

**March 1, 2009**

Cheese Fare Sunday

### **Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings**

A common way of dividing Old Testament history is based on the era of the monarchy. For example, Matthew traced the genealogy of Jesus according to three distinct periods: pre-monarchical (1:2-6), monarchical (1:7-11), and post-monarchical (1:12-16). Thus, wrote Matthew, there were "all the generations from Abraham to David . . . from David to the captivity in Babylon . . . and from the captivity in Babylon to the Christ" (1:17).

Needless to say, the division of history by recourse to political periods is a common pattern of historiography. Historians of Rome, for instance, have always parceled the material by reference to the Republic and the Empire, and the emperors themselves serve as signposts to identify the various periods of the Empire.

When we come to biblical history, however, this kind of division presents a methodological difficulty, for the simple reason that Israel's political history is less significant than other theological concerns. The Bible is more about God's activity than man's.

This narrative difficulty was perceived already in the second century before Christ, I believe, for we detect it in Sirach's survey of Israel's "famous men." When he came to the transition from the age of the Judges to the monarchy, Sirach was faced with a bit of a problem: How to get from Samuel to David without having to deal with Saul? He certainly could not include Saul among his "famous men"!

To get around this problem, Sirach resorted to a curious maneuver: Instead of tracing the continuous history from the Judges to the monarchy, he tracked it through the prophetic ministry: He angled over from Samuel to the Bible's next prophet---Nathan.

That step from Samuel to Nathan was perfectly consistent and provided a seamless robe of narrative, in which Sirach could tie together two periods of Israel's political history---the Judges and the monarchy---without using the category of politics. Moving from Samuel to Nathan (47:1) permitted Sirach to sidestep deftly from the Judges to Israel's second king: David. Having omitted Saul altogether, he then proceeded to consign most of the other kings (Solomon excepted, of whom he was critical) to the realm of silence.

Thus, Sirach concentrated on the prophets---not the kings---during the period of the monarchy. The two kings he felt obliged to include---Hezekiah and Josiah---were combined with two prophets with whom they were contemporary, Isaiah (48:17-25) and Jeremiah (49:1-7) respectively.

It is not difficult to see why Sirach approached the matter this way. Most of the biblical kings hardly merited inclusion among his "famous men," whereas the biblical prophets most certainly did.

Without referring to Sirach on the point, Saint Augustine also believed Israel's monarchical period was really more about the prophets than the kings. That whole era (*hoc itaque tempus*), he wrote, from Samuel down through the Babylonian Captivity, was "the age of the prophets"---*totum tempus est prophetarum*. Other men, to be sure, "both before and after" that period, are called prophets, but the years between Samuel and the Babylonian Captivity "are especially and chiefly called the days of the prophets"---*dies prophetarum praecipue maximeque hi dicti sunt* (*The City of God* 17.1).

In our translated Bibles, we tend still to divide the material by way of reference to Israel's political systems: We move from the era of the Judges to the establishment of the monarchy in Samuel, and then to the history of the monarchy in Kings. In the Hebrew Bible, on the other hand, all the books from Joshua through Malachi---covering nearly a thousand years---are under one category: "The Prophets," or *Nebivim*.

We detect that earlier perspective also in passing references within the New Testament. Thus, the Epistle to the Hebrews mentioned "Samuel and the prophets" to designate the biblical history after David (11:32). St. Peter, too, spoke of "all the prophets, from Samuel and those who follow" (Acts 3:24).

If we return, then, to our text at the beginning of Matthew, it is quite reasonable to read it as referring, not only to Israel's political history, but also to the Bible's literary divisions. That is to say, Matthew's genealogy of Jesus corresponds rather closely to the three parts of the Hebrew Bible: the Torah in the pre-monarchical period, the Prophets (*Nebivim*) during the monarchical period, and the Writings (*Ketubim*) during the post-monarchical period.

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