

(2) I'm an anti-literalist **textualist**. Most mainline Protestant clergy are not textualists, i.e. cannot deal with the biblical texts because they weren't trained in the biblical languages (as most Protestant seminarians are today--most of the Protestant seminarians today are evangelical). You cannot have the respect for the Bible (i.e., the Hebrew-Aramaic-Greek texts) that I have because you can't read it, as I can't read the Brahms & Mozart you play in recital. Great music profoundly moves me: I hear it all but have little power to penetrate it. You are profoundly moved by "the human concepts" in the Bible but cannot hear the music, cannot enter the hall where its symphonies are played, cannot have the "music appreciation" (as it were) that I have. But, if you will, you can listen to the listener: you can, second-hand, so catch the biblical spirit that you would not find offensive the expression "the biblical God." Let me illustrate by reference to a Hebrew song (the Yigdal) I was reading earlier today (14th c., on "The Thirteen Principles" of Maimonides)--a summary of Jewish theology; I can read it as a textualist because its wording is biblical even though the song itself is extra-canonical).: (a) By meditation-prayer I more feel my way in the song than think my way in: great ideas not greatly felt have less than great influence on soul & society. (b) The great motivational idea at the heart of our biblical religion is "the sanctification of the Name," magnifying-sanctifying God's name (the beginning of Mother Mary's Magnificat, Jesus "Lord's Prayer," & the Yigdal). We may so live as to have no effect on the size of God's Name; we may, by unworthy living, make God's Name small--& great, by worthy living. (c) The Yigdal's 7th & 8th lines (GP tr., "Behold the eternal Lord, who reveals his greatness and sovereignty to every creature") say that God does what in the song's 1st word (Yigdal, "Make great") we are enjoined to do: we are workers together with God in making (by deed & word) his Name great. (d) Monotheism: though he has rivals, this (biblical) God

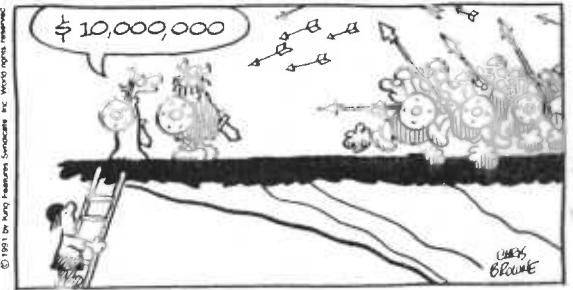
has no comparable & no domain-limits: his self-revelation is "to every creature." (e) What he reveals about himself is his greatness (majesty, etc.) & his sovereignty (rule, lit. "king-ship, -dom"; thus, in the Lord's Prayer, "your kingdom come"). To be a biblical person is to live "under God" (in hierarchal-patronal submission-obedience) with the conscious intention to improve (by deed & word) God's reputation, his "greatness" (for he is, under one aspect of his self-limitation, the psychosocial size we make him). (f) This God, the biblical God, the only God, "has not left himself without a witness in doing good--giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy" (Ac.14.17). His witness in history augments his witness in nature, but neither robs us of either the freedom to decide (for or against him) or the necessity to interpret P/TIE/P (persons-times-ideas-events-places) as to (aa) his presence/absence & (bb) his purpose. (g) In this Yigdal couplet, the vb. to "reveal" is the root of the noun "Torah": the Torah is God's teaching-revelation. The vb.'s secondary meaning is to "instruct"; it's primary meaning is to "shoot" (as an arrow, or a raindrop) & to "throw down" (as a foundation). Think how these funded metaphors can enrich devotion, deepen worship, stimulate imagination: when it rains, we think of God's shooting us with living arrows of life & wisdom; when we see a new building-foundation, we think of God's truth (in Hebrew, a noun related to the noun for "foundation") as fundamental (a "fundament" being a foundation) to our life & hope. And always God's Torah, written on parchment/paper & on the heart, intends our good & guidance.

(3) As you can see, \$10 million would not be too much for Hagar to pay for that ladder.

When I saw this cartoon, I immediately thought of the Bible, which in my teens was for me the salvific tactile object (& so I took to teaching myself to read it in Greek). Would Hagar's ladder have set you to thinking about the Bible? I doubt it.

I'm not judging you, but--is it not so?--the Bible has for you less weight than it has for me (else "the biblical God" would not seem to you an idolatrous [bibliolatrous] expression).

HAGAR THE HORRIBLE



by Dik Browne

3 You say you are "further disturbed by the assertion in your ¶6 of Thinksheet #2944 that Divine **revelation** **ceased* with the coming of the Bible. The God I read about in the Bible continues to be revealed, continues to 'create all things new'." That ¶ distinguished between revelation (which culminates in God's self-appearance, the Incarnation)--the high, technical-biblical use of "revelation"--& inspiration (for which one may use, in its low-ordinary sense, "revelation"). I wonder what instances of "revelation," as you use the word, you would adduce: Islam? Mormonism? The feminist emasculation of the biblical God? Pluralists-relativists-multiculturalists (theoretically) have no closure on "revelation"--as though Pastor Robinson, in saying goodbye to those of his congregation who sailed on the Mayflower in 1620, had said (as he's so often bowdlerized by UCC propaganda) "God hath yet more light & truth to break forth" (eliding this end of his sentence: *from his holy Word*). As in the quoted couplet from the Yigdal & in Ro.1, God has light & truth to break forth from nature; but he makes himself known as "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and our Father" (as the original UCC Statement of Faith has it) only in & through what Pastor Robinson rightly called "his holy Word," the Bible, Scripture as the source & criterion of "light & truth" as illumined by (in the Reformed phrase) "the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit" & by the Great Tradition of which Scripture itself is a product.

