

May 27, 2012

The Sunday After the Ascension

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

First Samuel 26 describes a second encounter between Saul and David during the latter's time of wandering in the desert as an exile.

There are distinct points of similarity between this story and the account found two chapters earlier---the encounter at the cave of En Gedi. These similarities include the betrayal of David by the friends of Saul, the irony of Saul's seeking David and David's finding Saul, David's mercy to Saul and the reference to Saul as the Lord's "anointed," Saul's retreat from further pursuit, and certain close resemblances in the conversations between the two men on both occasions.

In each account, the circumstances of their meeting give David an advantage over his adversary, an advantage that he exploits with singular restraint. In the first story, he cuts off the edge of Saul's robe; in the second, he absconds with the spear and water jar placed near Saul's head while he sleeps in camp. In both cases, the seized items serve as tokens to smite the conscience of Saul and bring him to a sense of remorse.

A major difference between the stories is the introduction of extra characters---Abishai and Abner---in the second. These are relatives of the antagonists; David is the uncle of Abishai, and Abner the uncle (or, perhaps, cousin) of Saul. From the perspective of the literary structure, the introduction of these extra characters ties the present episode to later---and deadly---encounters between them (cf. 2 Samuel 2-3).

Like the account of the cave at En Gedi (1 Samuel 24), the present story is largely structured on the contrasted characters of Saul and David. The one is mad and relentless in persecution, while the other is longsuffering and patient in mercy. Whereas the one imagines himself threatened, the other---who truly *is* threatened---forgives the offense and foregoes vengeance. Saul is clearly the unworthy king; David is clearly worthy to be the king.

This double thesis is elaborated through an identifiable dramatic sequence: David is tempted for a second time. Two chapters earlier he had "turned the other cheek" to Saul's offense, refusing to return evil for evil (24:17). Now, once again, David steadfastly declines to harm this king who has proved himself to be an enemy. He turns the cheek a second time.

Nonetheless, the author's moral contrast between the two men is far more than the development of an ethical theme. That is to say, the primary purpose of this narrative is not to convey a lesson in virtue. The author is not a Hebrew Aesop, nor even a biblical Plutarch. The moral structure of the story serves, rather, to illustrate the righteous judgment of God and His purposeful governance of history. God is the chief actor in this play.

If the two main characters in this new account are less explicit on this thesis than they were in the En Gedi story (cf. 24:12,20), the narrator is not. Indeed, I suggest that the entire theological burden of the encounter is conveyed in a single and subtle detail, which is introduced into the narrative at the point where David, under cover of darkness, departs from the enclosure of Saul's picket line: "So David took the spear and the jug of water by Saul's head, and they got away; and no man saw or knew it or awoke. For they were all asleep, because a deep sleep from the Lord had fallen on them" (26:12).

With this masterful stroke of storytelling, the narrator inserts the divine action into the story: "a deep sleep from the Lord had fallen on them." The author mimics, as it were, the subtlety of David's secret intrusion into the camp of Saul. This introduction of God is so quiet, so unobtrusive, that the reader---like one of those pickets posted on the line---must be fully awake to observe it. This "deep sleep from the Lord" is the sole point at which the narrator reveals the true theological significance of the story: a vigilant God keeps guard over these events.

What transpires here is not just a conflict between two antagonists. It is an episode in the dramatic enactment of the divine judgment. David, the reader knows, will come to the throne. At the end, even Saul's knows it: "Be blessed, my son David! You shall do great things and you will continue to prevail."

The deep slumber that came over Saul's camp that night was the historical lock, into which God inserted "the key of David." He shuts, and no one opens; He opens, and so one shuts.

©2012 Patrick Henry Reardon

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
phri@touchstonemag.com

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

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