

September 5, 2004
The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

In the biblical books that narrate Israel's Exodus from Egypt and its journeys in the wilderness, it is not difficult to detect a series of contrasts between God's treatment of the Egyptians and His treatment of the Chosen People.

Following the lead of the Book of Wisdom (or The Wisdom of Solomon), the earliest work to elaborate these contrasts, we may reduce their number to five-**chumash**-the mystic figure associated with the Torah. These five contrasts have to do with: (1) thirst, (2) hunger, (3) weather, (4) light, and (5) life.

First, because of the changing of the Nile into blood the Egyptians were deprived of water and suffered intense thirst (Exodus 7:17-24). The Book of Wisdom (11:5-7,14) sees this defiling of the Nile as a penalty especially appropriate to Egypt's sin of drowning the newborn Israelite boys in that river.

The Israelites in the desert, on the contrary, suffered only a brief thirst, from which they were delivered by the miraculous water that flowed from the rock in the wilderness (Exodus 17:1-7; Numbers 20:1-11; Wisdom 11:4,8-10).

Second, with respect to hunger, Egypt was visited by plagues of vile animals (Exodus 8:1-32; 10:1-20; Wisdom 11:15-16), so offensive to the Egyptians that the ensuing disgust ruined their appetite (Exodus 8:3; Wisdom 16:3,9). Whereas the first plague caused terrible thirst, these later afflictions brought about great hunger.

The Book of Wisdom (11:15-16) regards this visitation by troublesome beasts as a punishment merited by the Egyptian worship of animals. The Lord could have punished them with large and impressive animals, but He chose to use lowly creatures in order the greater to humble them for their sins (11:17-19).

In contrast to the animals dispatched to plague the Egyptians, God sent a flock of quail to satisfy the hunger of the Israelites (Exodus 16:13; Numbers 11:31-32; Psalms 105 [104]:40; Wisdom 16:2). Once again, God's provision for His people is contrasted with His punishment of their enemies.

Third, with respect to the "weather conditions" in Egypt, the Bible describes a plague of both hail and fire (lightning) that falls upon the Egyptians (Exodus 9:13-25; Wisdom 16:16-19,22). Since this twofold plague destroys both livestock and plant life, it continues the theme of hunger from the preceding contrast.

In place of these destructive storms, Israel was fed with a miraculous bread that fell from heaven (Exodus 15:4-15; Numbers 11:6-9; Psalms 78 [77]:25; 105 [104]:40). This heavenly

bread, says the Book of Wisdom (16:20-21), accommodated itself to the taste of each person who ate it.

Fourth, Egypt was tormented by a thick darkness that covered all the land (Exodus 10:21-23). This darkness was so complete that it imprisoned the Egyptians in their houses. It was not only a material darkness but also a darkening of the mind, accompanied by deep fears and shadowy apparitions of guilt and terror. No fire of earth, the Egyptians found, could dissipate this darkness; on the contrary, the fire itself was dark (Wisdom 17:2-6,11-21).

According to the Book of Wisdom (17:7-10; 18:4), this darkness permeating the land was a punishment for Egypt's addiction to the dark, demonic arts of idolatry.

The Israelites, in contrast, were led by a pillar of fire that illumined their way in the wilderness (Exodus 13:21; 14:24; Wisdom 18:1-3). The idolatrous Egyptians, then, are portrayed as children of darkness, the Israelites as sons of the light.

Fifth, in Egypt's last plague the angel of death takes the lives of its firstborn sons (Exodus 12:29-32; Wisdom 18:14-18). Israel's firstborn sons, by contrast, are delivered through the rites of the Passover (Exodus 13:1-2,11-15). Although some Israelites perished in the wilderness by reason of their sin, this tasting of death was but brief, because a renewed way to life was provided by the ministry of Moses (Wisdom 18:20-25).

This final contrast, that of death and life, is joined to the first by its repetition of the theme of Egypt's sin in killing the newborn sons of Israel (Exodus 11:4-6; Wisdom 18:5). For this reason the slaying of Egypt's firstborn sons on the night of Passover is followed by that event which is the culmination of the Exodus-namely, the destruction of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea.

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