

Bible Study, the DISTANCE factor in

To the neophyte, seriously approaching it for the first time, the Bible is "a strange new world" DISTANT from us in space/time & culture (languages, ideas, mores). The degree of seriousness, + the degree of opportunity, will determine to what extent our student of the Bible will CLOSE THE DISTANCE--the ideal being the ability to move back into that world while remaining in one's own (i.e., while avoiding archaism, getting lost back there ["modernism" meaning getting lost here, in one's own world]).

Here's an analogy I'd not thought of till this moment. In London's Tate Museum I saw an oil portrait so flattened, when viewed at 90°, that the king's head looks like little more than a blur. But when I looked into a scope set at ca.5°, the king looked normal! At 90° his head was a narrow ellipse; at 5°, a "natural" near-circle.

An ellipse has two foci--let's name them "then" (the Bible's world) & "now" (our world). Our neophyte Bible-student is shocked when first seeing/feeling the distances (as I was shocked when viewing the portrait at 90°)--shocked because the assumption that the Bible could be read as a modern book (a product of our world) has been shattered. (Most of the *misreading* of the Bible arises from that false assumption.) But as our neophyte advances in biblical understanding, the angle is slowly reduced from 90°, every degree of reduction representing a degree of clarification/understanding--the ideal being to be able to see the two worlds, as it were, in line.

Another optical analysis: Our neophyte is severely crosseyed, seeing the two words independently. Biblical competence is the achievement of binocular vision. A TACTILE EXPERIENCE of "the distance factor": In a Bible group, I pass around a certain stone & ask "What do you see?" Everybody see what I saw when I got the flat slate long ago where the creek enters Guilford Lake (G., central NYState): fossils, nothing more. But when the editor of the American Journal of Geology (who was staying overnight in our home some years ago) saw it in our greenhouse & examined it closely, he got all excited & said "Where did you get this?" I said "You tell me." And he did! He said it was from about 400 miles west of Cape Cod, & he added how old it was. With rocks in his head, he was able to CLOSE THE DISTANCES in space/time & culture. (The rock's fossils include both freshwater & salt, so it was near the shore when the Atlantic Ocean covered the eastern United States as far as central NY. [Our Cape Cod home is near the Centerville River, which is seawater when tide's in & fresh when tide's out: just the condition that produced our rock, by the same ocean.]) The rock scholar could see down into the rock: the Bible scholar can see down into the Bible--& get excited! Serious Bible-study is exciting! And you needn't be a professional to get into the wonder of it!

1 Distance is **multidimensional**: up (heaven, progress, achievement), down (hell, regress, failure), back (into the past "then"), forward (into the future "then"). Applicable to all the dimensions is the *degree* factor: short/long. E.g., depth: only a little interest in the Bible correlates with a (short) shallow, superficial grasp of it; great interest correlates with a (long) deep, profound understanding (whether or not one has achieved intellectual proficiency in exegesis/exposition). Additional dimensions are near (e.g., "within whispering distance") & far (e.g., "within shouting distance"). (As you think about each of these dimensions, you can better understand Einstein's "space-time continuum," that time & space are two ways of looking at the same reality.) Now think: can you recall biblical phrases/sentences containing dimension-words (e.g., "...but your heart is FAR from me")? This leads to...

2 ...a snatch of QUESTIONS: (1) In what ways is the Bible distant from our culture, the way we live? (2) How near-to (knowledgeable of) / far-from (ignorant of) the Bible am I? (3) Among books, how near-to/far-from God is the Bible? (4) How near-to/far-from God am I / are we? (4) How serious (shallow/deep) is my church about the Bible (in worship, study, life)?

