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Emily Dickinson's Early Religious Poems
On the Idea of Redemption

Yumiko S. Koizumi

It is widely known that Emily Dickinson makes full use of traditional religious meters and
metaphors in a way that undermines traditional religious attitudes and assumptions. In actuality,
Dickinson fluctuates between belief and skepticism throughout her work, yet her attitude toward
the basic idea of salvation seems to be consistent all through her life. Her poems written in the formative
years illustrate that she does struggle with finding a way to salvation, yet fails to perceive a method
of salvation. By examining her poems written in 1850s and early 1860s in the light of religious
influence, this paper will illuminate the poet’s struggle with regards to her inability to accept the
doctrine of salvation. Dickinson’s response to the basic ideas of Christianity, such as Original Sin,
Redemption, and Salvation, is recorded more precisely in her early poems. Dickinson tends to
write her poems as if she were almost persuaded by the teaching of the Gospels, but when it comes
to the issue of redemption, the poet almost always transmits her message in code. The purpose of
this paper is then to demonstrate how her true opinions concerning the idea of salvation is expressed
clearly once the Dickinson code is broken.

Redemption and salvation are a few exceptional theological terms to be discussed in
Dickinson’s letters. Redemption is more frequently used in the latter, being the only theological
term Dickinson tries to define by herself. There is good reason for Dickinson’s choice of the word
redemption. As Virginia Oliver in Apocalypse of Green mentions: “Dickinson does not spell out
her belief in the attainment of salvation in orthodox terms of repentance, reformation, and regeneration,
but rather in terms of sacrifice, renunciation, and creativity, on the basis of which she believes she
will be judged”.1 These three key words show how Dickinson views the concept of salvation stressing
above all the sacrificial aspect of redemption. Though Dickinson knew the process of salvation in
the orthodox Christian way very well, she preferred to follow the path to salvation by way of
creatively insisting: “Do not try to be saved - but let Redemption find you - ”(L 522).2

Dickinson’s frequent employment of business terms and commerce transactions stem from
the original meaning of redemption. Redemption means deliverance by payment of a price or ran-
som, hence, metaphorically, by any great cost or sacrifice. Redemption is not used in
Dickinson’s works in the general sense of the word deliverance, but rather with definite emphasis
on the idea of purchase. According to The Oxford Companion to the Bible, the most common situation
in which redemption arises in the Bible is “when property or persons have been confiscated to reconcile
a debt”.3 A redeemer is “one who pays the debt for the debtor, thus buying back what was
confiscated”. 4 The most dramatic moment of redemption in the New Testament comes at the time of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ on the cross. Dickinson dramatizes this historic scene and offers an alternative interpretation of redemption in some of her poems.

According to the New Testament, redemption is associated with Christ’s death on the cross because Christ interprets his death “as a ransom for many” (Mark 8:45). He views his coming death as a substitutive payment for those who live in bondage through sin and ensuing death. Christ’s blood was shed for all humans as the price paid for our liberation from sin and death. Dickinson comes back again and again to the very moment of Christ’s crucifixion in her poems questioning the validity of salvation. She challenges the theological givens of redemption and sheds new light on the reason why the detailed depiction of Christ’s crucifixion is erased in the New Testament.

The idea of redemption is clearly shown in many of Dickinson’s poems. “I never lost as much but twice” (P 49)5 is the best early poem which reveals Dickinson’s own idea about the traditional religious assumption:

I never lost as much but twice,
And that was in the sod.
Twice have I stood a beggar
Before the door of God!

Angels-twice descending
Reimbursed my store -
Burglar! Banker - Father!
I am poor once more!

The speaker is described as “a beggar” who begs God to reimburse her again and again in front of the door of God. As long as she is a beggar, she has to accept whatever is available with no power of choice. The repetition of the frequency “twice” emphasizes her third loss: “I am poor once more!” The last line is irregular because the two words “poor” and “more” although stressed are placed in weak positions. It strengthens the force of the meaning by clustering three accented syllables together, emphasizing poverty’s return.

