
The Watches of the Night

by Eric F. F. Bishop

We have been fortunate for several years now in being able to start a new annual volume with a brief meditation from Mr. Bishop, and we are glad to present the ninth in this welcome series. Last year, by a sad editorial lapse, his name suffered a serious textual corruption at the head of his contribution; we have taken special care this year to guard against a repetition.

SOME forty years ago, in the course of one of B. H. Streeter's seminars on the Synoptic Gospels, the discussion revolved around the closing verses of Mark 13. The brief parabolic ending closes with the words: "and commanded the porter to *watch*". (Thus most of the versions up to the NEB.) One of the senior members present suggested that the phrase constituted a sort of hidden reference to St. Peter's connexion with the author of the Second Gospel and was really an interpolation. Much to my surprised embarrassment, Streeter turned to me and said, "What does local colour say?" The obvious answer was that it was just the sort thing any householder, or headmaster, or manager would say to the *hawwāb* (θυρωρός) on going away for any period: *Dir* (in Egypt *khud*) *balak 'ala' l-bait*, "Turn your mind on the house; keep awake." In a job of this nature you must be content with snatches of sleep. "Watch and pray", Jesus was to say soon after to these same men. The point is that you should keep "an eye open" for any possibility.

"Watch" appears to have been a useful word to the majority of the translators of the N.T., apart from its being employed for *κουστωδία* in the AV of Matt. 27: 66. Otherwise it renders *τηρέω*, *φυλάσσω* and *γρηγορέω*, as in the Markan context (13: 37) where NEB has "stay awake". For *τηρέω* there is the emotional occurrence: "and sitting down they watched him there" (Matt. 27: 36). There is a similar use later on in the narrative (verse 54). The participle is also used for the "guards" at the tomb in the next chapter, and the infinitive is translated "to observe" in the Great Commission. In the Synoptic Gospels *τηρέω* seems to be confined to Matthew the rendering "observe" might suit all the occurrences.

There are fourteen occurrences of *γρηγορέω*, mostly eschatological, apart from those in the Gethsemane narrative. Here "stay awake" seems the right rendering. In Luke 12: 36 ff., after the wedding party (a somewhat similar scene to that in Mark 13), NEB renders "on the alert", as in the Pauline echo to the Ephesian elders on the sea shore at Miletus and to the Corinthians: though in the Colossian reference the apostle is almost half-way to the Gethsemane

episode—"with mind awake". In the last chapter of 1 Thessalonians the first instance is rendered "keep awake" as naturally befitting children of the day; but in the second case "awake" means "alive"—apparently the sole instance of this metaphor, unlike that of its counterpart "asleep". In 1 Peter the rendering of NEB is "alert", while the metaphorical use to the Church at Sardis is "Wake up". So too later on; "Happy is the man who stays awake". The nuance of γρηγορέω is some-what different from τηρέω. If the latter as "watch" is subjective, the former expresses a more personal attitude, which may or may not bring others into the picture as more objective than otherwise.

There is a further imperative in this short parable which, though usually translated "watch", is more penetrating in its implication; and which the NEB renders "be wakeful"—that is, "go without sleep if need be." It occurs again in Luke, where the NEB has "be on the alert". But this "sleeplessness" is a conscious endeavour, as with St. Paul in Ephesians: "keep watch". The word is usually employed in the context of prayer; intercessory prayer as in the close of Hebrews—"tireless in concern for you". This concept comes out clearly in the two occurrences of the noun ἀγρυπνία—both in 2 Corinthians, which might even in themselves strengthen the position of those scholars who hold to the composite nature of this most human document. In his "third letter" the "sleeplessness" is one of a string of dangers and indignities that had come his way in the course of his ministry. In the "fourth letter" ἀγρυπνία and other troubles are regarded not so much as proofs of apostleship as of affording the opportunity for its "exercise"; nor are the compensations unlisted. Christian ministry calls for doing without, not always but "often", as the apostle told his friends.

The Markan parable, however, has not yet exhausted its allusions to this general subject of "watching" with the reminder that you never know when the master of the house may appear—"evening or midnight, cockcrow or early dawn" (NEB). Here there seem to be the four "watches of the night". In the similar parable in Luke there is reference to two of these which the NEB renders "the middle of the night or before dawn"—the second or third φυλακή which is rare in this sense. The third such watch would be "cock-crowing". One of the Twelve had failed in the first and third "watches". But as he remembered, this may have helped in the detailed Markan analysis. The quartette too who were with Jesus on Olivet for that eschatological seminar always recollected that night out on the Lake following the Great Feeding when worn out with rowing up-wind He went up to them "about the fourth watch of the night". Can it be too that in John 1: 41 the reading of the pair of Old Latin MSS and the Sinaitic Syriac preserve an original πρωί—obviously a more reasonable way of talking than "the fourth watch"? This

oriental division of time was not properly appreciated, hence the reading $\pi\rho\omega\tau\omicron\nu$ which doesn't really make sense; while after the *sahra* with Jesus, lasting well into the dark hours, Andrew set off to find Peter and tell him of the great discovery. It was $\pi\rho\omega\tau$ too that Mary of Magdala and her name-sake went to the tomb—they set out in the hours of $\pi\rho\omega\tau$ before the sun was risen. Mark has $\pi\rho\omega\tau$ in the primal text like John but it occurs in the longer addition too. Christians in those tense and exciting days lived again through the fourth watch of the night. The actual occurrences of $\phi\upsilon\lambda\alpha\kappa\eta$ in the Gospels are a bare half-dozen, where (including parallels) it is translated “watch”—and not at all in the rest of the N.T., where the implication is restraint of some sort, prison the probable implication—unless the occurrences in 2 Corinthians might refer to “watchings” as opposed to sleeplessness. All the more remarkable accordingly is the familiar picture in the narrative of the Nativity: in a context where St. Luke seems to go out of his way to emphasize this meaning of “watch”, since it is the only place where the verb occurs in any form (participial). The very phrase feels like the rendering of an original Aramaic—these shepherds were naturally observing the customary “watches of the night”¹ and once more not at “midnight clear” but in the “roseate hues of early dawn”, towards the close of the fourth watch of the night they foregathered—their night work of looking after their sheep, penned in caves or out in the open—there was a chorus in confirmation of the previous message, echoing down their generations. Jesus was always making Himself known in the fourth watch of the night—even if not confined to that—from the cradle to the empty tomb.

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Arabic versions would support this as against the hymnological inaccuracies: Erpenius (1616) having “by turns”, while of the two nineteenth-century translations Van Dyck gives a literal rendering of the Greek, and the Jesuit version a more technical word for “watches”.