

June 15, 2008
Pentecost Sunday

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Prior to listing the generations of Adam in Genesis 5, Holy Scripture makes a special note relative to his grandson, Enosh, at the end of the previous chapter. The text of this note, which is obscure and uncertain, is worth extra attention.

The traditional Hebrew of the second half is Genesis 4:26—the Massoretic text—is *'az huchal liqero' beshem Adonai*, which may be literally translated, "Then it was begun to call on the name of the Lord." Although a bit awkward, the sense of the statement is at least intelligible. The King James Version paraphrases it: "then began men to call upon the name of the Lord," and many translations provide a variant of that rendering. The curious thing about this reading is that the invocation of the Lord's name is not ascribed to Enosh himself.

St. Jerome's Vulgate presupposes a different underlying Hebrew reading of the first two words: *ze' hechel*, meaning "he began [to call on the Lord's name]." The merit of this reading, surely, is that it ascribes to Enosh himself the invocation of the Lord's name.

This is also true of the Septuagint, which says: *houtos elpisen epikaleisthai to onoma Kyriou tou Theo*—literally rendered as, "He hoped to call on the name of the Lord God." Here we have another underlying Hebrew wording: *ze' hochil*—"he hoped."

It is difficult to determine which of these three readings is the most original, nor, I believe, is it necessary to decide the matter. All these readings have been used by believers over the centuries, and profitable sermons have been preached on each of them.

When the Orthodox Church accepts the canonical character of the Septuagint, this does not necessarily mean that this Greek version more accurately expresses the sense of an "original" text. Sometimes it may, of course, but that is not what is meant by the Septuagint's canonical quality. The latter means, rather, that the Septuagint expresses (usually and as a general rule) the ripest, most mature form of the text.

St. Augustine of Hippo best expressed, I believe, the Church's traditional view of this question. As he worked his way through Genesis, comparing the *Vetus Latina* (translated from the Septuagint) to the new Vulgate translation (made by St. Jerome directly from the Hebrew text), Augustine worked very hard trying to reconcile the ages of the patriarchs in these two versions of Genesis 5. He observed that the ages of these patriarchs, when they conceived their

respective sons, are different in the two versions. Moreover, he noted they are different in consistent and manifestly intentional ways, impossible to attribute to scribal error. That is to say, Augustine admits, the Septuagint translators deliberately *changed* the text. They were not the least bit interested in preserving an "original."

For many modern readers, who think it important to get to the "original" text, this would be a matter of either-or: One must *choose* between the Hebrew and Greek texts. Most Protestant readers, unless I am mistaken, when faced with this choice, feel not the slightest compunction about rejecting the Greek manuscripts, copied by Christians since the dawn of the Church, in favor of the Hebrew manuscripts, copied by Jews during the Middle Ages. I confess that this preference has always astounded me.

Many Orthodox Christians, on the other hand, because of the canonical status of the Septuagint, don't hesitate to ascribe the variants in the Massoretic text to deliberate textual alterations made by Jewish scribes and copyists. Truth to tell, I find this explanation of the matter even more objectionable. Those who imagine that God-fearing Jews would deliberately alter God's Word certainly don't know much about the Jewish faith.

According to Augustine, however, whose view I believe to be that of the Church, there is no need to choose between these two textual sources, because each of them represents God's revelation at a particular point in history. That is to say, Augustine accepts both readings, ascribing the prophetic Spirit, not only to the original Hebrew authors of Holy Scripture, but also to those translators who gave us the Greek version: "It is to be believed," he wrote, "that they were moved by the divine Spirit to say something differently, not by their gift as translators, but exercising the freedom of those that prophesy" (*divino Spiritu . . . prophetantium libertate aliter dicere*). This, said he, is what the Apostles implicitly taught, when they quoted Holy Scripture in Greek (*The City of God* 15.14).

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