The last line also suggests the eternal condition of being in debt as long as she remains human in her relation to God. Not knowing why she is placed in such a humiliating position with no possibility to complain, she cries out for reimbursement. The speaker owes money to “Burglar! Banker! Father!” and never escapes her misery. The poet’s triple use of exclamation marks intensifies the desperate condition under which she is forced to live.
The three identities given to God refer to the nature of divinity and reveal the culturally contrived accounts of divinity. God burglarizes her store and becomes a banker, and at the same time her “Father.” The dual nature of divinity, both merciful and merciless, is shown through the arrangement of three addresses to God. The speaker accuses the omnipotent of forcing man into the confines of a circumscribed self. God appears as a merchant dealing in commercial treaties with the speaker in other Dickinson poems. Dickinson talks about “faith” in terms of give - and - take of merchandise contracts on P 580 and names God as “this great Purchaser” who will never pay her back. In P 621, the speaker is forced to offer “Being” to “the Mighty Merchant.” Dickinson unmask the divinity and retells the story of redemption from her own point of view.

Dickinson seems to be saying that she has simply taken God at his word: “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you” (Matthew 7:7). According to the Bible, humans ask, God will give; not the other way around. But in fact, “what God gave, and what he will take” (L 30). Humans are forced into the position of “Beggars” who stand at God’s door and beg for their reimbursements. The speaker in the poem is keenly aware of the loss of her friends who were “snatched up to Heaven” by God’s “marauding hand.” For Dickinson, poverty signifies “the loss of friends and the longing for them” (L 180). She claims the irrationality of death and makes us face the human condition in which “we are hungry, and thirsty, sometimes - we are barefoot - and cold” (L 203). Dickinson accuses God of burglary: “Complacency! My Father! In such a world as this, when we must all stand barefoot before thy jasper doors!” (L 204). Her major complaint is that God may take back whatever he gives, therefore, she suffers from “this smart Misery” (P 376). If God beguiles her three times, his betrayal surely wounds her gravely. The price paid for the third time is exorbitant and destroys the balance between give - and - take.

In a letter of 1846, to Abiah Root, Dickinson refers to this God as stern or demanding:

Surely it is a fearful thing to live and a very fearful thing to die and give up our account to the supreme ruler for all our sinful deeds and thoughts upon this probationary term of existence. (L 11)

She often refers to the relationship between man and God in terms of business transactions. The messengers of God, “Angels descending” pay them back twice, but no promise of a third visit. If God does not come to rescue her in the very end, he might take everything away from her. Such payment also suggests that the price paid for this judgment was indeed exorbitant. God demands an exorbitant price, which she cannot possibly pay unless she were to pay the price with her own life. There seems to be no escape from this crushing debt.
The speaker of P 49 cannot reconcile a belief in God with the suffering of innocent people. Dickinson tries exceptionally hard to reconcile the two, but no avail. Roger Lundin in "Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief" stresses that Dickinson never accepted the connection between sin and death, by quoting from Romans 6:23: “The wages of sin is death.” 6 Refusing to accept the idea of Original Sin, she, therefore, rejects the possibility receiving death as “the wages of sin.”

“I never lost as much but twice,” is in many ways a pivotal poem when considering Dickinson’s idea of redemption. This poem dramatizes the irrationality of death after all. Among the issues discussed in the poem, the topic of death is singled out.

Dickinson openly questions the issue of redemption. Christ has obtained salvation for humans at the cost of great suffering. Christ’s redemptive death is examined in her poems, because it throws a spotlight on the irrationality of human suffering. Many critics have agreed that Jesus Christ is an important figure in Dickinson’s poems. He is the only divinity who has experienced the intense suffering on the cross. Although Dickinson writes about various phases in the life of Christ, the major focus in her formative years is on the passion of Christ demonstrating the Christian idea of redemption.

