

May 1, 2011

Saint Thomas Sunday

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Having reflected that human beings-generally considered-have never expected that the dead should rise, we must at once recognize an exception to this rule among certain Jews. In several places in the New Testament it is clear that some of Jesus' contemporaries *did* expect a resurrection of the dead. Thus, Martha of Bethany said of her brother, Lazarus, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day" (John 11:24).

This expectation seems to have taken its rise, in an explicit and unmistakable way, during the Maccabean period in the second century before Christ, in the context of the Seleucid persecution of faithful Jews. The Book of Daniel provides what may be our earliest text on this theme: "And at that time your people shall be delivered, / everyone who is found written in the book. / And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, / some to everlasting life, / some to shame and everlasting contempt. / Those who are wise shall shine / Like the brightness of the firmament, / and those who turn many to righteousness / Like the stars forever and ever" (Daniel 12:1-3).

This hope was reflected in the words with which a devout Jewish mother exhorted her sons, who were suffering martyrdom for their fidelity to the Torah: "But the Creator of the world, who formed the birth of man, and who discerned the origin of all-He will, in His mercy, restore to you again both breath and life, inasmuch as you now despise yourselves for the sake of His laws" (2 Maccabees 7:23). This persuasion of a future resurrection is found in several other verses of Second Maccabees, especially in chapters 7, 12, and 14, as well as in the Qumran manuscripts and other intertestamental sources (cf. 1 Enoch 102-104, but especially 108:11-15; Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch 32:3-5; 49:1-52).

At the time of Jesus, the hope of a future resurrection was chiefly preserved by the Pharisees. Indeed, the Apostle Paul argued that the Resurrection of Jesus provided the necessary historical warrant for that hope and expectation. In this respect he viewed his Christian faith as an extension of his hope as a Pharisee. Thus, accused of false teaching before Israel's high court, Paul pleaded, "Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee; concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!" (Acts 23:6).

This line of argument produced the effect Paul evidently had in mind: it divided the judicial assembly into those who expected a resurrection and those who didn't: "And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees; and the assembly was divided, because the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection" (23:7).

Later on, Paul's appeal to this belief of the Pharisees was less successful. This was the incident in which the Apostle was being jointly questioned by King Herod Agrippa and the Roman Procurator, Porcius Festus. Addressing himself directly to Agrippa, Paul once again argued for the hope of the Pharisees, a hope which he suspected Agrippa to favor. Before recounting his Christian conversion, Paul inquired, "For this hope's sake, King Agrippa, I am accused by the Jews. Why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead?" (26: 7-8).

When, however, the Apostle finished his narrative, the pagan Festus blurted out his incomprehension and complete incredulity on the matter of the resurrection: "You are crazy, Paul! All this book learning is driving you crazy!"--
-Mainei, Pavle, ta polla se grammata eis manian peritrepei (26:24).

It is significant that the pagan Roman, not the Jewish king, took offense at the idea of resurrection from the dead. It seems clear, in fact, that Agrippa felt favorably disposed to Paul's message, for his response to it was vastly different from that of Festus: Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You almost persuade me to become a Christian" (26:28). Moreover, Agrippa was persuaded, if Paul had not already appealed to a court at Rome, "he might have been set free" (26:32). For all that, however, Agrippa was not prepared to argue with his Roman counterpart with respect to the resurrection of the dead. He, too, would have been thought crazy!

There is no doubt that this Jewish expectation was a source of embarrassment for those Jews who wanted to make a favorable impression on pagans. Such Jews did not relish the idea that pagans would accuse them of holding weird, unfashionable ideas. They wanted "fit in" with pagan expectations.

Thus, when the Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus---a writer contemporary to the New Testament---came to describe for his pagan readers the beliefs of the Pharisees, he deliberately omitted any mention of the resurrection. He put Pharisaic belief, rather, in terms of the immortality of the soul and the transmigration of souls into other bodies. This was a notion with which Greco-Roman culture was more familiar. Of the Pharisees, Josephus wrote, "They say that every soul is incorruptible, but that only the soul of the good passes over (*metabainein*) into another body, and that of the wicked is punished with eternal retribution" (*The Jewish Wars*, 2.14.163). He thus avoided what might be called "the scandal of the resurrection."

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All Saints Orthodox Church
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America
4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641

Church Office: (773) 777-0749
<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor
phrii@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html

Pastoral Ponderings:
http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php