

January 11, 2004

The Sunday After Theophany

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Perhaps no one else knew it, but the Ammonites nursed a grudge against Israel. They were persuaded that the Israelites occupied a large tract of Ammonite land, so they resolved by force of arms to take back what was theirs. Accordingly, "It came to pass after a time that the people of Ammon made war against Israel" (Judges 11:4).

When Jephthah, Israel's judge at the time, inquired of these belligerents the reason for their hostility, the Ammonites rehearsed their historical grievance as best they could remember it: "Because Israel took away my land when they came up out of Egypt, from the Arnon as far as the Jabbok, and to the Jordan. Now, therefore, restore these lands peaceably" (11:13).

Perceiving a misunderstanding on their part, Jephthah went to some pains to spell out for the Ammonites several points on which his memory of the matter differed from theirs. First, he said, Israel had always been careful to respect the territorial integrity of its neighbors east of the Jordan (11:14-18).

Second, the land under dispute had not belonged to the Ammonites anyway, but to another group called the Amorites. Moreover, the territory in question had been seized from the Amorites when the latter attacked Israel, not the other way around (11:19-23). In this reference to the ancient events narrated in Numbers 21:21-26, Jephthah also gently reminded the Ammonites that they themselves had formerly lived under Amorite rule, from which Israel had delivered them and restored them to their ancestral property (Judges 11:24; cf. Numbers 21:29-30). With this they should be satisfied. For this they should be grateful.

Third, three hundred years had elapsed since all these things had happened (Judges 11:26). Why had the matter never been brought up before?

The Ammonites, in short, were engaged in an exercise of historical revisionism, which consisted in treating old events with a new theory. Viewing history under the lens of a "fresh interpretation," the Ammonites concluded that three centuries earlier they had suffered an injustice that now needed to be set right. Thus, having lived in peace with Israel for three hundred years, they were now commencing a war for the purpose of correcting an alleged wrong from a time before even their grandparents were born.

It came to pass, of course, that the Ammonites failed in this endeavor. Their historical revisionism brought upon them only further suffering-indeed, "a very great slaughter" (Judges 11:33).

History provides other examples, alas, of this Ammonite line of thought. For instance, some four centuries after Jephthah the Veientes went to war against Rome to recover territory that the Romans had earlier seized after defeating the Fidenates. For various reasons, the Veientes believed that the Fidenate land really belonged to themselves, so they had a right to take it from Rome by force. As Pliny (*History* 1.15) and Plutarch ("Romulus" 25) described the outcome of their efforts, however, the Veientes fared no better than the Ammonites.

The Ammonites, let it be said, seem ever to be with us. Their ideology may be described as attempting to remedy some ancient historical injustice-real or alleged-by taking action against the descendents of those accused of the injustice. The Ammonites always seem to themselves eminently reasonable. They either want back their real estate, or they demand indemnities for injuries to their ancestors, or they require restitution for this or that offense of yesteryear.

Now it is obvious that history does display wide patterns of real injustice, and no one denies that many people in the world still suffer from things that happened to their forebears a long time ago. It is a settled lesson of history, however, that efforts to go back and "correct" the past generally produce only more injustice. Most recorded attempts to rectify ancient historical wrongs serve chiefly to prove the thesis that "the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God" (James 1:20).

Moreover, few events in life are open to only one interpretation, even in their immediate context, and it is often the case that the passage of time renders their real moral character yet more ambiguous. Consequently, attempts to remedy the perceived wrongs of bygone times will almost certainly be regarded by others as merely unwarranted provocations. Such endeavors lead to further animosities, even wars.

In short, it is doubtful that the Ammonite ideology has ever really set right a single historical wrong, but it has most certainly given rise to many new ones.

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