

GOD GIVES THE MILK BUT NOT THE PAIL:

THE PROVIDENTIAL RECIPROCITY OF GRACE AND WORKS === ELLIOTT #1926

Recently (Feb/85) I've been dropping here and there this homely old proverb, which seldom fails to draw a chuckle and a light of recognition in the eye. It's like the old preacher saw: "What a beautiful garden God has given you!" "You should have seen it when God had it alone."...This thinksheet is about doing theology (i.e., faith-thinking) on the divide between (1) what's handed us and (2) what we hand back--with, here, emphasis on the curious ambiguity of (1)--which carries over, as curious ambiguity, into (2). This intellectual exploration has a moral parallel: our speculations and preachments as to "what God is doing" vis-a-vis what we should do should have a tentative positive quality. Faith, hope, and love all teach us heurism, perpetual openness to "new light" (which Jn. Robinson spoke of not far time-distant from Oliver Cromwell's famous question to Parliament: "Think thee, by the bowels of Christ, that thou mayest be wrong."). But the triadic Christian virtues teach us also courage, the courage to proclaim and live at each moment the truth as we see/feel it.... My text for this meditation is Acts 13:13-41, Paul's first recorded synagogue sermon in Asia Minor (after which he was invited to preach again the following Sabbath).

1. While we now feel it necessary to clean up God's act in "the birth of the nation" Israel, "Paul" (in quotes, because we speak here of Luke's Paul: ancient historians composed speeches for their characters, and we've no way of knowing how much of the Acts speeches rests on verbatim or near-verbatim accounts) did not. Learned 1st-c. Jew that he was, he "received and passed on" uncriticized much of his Jewish heritage (the quotes here referring to 1Cor.15.3, his traditioning of the Christian heritage).

2. Though the ancients did not (Thucidides and, less so, Herodotus being the only exceptions), we distinguish between "text" (= history as story-shaped-for-survival-and-edification) and "history" (= historiography, the past written with the unreachable but approx- imable goal of recording "what really happened"). We further distinguish between community- or house-theology and critical theology --the former being what we say of God among ourselves as believers using our traditional internal logic, and what we say as thinkers responsible for representing in and to "the world" beyond the community who our God is and (since we are monotheists) who God is, "the Lord of heaven and earth" and history and hope.*

3. Paul's speech, in light of the above, is "community theology" on the basis of "text." As such, it has validity for, and should continue to be taught in, community. Paul saw an unbroken flow of "the mighty works of God" from Abraham through Jesus: Christians tend to break the continuity by questioning some of the pre-Jesus as-
sertions, as Jews break off at the point where Jesus appears (but are now discovering Judaism-honoring ways of not rejecting the Christian story)....Let's see now what the "text"-God does:.... chooses to make a people....brings them out of Egypt....puts up with (change one Greek letter and it means "nourishes," "nurtures") them in the wilderness...."destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan....and made his people the owners of the land. All of this took about 450 years."....gave them judges....gave them Saul to be king....removed Saul....made David their king....made Jesus, "a descendant of David," "the Savior of the people of Israel, as he had promised"....sent to Israel "this message of salvation".... raised Jesus from death. **THREE VIEWS:** Israel got Canaan by mili-
tary action, by infiltration, by largely internal Canaanite revolt.

*When thinking in-for the community, thinkers are called theologians: when thinking in-for the world, they are called philosophers. Sad: They sometimes get confused as to who-where they are.