

August 24, 2008
Tenth Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

For a long time the identification of a thematic core of ideas was a major difficulty facing modern biblical scholarship. Even from fifty years ago I recall initiatory books--with titles like *Introduction to the Old Testament* and *New Testament Theology*--in which the author prefaced his labor with many pages trying to justify the effort: What were the unifying doctrines that led to the formation of the biblical canon(s)? I, for one, was never satisfied that the author answered the question. Only later did I realize it was the wrong question.

The difficulty came from the nature of the biblical canon, which differs greatly from what may appear, at first, to be parallel cases. For instance, a book entitled *An Introduction to Plato or The Philosophy of Jane Austen* begins with the canonical limits of these two authors. Their origin from a single mind is the unifying core of their ideas.

Even a literary canon not determined by single authorship normally has some other recognizable factor providing a unitive core. In a book entitled *An Introduction to the Romantics*, for instance, the author is not obliged to spend a lot of pages explaining why *Endymion* is included and *The Old Man and the Sea* is left out.

Contrast such clarity of purpose with the task of identifying what ideas Chronicles and Job have in common, or picking out the themes shared by Nahum and Deuteronomy, or Jude and Luke. Since the New Testament was composed over several decades, and the Old Testament over several centuries, there is an inbuilt frustration in attempting to canonize either testament on the basis of its core ideas, to say nothing of uniting both testaments in a single canon.

A few years ago Remi Brague summed up the simple and easily recognized truth of the matter: "The unity of the Bible does not reside in the text itself, but in the experience of the people of Israel. That experience constitutes the common background upon which and in the light of which the texts have continuously been read and reread" (*The Wisdom of the World*, p. 44).

To be sure, there are multiple thematic doctrines found all through the Bible. The Bible's true and deeper unity, however, comes from the unified history of an identifiable entity--Israel and the Church. The biblical metaphor for that unity is the cultivated olive tree of Israel, into which, according to St. Paul, the believing Gentiles have been engrafted (Romans 11: 16-28).

We will not strain the force of Paul's metaphor, I believe, if we regard the sundry books of Holy Scripture as the olives produced by that tree. Thus, if the books of the New Testament, in some instances, look and taste different from those of the Old, this is hardly surprising. The fruit of an engrafted branch is determined by the

species of that branch, even while its life wells up from the older root and is transmitted through the common trunk. In short, an identifiable historical community--the one Church of the Old and New Testaments--is what provides the unity of the Scriptures.

In this respect there is a radical difference between the Bible and the Qu'ran, because a single authorship unites the 114 qu'ranic suras. (We understand that author to be Muhammad, whereas Muslims believe him to be God, but that disagreement does not bear on the distinction considered here.) Islam was begotten and born of the Qu'ran, not the other way around. Canonicity preceded community. Thus, it is not the least bit difficult to write a *Qu'ranic Theology* or *A Thematic Introduction to the Qu'ran*, because the canonicity of the text is in no way contingent on the history and experience--or even the existence--of Islam. On the other hand, It is impossible even to think of the Bible without Israel and the Church.

The unnecessary problem faced by those misguided "introductions" and "theologies," of which I first spoke, grew from the deep chasm dug between exegesis and ecclesiology about five hundred years ago, when theologians felt obliged to choose between the Bible and the Church. Depending on their choice, either the Bible lost its proper hermeneutic context, or there perished from the Church an identifying feature of her being. Without the Church, of which the Bible was a formal and constitutive part, those modern exegetes were forced to examine the shared content of the Bible's canon in order to explain its canonicity. Man put asunder what God had joined together.

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