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THE "WHY" OF SLEEPLESS NIGHTS

by ERIC F. F. BISHOP

MR. BISHOP'S Bible studies are always interesting, both because of his ready sympathy with the characters concerned in their actual situation and because of his facility in illustrating the sacred text from his long acquaintance with the Near East. We are glad to present another of these studies.

TWICE in 2 Corinthians St. Paul mentions wakeful experiences: first chronologically in the list of personal "trials"; later as one of the hall-marks that should commend the ministry.¹ In the first ἐν ἀγρυπνίαις is rendered "watchings" in A.V., R.V. and A.S.V., which in R.S.V. runs "through many a sleepless night" following Goodspeed, Moffatt and Weymouth. Knox varies to "so often been sleepless". Phillips seems more realistic with "long vigils", perhaps the idea behind the earlier versions, and in any case alluding to something more conscious and purposeful than attacks of insomnia, however induced. The N.E.B. too appears to have the implication of an experience arising out of determination—"often gone without sleep". In the "hall-marks" of the ministry the older versions maintain their consistency with R.S.V. having the singular. N.E.B., in common with Moffatt, Knox and Goodspeed, has "sleepless" and Weymouth the combination of "sleepless watching". Phillips paraphrases with "having to go without (food and) sleep". In the second case the translations seem generally weaker—and they should be stronger.

These two "Corinthian" occasions are the only ones where the N.T. has the noun; but the verb occurs in four contexts.² Here is a galaxy of variations in the newer translations—the older still preferring "watching"—with "wakeful", "(on the) alert", "tireless", "vigilant", "keep watch", "standing guard". The Arabic versions give the impression of being as consistent as the R.V., employing the root *s-h-r*, which the dictionary explains as meaning "to spend the night awake". The two Gospel contexts are eschatological. St. Paul would have the Ephesians match "putting on the whole armour" with keeping a "look-out". The Hebrews reference is

¹ 2 Cor. 11: 27; 6: 5. Does not *πολλάκις* in the first instance lend colour to the second reference—a repeated experience?

² Mark 13: 33; Luke 21: 36; Eph. 6: 18; Heb. 13: 17.

to leaders who "keep watch over your souls". These verbal uses all indicate some conscious purpose, though the use is metaphorical. In this "watching" connection it is worth noting that the village close by the "Fields of the Shepherds" is *Bait Sâhūr* (The House of Watching). These men had grown accustomed to staying awake in turn—in case of the wolf or the thief—though one night they had ~~an~~ experience they might have missed, had they not been awake! Some older Arabic versions have "in turn" in the text of Luke 2: 8, presumably to render "keeping the watches of the night". The same Arabic root is employed to translate all the occurrences of $\gamma\rho\eta\gamma\omega\sigma\epsilon\iota\nu$ in the N.T. These include the scene in Gethsemane. Older English versions are faithful to "watch" in Gospels, Epistles and Apocalypse.³ People are bidden to remain awake for an absorbing purpose.

There is a Palestinian institution, which other countries relish too, known as a *sahrah*. Sitting up at night to talk has been a popular feature in city or village; though sometimes in the case of the latter it might be round a bonfire in the open air.⁴ Would it not have been a *sahrah* with a very definite purpose that night at Troas, when there were many lights, and Eutychus fell out through the window, the apostle prolonging his sermon till midnight? He must surely have had many *sahrah's* in Corinth and elsewhere. He was sleepless because he used the watches of the night in his missionary career for talking about Messiah: with the Jews interested it was a reminder of what happened when they visited Jerusalem at feast times. It was a *sahrah* of another kind behind the prison doors at Philippi, an unexpected opportunity when they sang "hymns", like the Christians of Bithynia at a later date "before daylight", as Pliny told the Emperor.⁵ There have often been cases when "the real Christian has been made at midnight". Is it not more likely that $\alpha\gamma\rho\upsilon\pi\tau\omega\lambda\epsilon\iota\varsigma$ signifies a voluntary "sleeplessness", intimately connected with the missionary enterprise, while at the same time a familiar Near Eastern institution?⁶ The *sahrah* goes on well into

³ In the Gospels and Acts, 15 occurrences; eight in rest of N.T.

⁴ Might this not have been such an occasion when our Lord gave the Parable of the Pounds (Lk. 19: 11 ff.)?

⁵ Some Oriental Churches at Great Festivals have maintained their services through the night. According to tradition the *sahrah* for prayer was a custom in monasteries; hence the introduction of coffee as an aid to wakefulness!

⁶ Of the Commentaries on 2 Corinthians consulted that of Plummer (ICC, 1915, pp. 195, 328) supports the preferred interpretation. "The word covers more than sleeplessness; it includes all that prevents one from sleeping". He mentions "Troas"; "voluntary 'watchings' rather than involuntary insomnia". He compares Ecclus. 38: 26-30.

the early hours, whether with one companion or more usually in a group. The Apostle had two of the personal *sahrah's*, one ashore in Corinth and the other afloat before the great shipwreck. In these contexts too, if he had merely meant that there were nights when he could not go to sleep, would he not have used the singular? "What I say unto you, I say unto all, Watch". The *sahrah* was often the living expression of the Christian ministry. "Wherefore watch ye, remembering that by the space of three years, I ceased not to admonish everyone *night and day*". "Couldst thou not watch one hour?"

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