Dickinson expresses her sympathy with him only when “he confides to us that he is ‘acquainted with Grief,’ ” (L 837). She retells a mortal story of Jesus Christ who died on the cross by means of the betrayal of Judas. Furthermore, she supports that the fact that the divine became human shelters from the world. Dickinson’s attempt to present a human Christ is made deliberate based on her belief that “to be human is more than to be divine, for when Christ was divine, he was uncontented till he had been human” (L 519). Dickinson emphasizes that Christ was tested, as we too are fighting against temptations, yet Christ was without sin.

Dickinson associates with the human Christ and his experience of “Grief.” She describes various kinds of grief existing in this world in the following poem:

There’s Grief of Want - and Grief of Cold -
A sort they call “Despair”-
There’s Banishment from native Eyes -
In sight of Native Air - (P 561)

Though the speaker admits “There is the various cause -” for grief, “Death - is but one - and comes but once - / And only nails the eyes -.” The grief of dealing with death seems especially meaningful to Dickinson. A slight possibility of seeing “gain - thro’ loss / Through Grief - obtain - / The Beauty of Demand - at Rest - ” (P 968) could be found in the case of the special death of Jesus Christ on the cross.
Dickinson dramatizes the moment of human suffering on earth juxtaposed on the passion of Christ in P 193:

I shall know why - when Time is over -
And I have ceased to wonder why -
Christ will explain each separate anguish
In the fair schoolroom of the sky -

He will tell me what “Peter” promised -
And I - for wonder at his woe -
I shall forget the drop of Anguish
That scalds me now - that scalds me now!

At first reading, the poem appears to give the traditional Christian answer to the issue of human anguish on earth. The speaker seems to understand their explanation but the more she pretends to accept their religious justification narrated in the future tense, the more her anxiety is revealed. After reading this poem, the question arises and remains in the reader’s mind: “Will Christ explain each separate anguish?” The repetition of the word anguish puts an emphasis on the last two lines: “the drop of Anguish! / That scalds me now-that scalds me now!” A sharp discrepancy between the pain of the moment and the explanation to come is the key to understanding this poem. The topic of this poem is human suffering on earth and it questions the meaning of anguish. Vincent Anderson clarifies this: “the important point Dickinson is making is that suffering and ‘anguish’ are at the heart of her own and Christ’s experience, and the two are thus bound together; in looking at his experience, she understands her own”. “One crucifixion is recorded - only -,” Dickinson writes somewhere, and records the moment of Christ’s crucifix “in the Being’s Centre” in history. The poem ends with the suggestion of her own crucifix: “There’s newer-nearer Crucifixion / Than That - ” (P 553).

The speaker juxtaposes her anguish with that of the passion of Christ. Christ seems to be the only person she can ask the reasons for the meaning of “each separate anguish” if there are any, because He had suffered on the cross. She consoles herself by hoping that Christ will make it all clear in heaven. However, the speaker seems to have noticed that there is a contradiction in the traditional assertion by suggesting ironically that she will not need to know then; she will have ceased wondering in the sky. The repetition of the last line enforces her sense of dissatisfaction with the traditional explanation, intensifying the present reality of her pain. She simply cannot wait for Christ’s explanation in the near future, she longs for an immediate answer instantly or
“now.”

Dickinson’s opinion of the idea of redemption is clearly expressed in “I should have been too glad, I see -” (P 313):

I should have been too glad, I see -
Too lifted - for the scant degree
Of Life’s penurious Round -
My little Circuit would have shamed
This new Circumference-have blamed -
The homelier time behind.

