

WINGS OF THE DOVE  
A MYSTERY IN HISTORY

Texts on Sunday, August 19, 2012

1 Kings 7 & 9 (sel); Acts 15: 1-21

**I**n THE INTRODUCTION to his biography of Abraham Lincoln, the historian Alan Guelzo reveals that Abraham Lincoln hated Thomas Jefferson. I confess, the evidence floored me. Knowing only how Jefferson's declaration that "all men are created equal" had inspired Lincoln's Gettysburg address, I'd supposed the men as close as pennies and nickels in my pocket.

President Jefferson left office one month after Lincoln was born, so his antipathy toward Jefferson was philosophical, not personal. Lincoln's political teeth were cut in the Illinois legislature, where he constantly battled for money to build canals and rail lines to support trade and industrial development. Improvements in infrastructure enabled poor white men such as he himself had been to leave what he thought of as the slavery of share-cropping and go to the city to accept a wage and develop themselves. In speeches as a young man, he defined slavery as "any relationship which forestalled social dynamism and economic mobility." (*Redeemer President*, p.9) The spirit of Jefferson, by contrast, praised the virtues of the yeoman farmer, dependent on no one. Its adherents resisted raising taxes to invest in the infrastructure which would promote industry. "In Jefferson," reports this biographer, "Lincoln saw a commitment to freedom in words but not in deeds, a champion of an agrarian order that concealed an elite class agenda." (*Redeemer President*, p.4)

Here is a puzzle to put together. The anti-tax Jeffersonians of Lincoln's day, who sought to hold on to the old order, assembled under the wing of the Democratic Party and ultimately became the core to the power of the American South. Those who longed for progress and transformation of the old order and who fought for government support of infrastructure projects gathered under the wing of the Republican party that would soon elect Lincoln as their first president. The historians of economics call the philosophy of Lincoln and the early Republicans "classical liberalism," while the Jeffersonian Democrats were the conservatives of that day. Got it? They fought hard. In fact, so intractable were their differences that the wings of that dove were severed. The conservatives held out for slavery, the classic liberals for industry, and they went to war. You know how that ended.

History never just plain repeats itself, but oh! how some pieces of its puzzles do look alike. Today, our political processes are again unable to move us together through our crises. Today's parties are really descended from those that bore their names in the 1850s, but their core values have shifted. Today, the nation's infrastructure is again an area of significant political and economic strife, and the parties cannot agree on ways forward. Our generation no longer invests the generous sums in infrastructure committed by our recent forebears. If you want facts, read the series of white papers called *Failure to Act*, published by the

American Society of Civil Engineers. Water resources, roads, bridges, public transport, shipping facilities, airports, power grids, school buildings, and even our postal system are deteriorating. Why, the nation acts like a bunch of church people whose big endowment once paid for all manner of services, but who, after the fall, grow tight with their money and grumpy with less service from the staff they cut, and yet who, uncertain about their identity and their purpose, have a very hard time deciding what is so essential to the future that it's worth the risk of borrowing to make the investments to get into the future. Unable to decide how to tax ourselves for infrastructure, we Americans are abandoning future generations to burdens heavier than any we now carry. That can-do attitude of a people once able to build an infrastructure that astounded the world is gone. And like all serious political crises, the underpinnings of this one have immense spiritual and ethical dimensions. And this crisis holds a mystery.

The future only began a little while ago. What you and I mean by the future—that plane of time through which a wise people should so act to improve conditions such that our great-great grandchildren might be able to have better lives not encumbered by war and privation—such a concept of the future did not exist in the minds of humans at all prior to the industrial age. The whole Bible was written with no sense of the future like ours at all.

Naturally Solomon imagined a great future for his dynasty, according to the books of the Kings. He taxed people and he built a city of beauty—using slaves, the story says—but neither he nor any who followed him believed the structures of power should change. No one ever conceived that poor farmers should be educated or lifted from their sorrows into a new level of power and authority in society. There was no society in our sense of the word! The divine promise they imagined vouchsafed to themselves was not to develop and transform themselves, but rather to rule in power *over others* until the Day of Judgment should come and cause the sun to cease from its courses and all time to roll up and stop forever before the one true LORD.

The stories of Jesus tell us he blessed the poor and the hungry and healed the sick, but they offer no sign that he meant his work to shake the foundations of unjust rulers. Rather, we see him teaching his followers inner disciplines to strengthen them against the humiliations and errors that destroy the inner quality of the lives of the poor. Why? Surely it was enough, then as now, to know thyself and to learn to love. These teachings at the core of the great spiritual traditions are true and deep and valuable beyond words, but they are not oriented toward changing society. As to what Jesus particularly taught, the gospel stories also show us his passion for the words of the prophets of Israel. We may therefore trust that like them, Jesus intended to prepare people in righteousness so that they might stand blameless before the judgment of God at the end of time—and avoid the wrath of destruction.

