

July 14, 2002

The Fathers of the Council of Chalcedon

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Though Baruch's name means "blessed," his was a pretty rough life because he served one of the most turbulent men in an extraordinarily turbulent period of Israel's history. Long before anyone thought of an annual "Secretaries' Appreciation Day," Baruch was the secretary for the prophet Jeremiah.

Baruch, "son of Neriah" (Jeremiah 32:12), had he lived in normal times, would surely have fared better. Perhaps as talented as his brother Seraiah, the quartermaster to King Zedechiah (51:59), he might have gone into royal service. How he came into the service of Jeremiah the Bible does not tell us, but one is probably right in thinking that a perceived divine call was the determining factor. Indeed, hardly anything else would explain it.

Jeremiah had fallen silent in 622, when King Josiah's workmen, in the course of some repairs on the Temple, had discovered the Book of Deuteronomy lying on a shelf somewhere under several layers of dust. This discovery led, in turn, to a very serious religious reform of the kingdom under royal auspices (2 Kings 23; 2 Chronicles 34), so Jeremiah, a somewhat reluctant prophet anyway (Jeremiah 1:6), felt that he could retire from public life. Even when the Assyrian capital of Nineveh fell to the Babylonians in 612, much to the literary inspiration of the prophet Nahum, Jeremiah held his peace.

But then disaster struck. King Josiah, who had thrown in his lot with the rising Babylonian power, was killed by the Egyptian army under Pharaoh Neco at the Battle of Megiddo in 609. It was the beginning of very hard times in Jerusalem. The new king, Jehoahaz (Shallum), reigned less than a hundred days (2 Kings 23:31), and from this point on, kings would reign in Jerusalem only at the pleasure of either Egypt or Babylon. Judah's religious and political life began rapidly to unravel, ending with Jerusalem's destruction in 587. The crisis inaugurated by the death of Josiah in 609, addressed with such pathos by Habakkuk, also brought Jeremiah out of retirement.

At the divine command he went to the Temple to preach the sermon that began the second phase of his long prophetic ministry (Jeremiah 7:1-15; 26:1-24). It was during this phase that Baruch entered his service as the prophetic secretary.

What made Baruch's task particularly difficult was that many folks, Judah's kings in particular, were not especially fond of what Jeremiah had to say. They thought his tone a bit too stark and stern, in contrast to the gentler, more nuanced approach favored by themselves. So when Jeremiah delivered his oracles, and Baruch dutifully wrote them down, there was normally not much applause.

We find a typical reaction in Jeremiah 36, where one of those oracles conveyed some hint of divine displeasure (at least, "great is the anger and the fury that the Lord has pronounced against this people" could be taken in that sense). The king, who preferred a broader, more flexible view of things, took exception to the point. Although it was a fairly lengthy message, which had cost poor Baruch several hours of careful transcription, how did the king receive it? Well, as the scroll was read before him, we are told, he "cut it with a scribe's knife and cast it into the fire that was on the hearth, until all the scroll was consumed in the fire that was on the hearth." And how did Jeremiah respond to this? He instructed Baruch to take a new scroll and write the whole thing down again!

Naturally, sometimes Baruch would get discouraged. There is an example of this in the shortest chapter of the Book of Jeremiah, Chapter 45; a message from the prophet to his secretary in the year 605. He quotes Baruch as saying "Woe is me now! For the Lord has added grief to my sorrow. I fainted in my sighing, and I find no rest." By way of response to this lament, Jeremiah reminds his secretary that he is not alone in his suffering. Indeed, insists the prophet, God is suffering more than anyone. God is tearing down what He built; God is plucking up what He planted. So who was Baruch to be complaining and feeling sorry for himself? Jeremiah leaves the message there, confident that the loyal Baruch will hear it wisely and brace his mind for the greater catastrophes yet to fall. After the destruction of Jerusalem in 587, the faithful secretary shares the prophet's exile in Egypt (43:2-7).

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