I should have been too saved - I see -
Too rescued - Fear too dim to me
That I could spell the Prayer
I knew so perfect - yesterday -
That Scalding One - Sabacthini -
Recited fluent - here -

Earth would have been too much - I see -
And Heaven - not enough for me -
I should have had the Joy
Without the Fear - to justify -
The Palm - without the Calvary -
So Savior - Crucify -

Defeat whets Victory - they say -
The Reefs in old Gethsemane -
Endear the Shore beyond -
’Tis Beggars - Banquets best define -
’Tis Thirsting - vitalizes Wine -
Faith bleats to understand -

P 313 shows a possibility of being saved if the speaker would have made her confession. Dickinson doubts the theological givens of Christ’s suffering and final victory, and questions the validity of the passion of Christ as the salvation of mankind in the last stanza. Moreover, she focuses upon
the unforgettable fact that salvation has been obtained at the cost of the redeeming death of Christ. The Gospels tend to put a stress on the aspect of liberation from sin through Christ's death, while Dickinson's poem emphasizes the cost paid for salvation.

Although Virginia Oliver admits that Dickinson preferred to follow a path to salvation uniquely her own, the critic locates P 313 as one of representative poems which claims "the necessity to share in or emulate Christ’s suffering and the necessity to have ultimate victory enriched by pain and suffering". Oliver’s interpretation of the last stanza is problematic, because there is no clear evidence to support her argument in the poem. Oliver takes Dickinson’s adaptation of Christian paradoxes as it is: “Just as hunger sharpens appetite for food, and thirst, for wine, so also does the withholding of certainty of salvation make faith more firm”.

The last stanza consists of the series of Christian paradoxes: “Defeat whets Victory”; “’Tis Beggars - Banquet’s define - ”; “’Tis Parching - vitalizes Wine - .” These lists are what “they say” to justify Christ’s blood shed for all; “That Scalding One - Sabachthini - / Recited fluent - here -.” Dickinson sent the last stanza to Susan Dickinson in 1862. In the 1862 version, “Faith” is with quotation marks to convey her message that faith is not counted upon:

Defeat-whets Victory - they say - 
The Reefs - in old Gethsemane - 
Endear the Coast-beyond!
’Tis Beggars - Banquets - can define -
’Tis Parching - vitalizes Wine -
“Faith” bleats - to understand!

All the lists of Christian paradoxes, what people say, are undercut by the last line: “‘Faith’ bleats - to understand!” Dickinson’s choice of word in the verb, “bleats” or “faints” as a variant, tones down the earlier message when delivering the idea of redemption. It conveys the ineffectiveness of “Faith.” “Bleat” are the cries of a lost sheep, calling for the Good Sheperd. The voice of the little sheep reminds us of Christ’s tormented cry for God in the second stanza of the poem: “Sabachthini” (sic) meaning “Why hath God forsaken me?”

The first stanza and the following two stanzas are parallel in meaning. These semantic parallel stanzas provide both similarities and differences between the orthodox idea of redemption and that of Dickinson’s own.

On the surface, the speaker sounds self-confident. However, her casting of the three sentences in the very first line of each stanza as well as used the subjunctive mode tends to raise doubt from the very beginning. The point is that she acted in exactly the opposite manner: she was not glad;
she was not saved. The subjunctive mode reverses the supposed world into reality; the poem is written conditionally yet reveals her uppermost state of feelings.

The first stanza, although in subjunctive mode, simply delivers what people say. The three adjectives, “scant,” “penurious,” and “little” which describe earth are compared with heaven; the smallness of the circuit world is intensified by the greatness of “new Circumference.” The speaker feels that “Heaven is seeming greater, or Earth a great deal more small, or God is more ‘Our Father,’ and we feel our need increased” (L 35). Looking back to the past, Dickinson writes P 313 to suggest that she is aware that God makes Heaven more attractive by making this earthly life appear small, trifle, and painful. The sense of loss derived from the human condition transforms itself into the desire for heaven.

Dickinson ends the first stanza in an unusual way with a period as if she were distinguishing what they say and what she sees. She then moves to the second stanza in which the speaker confesses her ignorance of the significance of Prayer, probably Psalm 22. She is now conscious of her position as a “Pagan,” reflecting on the past when she recited “That Scalding One- Sabacthini” since she senses that it is “Fear too dim to me.” “Fear” has not perceived close at hand but far away from her consciousness. The speaker could utter the Prayer perfectly and fluently without experiencing fear. Now, however, she experiences fear whenever she reads the prayer, because she has grasped its true meaning.