Certainly, Paul and all who wrote the New Testament, firmly and faithfully expected that Jesus would soon return on clouds descending for the last judgment. Time would stop, the mighty would be thrown from their thrones and the

lowly lifted up before their Maker—but not in history. In history, nothing new ever happened. As the Teacher puts it in *Ecclesiastes*, “There is nothing new under the sun: that which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is.” The future stood as a heavenly hope, and earth, for most, as a beastly burden of ordinary pleasures and pains, as men and women performed their ageless dance with necessity and war and famine, plague and quake.

According to the famous economist John Maynard Keynes, from “two thousand years before Jesus Christ down to the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there was no great change in the standard of living for the average person in the civilized centers of the earth.” Across four thousand years, that standard of living had at most doubled, according to Keynes’ calculation.

Then, in the year 1712, the future began. Thomas Newcomen, a Baptist elder who couldn’t make a living from his preaching, developed the first useful steam engine. Supplanting the power of a few hundred horses to drain water from the bottom of a coal mine in Dudley, England, Newcomen’s engine enabled much more coal to come up from the earth. Therefore more power came to homes and businesses. Jobs began to multiply. In a word, the standard of living improved and, to be a rather short-spoken about it, before long people began to think that this earth was a good place to live, with a future.

Certainly, the industrial age has imposed sharp costs on millions—billions?—but let a fact be a fact. The industrial age marked a new epoch in human experience. Into human minds and hands, it has placed responsibilities unlike any carried by people of prior ages. Improvements in the quality of life have multiplied so rapidly that now it is normal to believe that the human future matters; that society should change; that justice should be done on earth; and that the people of particular nations form a social reality, with real powers to ensure that their will be done, along with real accountability in time should they fail to design and adapt their society justly. What you and I mean by “hope for the future” only began a few generations ago. We are but infants in the pursuit of democratic well-being and human rights. Why, my great-great grandfather was born in the 1790s. Have compassion on yourselves in this hard work; as also on those fellow citizens not yet ready to shoulder responsibility to care for the future.

For Protestants in America, the mystery in our history goes very deep. The elite white men who formed this nation’s laws and economy around property rights were also largely in thrall to theories of divine predestination, turning on the ideas of God’s absolute sovereignty and its corollary, that human will is of no account whatsoever in causing the good things of God to come into history. Naturally, they assumed their theory to be necessitated by Scripture. I served a church in Buffalo founded in schism in 1835 by one of the old school predestinarians. Though his city stood as a beacon on the path of the underground railroad, from the pulpit in 1851 he delivered a sermon which brought him fame and power in conservative religious and Democratic circles across the land:

The existence of domestic Slavery was expressly allowed, sanctioned, and regulated by the Supreme Lawgiver in that divine economy which He gave the Hebrews . . . [Those who

hold that] slavery is necessarily sinful now . . . must assume that [they] are wiser and better men than the Savior himself and the Apostles, and that the government of God and the Gospel need revision . . . (Rev. John Lord, "The Higher Law," 1851)

Is this not astonishing and tragic, that a bright man's mind should be so enslaved to a belief in original sin, and so committed to a theory that the human will cannot unwork evils predestined by God, but only await heaven's resolution; that he would argue that chattel slavery, or any structures of power, whatever their injustices, are ordained by God and not to be challenged?

In the history of religion, as written by religious men, one rarely finds it said that the interpretation of God's word must change in order to accommodate the wisdom coming up in the people through changing times. This is a line that brightly divides conservative and liberal understanding. Yet change of this kind has come to the nations, time and again. And those who resist it completely reject the possibility that God is free to move God's word through the wisdom of the people. Moreover, they fail to account for the fact that the Bible itself gives warrants for making re-visions of God's word.

When Peter, Paul and Silas came before the elders in Jerusalem, appealing to them for liberty to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to Gentiles, without circumcision, think what burden lay upon those elders! In one hand, they had the law, the Torah; in the other, they had reports of lives of men and women made joyful and new, apart from any written law of God. And though we have seen today that those ancients did not know a meaning for the future as we now solemnly conceive it, nevertheless, against the hard law, they held out for human hope and joy. Thus, though the future was surely obscure to them, they flung open the door on a future for humanity so different and so unimaginable that it would take most of twenty centuries before the people of the nations would even start to understand their joined duties toward creation and the future.

Does the gospel needs revision? Yes, the gospel needs revision. Always. For to revise means to review—it's the same word. And to review is to re-see, which is to declare "I have new sight." "I once was blind, but now I see," as John Newman set it in the beloved hymn "Amazing Grace." To me, it seems that so many of the crises that terribly trouble Americans have this character, that the eyes of our people are bent groundward by fears of losing stuff they only think they have. Such anxiety fixes human eyes on present possessions—and, in an instant, we are blind. But those who trust in God are free to lift their eye to the horizon of hope, to the human future as we hope it—and like the elders in Jerusalem long ago, free to let go of what was, that God's new thing might be done. Now, even in a matter so plain as whether to tax ourselves in order to build for the future again, you can tell if your eyes are open and you are ready to say, "Now I see." It's a mystery in history. Amen.