

July 13, 2008
The Fathers of Chalcedon

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

It is a natural and expected thing, I suppose, to divide history into distinct periods, if only to help the memory keep track of it. Everyone seems to do this, even though the events and lives of actual people overlap and run together. Thus, we distinguish America's colonial period from its national history, while recognizing that thousands of people lived during both eras.

Christians very early did much the same thing as they surveyed the history of salvation. St. Matthew, for example, divided the nearly two millennia between Abraham and Jesus into three groups of fourteen generations: one from Abraham to David, the second from David to the Babylonian Captivity, and the third from the Babylonian Captivity to Jesus (1:17).

Writing in the early fifth century, Augustine of Hippo constructed his own outline of biblical history around Matthew's, adding two eras before Abraham (one from Adam to Noah, the other from Noah to Abraham), and another--the current one--after Christ. Augustine thus arrived at six ages of salvation history, corresponding both to the six days of Creation and to the supposed six periods marking the life of an individual man (*infantia, pueritia, adulescentia, juvenus, gravitas, and senectus*). This outline, which gave structure to Augustine's *The City of God*, was favored by later theologians of history, notably St. Bonaventure and Richard of St. Victor.

As far as I can tell, Matthew attaches no theological significance to the individual parts of his tripartite division of history. Reduced to its simplest components, after all, it can be summarized as: pre-monarchical, monarchical, and post-monarchical. That is to say, it appears to be a quasi-political division rather than theological. What I think is chiefly missing in this schema, from a theological perspective, is some reference to Moses and the promulgation of the Law.

I say "missing," not to suggest a defect in Matthew's arrangement, but to indicate how it differs from that of St. Paul. Some decades before Matthew, Paul had already divided salvation history into three parts, but he mainly structured it around the Law. We especially find this in the Epistle to the Romans.

The first era of history Paul described as the rule of death, saying that "death reigned from Adam to Moses" (Romans 5:14). Moses became his point transition. That is to say, the Law marked a new age in human history, dividing it into pre-Law and Law.

The period of the Law, however, was also superceded, because "Christ is the end of the Law unto righteousness to everyone who believes" (10:4; Galatians 3:24). Thus, for Paul, all salvation history is divided into pre-Law, Law, and post-Law, or Gospel.

Unlike Matthew's division, which is simply chronological, Paul's is properly theological, inasmuch as each part involves a change in man's relationship to God. Thus, from Adam

to Moses man was without the help of the Law. From Moses to Christ, man was subject to the Law. After Christ man is under grace (6:14).

To Paul's tripartite division of history there are rabbinic parallels, which speak of the world's first age from Adam to Moses (the age of confusion), the second from Moses to the Messiah (the age of the Torah), and the third the Messianic Age, when a new Torah will be promulgated (Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 97b; *Abodah zara* 9b; *Shabbath* 151b; *Niddah* 61b; Jerusalem Talmud, *Megillah* 70d; Targum of Isaiah 12:3).

Unlike these rabbis, however, Paul knew that the Messiah had come, and that the Jews, generally speaking, had rejected Him. Paul's third part of salvation history, therefore, which is still in progress, is theologically more complex; it is marked by a dialectical structure: The refusal of the Jews to accept the new Torah--"the Law of the Messiah" (Galatians 6:2; Romans 13:8-10)--was the "set back" in salvation history. It was the antithesis--the historical resistance--that became the occasion for the calling of the Gentiles. These, says Paul, are the branches grafted into the ancient stock of Israel, to replace the branches broken off. The Jewish people as such, however, have not been replaced and never will be (Romans 11:1-2,28-29). Indeed, this third period of salvation history will remain incomplete "until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in, and so all Israel will be saved" (11:25-26).

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