“Sabacthini”(sic) is one of the last words uttered by Jesus Christ from the cross; it reads “why hast thou forsaken me?” The seven last sentences Christ uttered on the cross are: “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34); “Today shalt thou be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43); “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46); “Woman, behold thy son!” (John 19:26-27); “I thirst” (John 19:28) and “It is finished” (John 19:30). “Sabacthini”(sic) is probably the first word spoken by Christ from the cross. It has been interpreted not only as Christ’s cry of anguish but also his prayer for God’s grace.

P 313 is the only poem in which Dickinson quotes the phrase “Sabacthini”(sic) although I have referred to P 193 which uses the associated verb “scalds” twice. Christ’s direct speech to God is so powerful that it intensifies his great suffering. The poet associates the human Christ with earthly suffering like all of us. Dickinson’s deliberate employment of the most moving biblical quotation reveals her focus upon Christ’s agony rather than on joy; on the human Christ rather than divinity; on earthly experience in lieu of the supposed heaven. It is the mortal story of Christ which climaxes in the crucifixion on the cross. Dickinson tends to dwell on the death of Christ, ignoring his glorious moment of resurrection. The image of such a Christ is developed in the next stanza: “The Palm - without the Calvary - / So Savior - Crucify -.” The associated concrete images function effectively to remind us of the very real story of “the Calvary,” where
Jesus was crucified.

Unexpectedly, the third stanza begins with “Earth,” and not the pronoun “I” in parallel with “Heaven” in the following line. The change of the auxiliary verb from “should” to “would” signals a subtle difference from the first stanza concerned with the stance of the speaker towards “Earth.” “Too much” Earth and “not enough” Heaven are thus aptly contrasted; it is obvious that the poet places a great emphasis on “Earth.” In her letters, Dickinson often mentions that “I feel that the world holds a predominant place in my affections” (L 13). “The world has been too precious for your poor-and striving sister!” is one of the reasons given for not converting to Christianity. Dickinson later writes further in a more abstract reference as follows: “The Charms of the Heaven in the bush are superceded I fear, by the Heaven in the hand, occasionally” (L 193).

When reading the first three stanzas, what is disturbing is Dickinson’s frequent use of the adverb “too” with a negative connotation, followed by the self - assuring phrase, “I see” contrasted with “they say” in the last stanza. Without paying attention to the great price paid by Christ, Dickinson writes, “I should have been too glad - I see - .” Christ’s death and resurrection were a means to salvation, humans are free from all sin’s evils. The speaker seems to have a positive viewpoint of redemption; the liberation from guilt, sin in every form, and ultimately from death itself. Gradually, however, the poem is drawn to “the Fear” rather than to “the Joy.” The first 18 lines insist that she cannot forget “That Scalding One - Sabachthini - ;” the scalding anguish Christ has experienced on the cross; “the Fear” of death rather than “the Joy” of resurrection; and “the Calvary” rather than his glory.

According to Webster’s Dictionary, the word “justify” means “to judge, regard, or treat as righteous, worthy of salvation, or as freed from the future penalty of sin.”

God justifies with his grace he who comes to him. “Justify” rhymes perfectly with “Crucify” in the third stanza. God’s justification and Christ’s crucifixion are inseparable, two sides of the same coin. The Crucifixion is required to be justified by God.

The speaker does not know whether what they say is true or not. Dickinson makes a list of Christian paradoxes about what they say without any intention of gaining approval or disapproval. According to the teaching of the Gospels, it seems that there could be no real joy without fear, no important victory without defeat, no eternal resurrection without crucifixion. Perhaps, after surviving Gethsemane’s reefs could she come to a shore whose “new Circumference” would appear. She is not sure, however, whether we can survive “the Calvary” or not.