4 Yes, "language **changes** constantly," but (I must add) insignificantly. Some changes are to be accepted, some resisted (e.g., I resist the corruption of

the word "gay" to represent the saddest sector of any general populace). Language is a work-in-process but not necessarily a work-in-progress (e.g., is American English "progress" over Shakespeare's?). In the same vein, my answer to this Thinksheet's title-question is no: revelation is a work-in-process, but not a work-in-progress. "Progressive revelation" is a traditional theological phrase for (1) God's self-**disclosure** from creation through incarnation and, secondarily, (2) doctrinal **development** (in Roman Catholic teaching [according to Edward Wm. Clark in his FIVE GREAT CATHOLIC IDEAS, Crossroad/98], the 5th: "Great ideas develop over time"--interested in the other 4? "We are saved in community." "The kingdom of heaven begins on earth." "God respects our human freedom." "Scriptural interpretation is a work of the whole church"; see also J. Pelikan's 5-vol. work on the history of doctrinal development).

5 Disclosure, development, & **discovery**: God's given us heuristic, exploration-hungry, discovery-thirsty, problem-solving minds. In this derivative sense, everything we ever find is "revelation" at both ends of the Easter-egg hunt: hunter & hunted have the same Source (including the current expression "intelligent design")....But all these extensions of "revelation" weaken the **unique-ness** and power and glory of "revelation" in the lexicon of the Christian language. (Yes, there is a Christian language; & yes, there is a Christian lexicon with definitions more clear-cut than many know or want to think; and yes, many "interested" parties through the centuries have used the Christian lexicon [word-list] in disregard of its words' semantic range/depths/limits; & yes, some of us feel called to confront violaters of those limits, as in this letter-Thinksheet I'm confronting you for your expansive use of "revelation.")

6 Can the gospel be expressed & transmitted "in other words" than those of the Christian lexicon? Not if the "other words" are substitutes for these words, the Christian lexicon; but from culture to culture the gospel cannot even be understood, much less expressed & transmitted, without synonyms (& other like bridging words). You yourself, in your letter, worry that substance will be lost if the gospel's mother-speech, the Christian lexicon, is suppressed--as, e.g., it is in THE NEW CENTURY HYMNAL, which has a bowdlerized substitute for the UCC Statement of Faith but not the Statement itself. (As you say, "a bad hymnal created by a well meaning committee," in which "substance is often sacrificed for inclusive purists.")....So now I've noted two threats to the Christian lexicon, both endangering the Faith's identity: (1) Word-**dilution**, as in your expanding the meaning of "revelation" beyond the Christian lexicon; (2) Word-**suppression** by replacement with substitutes (or, in the case of the Christian lexicon's pronouns for God, elimination).

7 Where the Christian lexicon is taken seriously & engendered, Christians are **articulate** about the Faith. (A bad-sad joke on us Congregationalists: How are we unlike door-to-door salesmen? When we knock & the door opens, we have nothing to say.) Confident in their lexicon, the early Christians outwitnessed & outdebated the competition; 'round the world, lexicon-confident Christians are having the same success today. If we want to walk the walk straight, we must learn to talk the talk straight.

8 As you know "**radical**" is an adjective from the Latin word for "roots": I have been, & am, a linguistic radical (more than I've been radical in any other sense). Words grow out of roots & are themselves the roots of sentences, which are the roots of all discursive thought/speaking/writing. Concepts & institutions are in continuous need of renewal by returning to their roots. E.g., what was "the original intent" of the contents of the U.S. Constitution which has undergone hermeneutics for two centuries, & of the Bible which has undergone hermeneutics for 10x that long (the main question J. Pelikan discoursed on recently in comparing the interpretive histories of the two documents)? The original intent may not be the steeple or even the roof, but (if we're to be intelligent & honest) it must be (like the Christian lexicon) the foundation.

9 In §4, I said language changes "insignificantly." Chaucer's English of

six centuries ago is basically the same syntactically (structurally) & lexically (in word-meanings), though it's superficially different enough to be a hard read for us & is significantly different from American English today if we choose to look at what makes it a hard read. In this light, you overstate: "Language needs to enhance our understanding of God; and since language changes constantly, we have to be in tune with the idea that verbal concepts which once were adequate to communicate our understanding of God and Divine revelation may *not* be adequate as word meanings change or as human understanding of God grows and evolves, perhaps even as a result of God's new and on-going revelation and creation as affirmed in the scriptures themselves." I see the Christian language as the skin of the Faith, you see it as only clothing to be changed as situations change. For you, the Christian language does not control "our understanding of God" but the reverse as the past's "verbal concepts" become inadequate "to communicate our understanding of God" which "grows and evolves." Nothing there to prevent this "evolution" from producing the Goddess & (as I've said so often [e.g., 61-65 of HOW SHALL WE SING THE LORD'S SONG?]) **"a new religion."**

"The theology of the Word must not be distorted into a theology of talk." That caution against a cavalier treatment of the Christian language appears in my diary of $\frac{1}{2}$ century ago today (4.2.49). It was said by Paul Tillich as I "sat on a rug a yard from him." His theology of correlation put some strains on the Christian language, but he faithfully constantly referred his thinking/speaking/writing back to the Christian lexicon.

10 What we Christians need, in the word-wars (logamachies), is a **generous narrow-mindedness**.^{*} I'm generous enough toward the other religions to have taught them at the U. of Hawaii, & I'm a defender of the classical-canonical wording of the gospel. We'll be dealing with this during Craigville Theological Colloquy XVI (July 12-16), *How Shall We Understand Jesus as Savior Now?* Come, & we'll converse further!

* What Hans Frei called a "generous orthodoxy."

