

"TOUCHED BY AN ANGEL": SEARCH BELOW, SPEECH ABOVE

$\frac{1}{2}$ of our species-- $2\frac{1}{2}$ billion human beings!--are said to have watched Princess Diana's funeral yesterday. "She was an angel to the hurting," some said; others, "A [secular] saint." This phenomenal event cries out for religious-theological interpretation. It wasn't even mentioned in the Sunday worship Loree & I visited this morning. I just had to say it to the preacher after the service: "What you said was true & good, but I'm sorry you didn't connect with what was in people's heads."

This brief series tries to connect with some questions I've been asked lately, questions I might sum by "What's all this angel stuff?" The supernatural, or something like it, is making a comeback--which always happens when people become bored with the natural, especially human nature "as we have known it."

The media--& I think, in the main, rightly--are said to be under the control of a secularistic (anti-religious) elite whose modes of understanding do not transcend public-school atheism. No wonder the television producers' surprise when the "Touched by an Angel" series, a sort of supernatural soap, hit the fan. I watched a few episodes to see what the excitement was about. The paradigm is familiar from the Greek tragedians & the Bible: (1) You get yourself into a bind; (2) You can't unbind yourself; (3) You become unbound by a presence & a "wisdom from above" (Jas.3.13-18). (Literati call this pattern *deus ex machina*, the human trammels loosed by a deity descending by machine from above the stage.)

In the series, the descending (arriving-in-the-nick-of-time) deity is not a god but a goddess, a middle-aged African-American, an archangel with angel assistants. She does nothing to dent the unfortunates' self-esteem or autonomy. Her salvific influence is strictly only sapiential: she "saves" by suggesting something the unfortunates' haven't thought of--which by thinking of & acting on they can save themselves, with (unlike the Bible) no continuing relationship with the savior(ess).

Also unlike the Bible, in all this contemporary pop angelology, is the primary **focus** of attention & **locus** of action. The Bible focuses our attention on God, Creator-Savior(Redeemer)-Sanctifier-Consummator: the TV series is deistic at best, God being the absentee sender of the angels (a Gk. wd. meaning "messenger"): the TV focus is not theocentric but angelo- & anthro-po-centric. Again, the primary locus in the Bible is heaven, God's home, from which he sends messenger-angels: in the few segments I saw, there were no adversions to heaven or the divine initiative....But enough on "Touched by an Angel" except to observe that its question/answer **correlation** is biblical. As I've put it in this Thinksheet's subtitle, "search below [as we do in wonder & perplexity], speech above [God, sometimes through angels, "speaks to our condition," to use an old Quaker phrase; in the NT, the angels are largely replaced by Jesus--eg, Heb.1--& by the Holy Spirit--best seen in Acts]."

Whoops, I must add one more thing: "Touched by an Angel" has a savior(ess) but no lord (again, no continuing divine-human communion). Which is the greater **insult** to human autonomy, the I-can-do-it-myself Enlightenment doctrine--Savior or Lord? In that worship this morning, for the Confession of Faith we use a bowdlerized version of the UCC Statement of Faith, which has the phrase "our crucified and risen Lord": "Lord" was changed to "Savior." You have no dignity left if you need the Savior: you're a miserable, helpless, hopeless creature (as the Bible says you are--eg, Ro.3.9). But if you acknowledge that you are under the Lord, you have the dignity of servant-status, helpful to your lord. Savior implies disability: Lord implies ability. Why, then, the substitution of the undignified for the dignified? Because the bowdlerizers considered that the gender of "Lord" is a greater insult to women than the ungendered "Savior." O Lord, who will deliver us from this silliness? Do you see that in the present gender-relations atmosphere, "Touched by an Angel" must have a savior(ess)-angel, not a savior(ess)-angel (though all the Bible's angels with identified gender are masculine)?

September 14: "'Heaven's Gate' and the gate of heaven"

Who wasn't fascinated by the weird goings-on of those 39 who "beamed themselves up" (by suicide) to a putative spaceship behind the Hale-Bopp comet? Let's do some

"heartwork" on "gate":

1 The Presbyterian PK (preacher's kid) & former church-choir director who started & named the cult "Heaven's Gate" almost certainly picked up the metaphor from Jacob (Gn.28.17: [Heb.] *sha'r hashamayim*, lit., "gate [to] the above-world" or "the heavens" or "heaven"--created, acc. to Gn.1.1, before "the below-world" or "earth"). In that vs., "gate" is anarthrous (ie, not "the gate"), suggesting that what follows is construct (ie, adjectival): voilá, "heaven's gate" (though I've never come across that in any version/translation).