Dickinson endeavors to break the Christian formula by interpreting each religious phrase differently from the traditional reading. Dickinson writes in the third stanza:

I should have had the Joy
Without the Fear - to justify -
The Palm - without the Calvary -
So Savior - Crucify -

The position of each noun would surely be reversed in the real world: “the Calvary” without “the Palm”; “Defeat” without “Victory”; “the Fear” without “the Joy.” The second “Fear” is to allude to the one special death of Jesus Christ juxtaposed upon our own fear of death.

Dickinson jokingly writes almost the same aphoristic phrase though in opposite meaning in one of her early letters: “No loss without a gain” (L 31). She questions the Christian assumption that loss is gain by reversing the nouns. The underlying message lies behind this phrase: “No gain without a loss.” The emphasis is on “a loss” not “gain,” because “a loss” is a prerequisite for success. The Christian paradox suggests no resurrection without crucifixion; no victory without defeat; no gain without loss; no joy without fear. By means of Christ’s redemptive death, we are supposed to be liberated from all sins and evil. Shira Wolsky explains the big difference between Dickinson’s work and the Christian paradox; “The justification of loss by gain is essentially a theodicean structure. And if a positive interpretation can be given to a negative fact, a theodicy is accomplished. In Dickinson’s work, although such structures are consistently invoked, they are rarely accomplished or fulfilled”.11

Death and resurrection simultaneously occur in the Bible. Christ’s words recorded in the Gospels are so decisive that there can be no doubt cast upon the mystery of redemption: “Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again” (John 10:17). Christ’s calling is echoed in the Gospels: “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me” (Luke 9:23). Giving up all for Christ, and taking up the cross as a sign of the Christian faith, are required simultaneously to become a Christian. “Deny yourself, take up your cross” (Matthew 16:24) or “Depart from Me, you cursed, into everlasting fire” (Matthew 25:41) is Christ’s direct message to force humans to follow him. The cross is the only road to the kingdom of heaven. If you follow Jesus, you can be led to eternal life. No wonder Dickinson felt frightened when she listened to the sermon on death and judgment, and the subject of perdition (L 175).

Christ’s speech leaves no doubt as to the certainty of the heaven to come unless we break the Christian formula of redemption: loss is gain, death is life. In one of Dickinson’s favorite books, *The Imitation of Christ*, Thomas à Kempis, explains about the words of the Gospels concerned with the idea of redemption, “Christ has gone before you, bearing His Cross; He died for you on the cross, that you also may bear your cross, and desire to die on the Cross with Him” and reminds us that “If you share His sufferings, you will also share His glory”.12 Christ does not separate the
cross and salvation, but rather places the crucifixion at the very center of salvation. Two opposites, death and life, are ultimately reconciled in unity. On the other hand, Emily Dickinson attempts to omit the center of the story from her early poems.

The first five lines of the last stanza start with a negative word followed by a positive one. The emphasis is on the first term, and it is a prerequisite to achievement. Going to heaven requires “Defeat,” “parching,” begging, and “the Calvary.” Christinan’s justification for human suffering on earth is sharply contrasted with the supposed consolations in heaven. Dickinson’s peculiar stress on the earthly experience of love makes the list of Christian paradoxes sound meaningless. The poem is built upon the irony of the speaker’s striving to accept the Christian solution to the problem of human suffering. Compared with the Christian dogma expressed in the first five lines of the last stanza with the present anguish she has experienced on earth, the last line undermines the traditional justification of human suffering on earth. To accept being mortal and fight against negative forces to seek heaven on earth, is the direction Dickinson takes in order to arrive at her kingdom in the poem.

Dickinson does not always deny a negative experience in life, since she acknowledges its vitalizing effect to make life stimulating. She feels most happy, says she, when “there is a sting in every enjoyment” (L 10). In a letter of 1850, Dickinson makes known to Abiah Root her decision not to become a Christian: “The shore is safer, Abiah, but I love to buffet the sea - ...I love the danger” (L 39). Although Dickinson admits the vitalizing effects of suffering seen in “For each ecstatic instant, we must an anguish pay” (P 125), she never seems to have approved of the intense suffering of Christ on the cross.

