

**June 16, 2013**

The Sunday After Ascension

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

### **Church and Prophecy**

In his first epistle Peter describes his audience as God's Chosen People: "But you are an elect generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a treasured People, that you may declare the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; formerly you were not a people, but now the People of God; you once had not obtained mercy, but now you have obtained mercy" (1 Peter 2:9-10).

This description of the Church is a pastiche formed from several (Greek) Old Testament passages; most notable among them are Exodus 19:6; Isaiah 43:20-21; and Hosea 1:10 and 2:25. Peter apparently makes no effort to quote any of these texts verbatim, but his allusions to them are unmistakable and rather full. In their original contexts all of these texts refer to Israel (and/or Judah), but this historical fact does not bother Peter; since the Church is truly God's People, the historical and theological extension of ancient Israel, these texts apply with equal—no, greater—force to the New Testament body of believers.

Peter's description contains five elements worthy of further comment. His readers are: (1) a chosen race; (2) a royal priesthood; (3) a holy nation; (4) a people of God's special possession; and (5) recipients of great mercy. We may examine these in more detail over the next couple of weeks.

First, Peter describes his audience as "a chosen race," *genos eklekton*. This language is drawn from two texts: The first is Exodus 19:5-6: "Now, therefore, if you will attend to (*akoe akousete*) My voice and guard My covenant, you shall be to Me a treasured people (*laos periousios*), above all the nations. For all the earth belongs to Me, but you shall be to Me a royal priesthood and a holy nation."

The second is Isaiah 43:20-21: ". . . I gave water in the desert and rivers in the wasteland to provide drink for My chosen race (to *genos mou to eklekton*), My people, (*laos*) whom I have acquired (*periepoiesamen*) to declare My excellencies (*aretas*)."

The latter passage, which refers to the aftermath of Israel's liberation from Egypt, has in mind the same context: God's Sinai Covenant with the seed of Abraham. In this Isaian text, however, the same chosen nation, once delivered from Egypt, God is about to deliver from exile in Babylon. For Peter, on the other hand, the Christians of his own day are the true heirs of that Covenant; they are the Lord's Chosen Race and special people, now delivered from both Egyptian bondage and Babylonian captivity.

Second, Peter calls his audience God's "royal priesthood" (*basileion hieratevma*), another expression drawn from Exodus 19. That designation, originally referent to the Hebrews in the Sinai Desert, now describes the Christians, who have been delivered from the slavery to sin in order to offer the Lord the appropriate sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. Both in the Book of Exodus and in this epistle, the point of interest is not the Chosen People's relationship to the "other nations" but their relationship to the redeeming God. That is to say, God's People can be priestly kingdom only by being a kingdom of priests.

Third, Peter is writing to a "holy nation" (*ethnos hagion*). Once again, this expression is verbatim from Exodus 19. In its original context, it declared that Israel, by reason of God's deliverance and His Covenant, was both constituted as a nation among the other nations and specifically consecrated to God. As Peter understands this expression, it no longer refers to that political nation (as distinct from other nations of the earth) but to the new nation, the *tertium quid* made up of both Jews and Gentiles.

Fourth, those addressed by Peter are described as God's "treasured People"—more literally, God's "People unto possession" (*laos eis peripoiesin*). Although this expression is not verbally represented in either Exodus 19 or Isaiah 43, it is conceptually identical to the meaning of both texts. The wording, *laos eis peripoiesin*, somewhat resembles the vocabulary in Exodus 19, where Israel is portrayed as a "treasured people" (*laos periousios*).

In the relevant Isaian text, God preserves His *laos* from the exile in Babylon so that they might declare His *aretas*, His "excellencies." This rich expression denotes the awful wisdom and power manifest in the Lord's rescue of Israel from captivity in Babylon. In the Petrine context the reference has to do with the spiritual deliverance of Christians and their consequent declaration of God's wonders. In the Gospel stories, for instance, we observe how many healings and exorcisms performed by Jesus prompt the beneficiaries of his mercy to break into divine praise.

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