2 Gate, not door: Heb. has a different wd. for door. What's the difference? You could have a door to a broomcloset, but not a gate! Why not? Because (as Webster's DICT. OF SYNONYMS says) doors may lead to a smaller or greater area, gates only to the latter. When in the building of our house I bought 11 pairs of gate hinges, the hardwareman said "You must have a huge farm!" (I explained that we made the doors & they were too heavy for house-door hinges.)....By dream-vision, Jacob (as we now say) "accessed" the above-world, with the LORD at the ladder-top & angels using the ladder as a two-way street. Jacob became aware of the higher-wider world, the stupendous space on the other side of heaven's gate. And the Heaven's Gaters believed that that higher-wider world could be "accessed" by cultic mass suicide, a weird-sick belief that had at least the virtue of shocking flatlanders (not flat-earth-ers, but believers that for us, earth is all there is or ever will be) into at least a momentary thought about possibilities of More Than, Beyond. Which is, is it not, the first interior effect of trying to take "Jacob's ladder" seriously?....Now notice that all the stage-furnishings are a dramaturgic set-up for a speech (vv.13-16, God's "speech above," the last two words of this Thinksheet's title), a familiar biblical parabola: heaven acts, we notice, heaven speaks, we listen & disobey, heaven suffers our disobedience (the Cross) to redeem us (lit., "buy us back").

3 Both Hebrew & Greek, in addition to separate words for gate & door, have each a word covering both, both words well translated by opening (Quaker metaphor. use, revelation-inspiration-guidance from above, as after Jesus' baptism "the heavens opened" [Mt.3.16; L.3.21, "the heaven"; M.1.10, "the heavens splitting [open]"--for the descent of "God's spirit" [Mt.], "the spirit" [M.], "the holy spirit" [L.]; "opportunities" is another metaphor. use, as "job openings": cp. Paul's opening to preach in Macedonia after "the spirit of Jesus didn't allow" him into Bithynia--as it were closing that door, but by "vision" opening the other [Ac.16.7-10; 1Cor.16.9, 2Cor.2.12]).

Twice today Loree & I encountered openings. In our Gospel reading, Jesus (using an Aram. wd. having that Sem. root "to open") commands the ears & tongue of a deaf mute to "Open up!" or "Be open!" Early this morning we were at a Habitat for Humanity site where Loree led worship for an all-women volunteer building crew. The building had not yet any doors or windows, but only openings. She had with her slide-copies I'd made of the first Habitat houses (1973, Zaire)--the first of now 60,000. (That year & the next, she showed the slides in churches to raise funds for the project. The year before, she & I were in the home of the founders, Millard & Linda Fuller, the four of us on our knees seeking God's opening for the next stage of the Fullers' life together.) Those slides show housing construction with no doors or windows, only openings in anticipation of both.

After the letters to the seven churches, the 1st vision in the Revelation of John is this (4.1 NRSV): "I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open!" Immediately following the vision comes the audition: "Come up here...." Since heaven is a wider field than earth, we would expect the Gk. wd. for "gate" but get the Gk. wd. for "door." The explanation: the only other uses of Gk. for "door" in Rev. are in the immediately previous chapter, whose "door" meanings carry over into 4.1. Further, Jesus' "I am the door" (Jn.10.7,9; vv.1,2,7 use Gk. for "door" of a sheepfold, where we'd expect Gk. for "gate": in early Christian literature, rich reverberations of "door" often include the expansive meaning of "gate")....Sometimes "heaven opened" is for vision only: eg, Rev.19.11. The opening is sometimes for **entrance**, sometimes revelation without ascent. 7x in Rev., 3x in the OT, the point is that heaven-events determine earth-events. Consider also **entranceway** & **passageway**: a door may prevent passage, so Jesus' saying "I am the passageway" is unambiguous.

4 Heaven is always open for **prayer**. Thus the Reform Jewish prayerbook "Sha'aré Tephilah" (GATES OF PRAYER, so named--he told me--because of editor Chaim Stern's boyhood experience of a Brooklyn rebbe reputed to be, personally, a heaven's gate).