Psalm 22 starts with “Why hath God forsaken me?” (P 313) and Psalm 22 deal with the same topic, yet end differently. Despite the employment of the same phrase, Psalm 22 ends with Christ’s faith in God. If we compare Psalm 22 with Dickinson’s adaptation of the phrase, there is a sharp contrast between the two. P 313 focuses on Christ’s despair and mortal anguish on the cross without describing the very moment of the transformation of his pain into joy. Instead of depicting the Christian glory, the moment of resurrection, the later half of the story is left out. Dickinson deliberately omits the description of resurrection while focusing upon the crucifixion. There are seven phrases Christ utters from the cross just before he dies in the Gospels. Dickinson picks the first word spoken by Christ and uses it out of context in order to dramatize this historic moment.

The Gospels tend to emphasize the aspect of liberation from sin through Christ’s death, while Dickinson’s poems focus upon the price paid for all. Dickinson’s poems appear to begin with an affirmation of Christian paradoxes: loss is gain; defeat is triumph; pain is joy. However, they end with a negation of such Christian formula by deliberately erasing the other side of the story of Jesus Christ. The suffering Christ stands as a human hero who has been severely defeated in
Dickinson’s religious poems. The Christian paradoxes integrate the dichotomy; while Dickinson’s poems refuse to reconcile the two, omitting half of the whole picture. Dickinson’s adaptation of Christian paradoxes in her poems appears to be the same on the surface if the reader fails to notice the subtle signs encoded in her poems. Besides both readings are two sides of the same coin yet focus upon a totally different aspect of the story of redemption. After reading Dickinson’s early religious poems, we come up with an entirely different understanding.

The letter written in 1846 in the midst of a religious revival at Amherst delivers her ambivalent feelings toward God:

I have perfect confidence in God & his promises & yet I know not why, I feel that the world holds a predominant place in my affections. I do not feel that I could give up all for Christ, were I called to die. Pray for me Dear A. that I may yet enter into the kingdom, that there may be room left for me in the shining courts above. (L 13)

In this letter, she cannot give up all for Christ, yet she can never give up entering into the kingdom of heaven even though she admits she would take a different route to heaven in her own way. The destination is the same for Christians and Dickinson, but the way to get to heaven differs totally. Accepting Christian ideas partially, Dickinson creates her own sacred texts by adopting hymn meters and some of Christian sacred texts.

The letters written in the early 1850s, Dickinson has doubts about the basic Christian doctrine of redemption: “How strange is this sanctification, that works such a marvelous change, that sows in such corruption, and rises in golden glory, that brings Christ down, and shews him, and lets him select his friends!” (L 35). The doctrine of redemption requires the denial of self and earthly joys, and the acceptance of intense suffering. The Gospels tell that gain in this world is loss of the next, that only through present sacrifice can one attain future glory. Compared with salvation, nothing has value, and for its sake everything else must be renounced as vain. Obviously, Dickinson could not renounce all for Christ.

Dickinson elucidates how redemption works on humans in one of her letters: “You will excuse all mistakes in view of ignorance, all sin in view of ’the fall,’ all want of friendly affection..., and other general deficiencies, on the ground of universal incapability!” (L 31). The death of Jesus Christ cancels every claim against guilty persons. The underlying assumption of the idea of redemption is that humans are ignorant, deficient, and unable to do any individual work. Dickinson finds it insulting to understand this basic idea which involves helping humans because they are unable to do so. Her response to the Christian message is agonizing but firm with the greatest emphasis on
this world: “an experience bitter, and sweet, but the sweet did so beguile me - and life has had an aim, and the world has been too precious for your poor - and striving sister!” (L 35) Dickinson is perceptive enough to notice that denying earthly happiness is God’s design to make us desire heaven. God inflicts suffering on humans to make us weaker and practices the artificially contrived plan of selecting humans. “Who made the Bible?” (L 794) was Emily Dickinson’s early question. “We dignify our Faith, when we cross the ocean with it, though most prefer ships” (L 209), in one of her letters, Dickinson suggests that deep inside, most people prefer more practical means of salvation. “‘Faith is a fine invention” (P 185) illustrates how Dickinson perceives the function of religion in her times:

“Faith” is a fine invention
When Gentlemen can see -
But Microscopes are prudent
In an Emergency.