3 "Tiefenbibelstudien"--depth Bible-studies--are motivated both by the Sehnsucht (soul-longing for God) & by the desire to "return to the sources" in our "Age of Diminished Christianity" (Episcopal scholar R.R.Reno in his IN THE RUINS OF THE CHURCH: Sustaining Faith in an Age of Diminished Christianity [Brazos/03]--

reviewed in June/July/03 FT by C.L.Rigby). We who hope for the revival/renewal of the Faith must "draw ever closer [my underlining] to the words," which are "the indispensable concrete form of our fellowship with each other, with God, and in God." While we should caution ourselves against the archaist temptation in preservationist Anglicans like Reno, even more should we beware of the modernist temptation to slight our primordial Hebrew/Aramaic/Greek/Latin words, the foundational sounds of the Faith. When we are closer to these words, we are deeper in the Faith & more distant from "changing our minds about what we believe because someone has told us something different or because someone has cleverly lied to us and made the lie sound like the truth" (Eph.4.14 NLT), "unsettled as a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind" (Jas.1.6 NLT).

Barnard College's Randall Balmer, bemoaning the mainline transformation of the Faith into social causes, recently said that Father, Son, & Spirit are now justice, peace, & inclusiveness. In the UCC, the Confessing Christ movement says yes to both: the choice of old or new is false (Mt.13.52).

The options are to teach the old words/ideas/feelings as foundational or to use current language "understandable of the people." It was faced recently by a friend of mine who said grace at the banquet of 600 Yale golden-age alumni (class of '53). When I congratulated him on being chosen, he said "Of our class of 1,100, only two other guys were clergy." (Bill Buckley, whose first book was GOD AND MAN AT YALE, was a fellow-student of my friend.) (Things could be worse, I said; indeed things were worse: in 1800, not one Yalee was a professing Christian.)

ANOMALY: While some of us (including me) are at work to decrease the distance between us & Bible language, others (radfems, language police, political correctors) are counteractive, trying to (in effect) increase the distance by banning generic nouns (e.g., "man," "mankind") & pronouns ("he," "his," "him"). Did you know that millions of tax \$ have been / are being spent in American state-houses to rewrite official documents, even constitutions, to conform to this ban? And did you know that publishers have come out with two whole Bibles thus bowdlerized (one including, the other not, the pronouns for God)? The ban's motive is justice understood as gender equality; the cost is the public's increasing alienation from Scripture &--worse--the biblical God. I am deeply puzzled, even distressed, as to why some of my friends do not consider the cost too high (& are, I believe, insufficiently critical of the justice/equality goal).

4 DISTANCE (transcendence) is not all bad, CLOSENESS (immanence) is not all good. God redesigned as unconditional Friend (in contrast to Whitehead's Void to Enemy to Friend, & to Kierkegaard's "infinite qualitative distinction," & to the biblical balance of promises/threats//rewards/punishments) was anticipated 44 years ago by H.Rich.Niebuhr in his THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN AMERICA (the most famous quote from which is on p193: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.") Of Americans, 95% say they believe in God, 25% are in church/synagogue worship weekly: who/what do the "unchurched" worship? (And the "churched"?)

5 The Bible, as we close the distance between it & ourselves, can help us DISTANCE ourselves from whatever distances us from God. Did you know that almost everything on earth is going right? Why is that a shocking thought? Because we've insufficiently distanced ourselves from journalists--for whom no news is bad news, good news is dull news, bad news makes good copy, & spinning (lying) increases (for journalists) the value of bad news, which is best (for journalists) when it feeds fear & anger, worst when it nourishes faith & hope. (NOTE: From this point of view, the Bible, which majors in faith & hope, is the worst news.)

6 What the Bible MEANS (now) is continuous with what the Bible MEANT (then, for its first hearers/readers): don't exaggerate the DISTANCE. Before beginning the public reading of Scripture, the lector says "Let us listen for [not "to"] the Word of God": the God who "spoke" (Heb.1.1,2, two aorists: past punctiliar) continues to breathe through what he spoke: "God breathes his Spirit-breath through all Scripture" (as if through a flute; my outing of the metaphor in 2Tim.3.16).^{*} Never put a comma where God has put a period (as in the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ), nor (as Gracie Allen said) the reverse.