

October 30, 2005
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Holy Scripture gives us two views of King Manasseh (687-642, apparently with a coregency from 697).

In 2 Kings he was a thoroughly bad man, whose reign had no redeeming aspects. He was not only an idolater of first rank (21:3-5,7,11), but also a murderer and sorcerer. Manasseh offered at least one of his children in sacrifice (21:6) and "shed very much innocent blood, till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another" (21:16). Flavius Josephus must have had this text in mind when he wrote that Manasseh "barbarously slew all the righteous men that were among the Hebrews; nor would he spare the prophets, for he every day slew some of them, till Jerusalem overflowed with blood" (*Antiquities* 10.3.1).

The most notable of the prophets murdered by Manasseh was the great Isaiah. According to an account recorded in the apocryphal story, *The Martyrdom of Isaiah*, Manasseh caused the prophet to be sawn in two. A passage in the Epistle to the Hebrews, because it mentions this detail, is often thought to refer to the era of Manasseh: "Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword" (11:36-37).

There is a rather different--or at least a more ample--account on Manasseh's reign in 2 Chronicles. The latter book, while not dismissing the evils elsewhere ascribed to that king, assigns them only to the first part of his long reign (33:1-10).

Then the Chronicler goes on to tell quite another story of Manasseh: "Therefore the Lord brought upon them the captains of the army of the king of Assyria, who took Manasseh with hooks, bound him with bronze fetters, and carried him off to Babylon."

Whereas the prophets had failed to convert Manasseh, the Assyrians succeeded: "Now when he was in affliction, he implored the Lord his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers, and prayed to Him; and He received his entreaty, heard his supplication, and brought him back to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord was God" 33:11-13). When at last he returned to Jerusalem, Manasseh was a changed man, who immediately undertook religious renewal throughout the realm and liturgical reform in the Temple (33:14-17).

This repentance on his part inspired a much later apocryphon called *The Prayer of Manasseh*, often included among the Odes in the Septuagint and an authorized part of the Vulgate.

This sojourn of Judah's king in Mesopotamia is also recorded in an Assyrian source called *The Prism of Esarhaddon*. According to this archival document, the new emperor, Esarhaddon (680-669), compelled the kings in the western part of the Assyrian Empire to come to the capital of Assyria to render their obeisance. The *Prism* names all these kings, among whom was *Me-na-si-i la-ú-di*, Manasseh of Judah.

This text is of great assistance in understanding the account in 2 Chronicles. Josephus, who was understandably unfamiliar with the *Prism*, rather seriously misinterprets the biblical story by supposing it was the Babylonians that abducted Manasseh (*Antiquities* 10.3.1). This explanation is scarcely possible, because the event antedated the rise of Babylon by several decades.

The truth is deeper and more interesting. According to *The Prism of Esarhaddon*, these subject kings were conveyed to Nineveh, which is exactly what we would expect, that city being the capital of the Assyrian Empire. Why, then, does 2 Chronicles say "Babylon"? Surely this does not mean the city of Babylon, which would make no sense in that historical setting. "Babylon" here refers, rather, to the *region* of Babylon, "Babylonia," a territory contained in the Assyrian Empire. According to the much later perspective of the Chronicler, Nineveh was a city in "Babylon," much as it is currently a place in Iraq.

We perceive what the Chronicler has done. He has portrayed Manasseh's forced journey to Mesopotamia as a kind of small Babylonian captivity, prefiguring the great captivity of the Jews a century later. Thus the repentance of Manasseh in exile and his subsequent religious, liturgical reforms at Jerusalem foreshadowed the repentance of the Jews, languishing in Babylon, and their subsequent restoration of worship at Jerusalem. This subtle historical analogy touches a dominant theme of the Chronicler, who regarded the orthodox worship of God as the final goal and the true significance of biblical history.

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