Dickinson speaks of “Faith” in terms of science seen from scientific eyes by means of “Microscopes.” The scientific instrument makes every invisible thing visible to the naked eye. To put “Faith” under a microscope enables us to examine the situation very closely and carefully. The poet concludes that “Microscopes are prudent / In an Emergency” though she admits that “‘Faith’ is a fine invention.” Both faith and microscopes are newly invented by humans. If “Gentlemen can see-,” they perceive that “Faith” too is an invented thing in order to deceive. The adjective “prudent” conveys a warning sign to avoid unnecessary risks. Religion and science are equally juxtaposed in each situation. Each statement is conditional. Being born in the age of science, Dickinson was torn between the knowledge of science and that of religion.

Some of her poems express intense religious sentiments to the extent that she would almost be mistaken as a religious poet. But she never seems to be completely persuaded by the teaching of the Gospels. Nevertheless, it is obvious that Dickinson was attracted by the idea of divinity, especially the life of Jesus Christ throughout her life. Shira Wolosky in her recent article on “Women’s Bibles” concludes:

Dickinson’s religious position is particularly fraught. Despite her powerful critique of dogma and institutional religion, Dickinson is not merely secular. She instead remains torn between a search for purpose and meaning within human experience, and an angry rejection of what she could not help but see as a failure of religion to provide it. Her poetry accordingly provides many scenes of both religious assault and
appeal, defiance and desire.\textsuperscript{13}

It is almost impossible for us to pin down one unified view on how religion has shaped the content and form of Emily Dickinson’s poetry. Because her stance toward religion, to quote from Wolosky, “is never finalized, never settled, but enacts an ongoing struggle between unsatisfactory positions that constantly engage and undermine each other”\textsuperscript{14}. Judith Farr persuasively summarizes the significance of religion in Dickinson’s life; “it is important to remember that Dickinson appealed to the idea of God throughout her life with manifest hope and desire”\textsuperscript{15}, after warning us that Dickinson is not a religious poet in the style of John Donne or George Herbert, “who believed rather than hoped to believe in the Christian mysteries”\textsuperscript{16}. In spite of her inconsistency in her belief in religion, her stance toward the idea of salvation, which requires the negation of self, mortal sufferings, and the denial of earthly joys is consistent all through her life. She never let herself despise all earthly things, nor could she justify the intense suffering on the cross. She wanted to accept God’s grace, convert, and be saved but eventually rejected orthodoxy and its God. Dickinson’s early religious poems show the very process of how her mind has worked toward the divine. Nevertheless, Dickinson could not give up all for Christ, at the same time she never resigned entering into her kingdom of heaven: “The mysteries of human nature surpass the ‘mysteries of redemption,’ for the infinite we only suppose, while we see the finite...”\textsuperscript{(L 389)}.

NOTES


2 All quotations from Emily Dickinson’s letters are taken from \textit{The Letters of Emily Dickinson}, eds. Thomas Johnson and Theodora Ward, 3vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1976). Letters will be identified in the text by the number they have given. Subsequent references to this edition will appear in the text as L.


4 Ibid. 644.

5 All quotations from Emily Dickinson’s poetry are taken from \textit{The Poems of Emily Dickinson}, ed. Thomas Johnson, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1979). In his edition, poems will be identified in the text by the number Johnson has given. Subsequent references to this edition will appear in the text as P.


8 Oliver, 129.

9 Oliver, 130.


14 Ibid. 207.


16 Ibid.