

November 8, 2009
Archangel Michael

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Although the descendants of Esau are regarded with scant respect---and less affection---in the pages of Holy Scripture (cf. Psalm 136 [137]: 7; Ezekiel 25:12-14; Amos 1:6,9,11-12; Obadiah, *passim*; 1 Esdras 4:45), it is not difficult to discern a "minority view" on the point. For example, there was the Lord's countervailing injunction: "You shall not despise the Edomite, for he is your brother" (Deuteronomy 23:7).

For my part, I confess a soft place in my heart for Esau and---with notable exceptions, like Herod---Esau's descendants. I should probably explain why.

We may begin by noticing that Isaac's belated blessing of Esau contained an unexpected agricultural component: "Behold, your dwelling shall be of the fatness of the earth, / And of the dew of heaven from above" (Genesis 27:39). Since the descendants of Esau lived in a desolate area south and east of the Dead Sea, there is an obvious irony of this blessing. Think about it: that miserable land of the Edomites was taken as evidence of God's *hatred*: "Esau I have hated, / And laid waste his mountains and his heritage / for the jackals of the wilderness" (Malachi 1:3). This sounds pretty bad. Yet, Isaac promised his son "the fatness of the earth."

And Esau, even deprived of the better land flowing with milk and honey, seems to have done pretty well for himself. When he later went to meet the returning Jacob, we are told, Esau was accompanied by a troop of four hundred men. Indeed, only with difficulty was Jacob able to persuade Esau to accept the several gifts he had brought for his brother. Esau modestly answered, "I have enough, my brother" (Genesis 33:1-11).

At least some of Esau's descendants seem also to have had "enough." Of the most famous of them, we read, "his possessions were seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred female donkeys, and a very large household, so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the East" (Job 1:3). This was not bad for a man whose ancestor forfeited the birthright.

It is clear, from the Book of Job, that this grandson of Esau (42:20 LXX) worshipped the same God as the patriarchs and the Israelites, and I take this fact as evidence that Esau did so, as well. The blessing, the inheritance, and the promises, to be sure, passed through Jacob and his seed, but why suppose

that Esau and his offspring abandoned the God worshipped by Abraham and Isaac?

Having foolishly deprived himself of the privileges of the firstborn, Esau received a second blessing, nonetheless, and that blessing came from the son of Abraham. Thus, even though the Israelites were God's Chosen People, the worship of the true God---the God of Abraham and Isaac---apparently continued among the descendants of Esau. The Book of Job, at least, represents a compelling argument that this was the case.

For this reason, one may take the continued religious existence of Esau's descendants as a clue to God's intention to augment His people by including non-Jews. That is to say, the providential preservation of the earlier revelation within Esau's race was an historical foreshadowing of the evangelization of the Gentiles. Job, especially, is proof of this, because he "was neither a native born Israelite, nor a proselyte, . . . but someone who sprang from the stock of Edom, was born there, and died there. So praised he is by the divine eloquence (*divino sic laudatur eloquio*) that no contemporary of his was his equal in justice and piety" (St. Augustine, *The City of God* 18.47).

And how did Job know the Lord? Doubtless from the family tradition handed down from Esau. God's rejection of the latter placed him outside the line through which the Law was given and the coming of the Messiah was prepared (Romans 9:11-13), but clearly the Lord did not forget the offspring of Esau.

Let me suggest, moreover, that the blessing Esau received from Isaac---"your dwelling shall be of the fatness of the earth, / And of the dew of heaven from above"---may be understood in a sense richer than its obvious agricultural meaning. The "fatness of the earth" may refer to the fullness of the nations, all of us aliens engrafted into the stock of Israel. And "the dew of heaven above" may be understood as the messianic grace itself, of which the prophet spoke: "Like a cloud of dew in the heat of harvest" (Isaiah 18:4).

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