

August 11, 2013

The Sunday Before the Dormition of our Lady

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Joshua the Man

Even though his name, in both Hebrew and Greek, is identical to that of the Savior, Old Testament Joshua does not enjoy among Christians these days the respect he had in the past. One suspects this circumstance has something to do with his history as a warrior, particularly as the conqueror of the Holy Land. It is hardly surprising that Christians, in the Middle East especially, find it hard to get past the (totally unwarranted) image of Joshua as an early leader of the modern State of Israel. As though Joshua were a predecessor of David Ben Gurion

In fact, nonetheless, Christians in the Middle East have not always felt that negatively about Joshua. Take, for instance, Saint Cyril of Jerusalem in the late fourth century. Here is what Cyril had to say about Joshua:

Joshua, the son of Nun, was a type of [Jesus] in many ways. When he commenced his rule of the people, he started at the Jordan, where Christ also, after his baptism, inaugurated the Gospel. The son of Nun appointed the Twelve [tribal leaders] who were to divide the inheritance; Jesus sends the Twelve Apostles to the ends of the earth as heralds of the truth (Catechesis 10).

More obviously than Moses, Joshua was a prefiguration of Christ. Moses rescued the People from bondage, but only Joshua could bring them into their inheritance. In the 2nd century Irenaeus of Lyons made a contrast between Moses and Joshua a point of reference to Christ. He wrote,

It was appropriate that Moses should bring the People out of Egypt, but that Joshua should conduct them into the inheritance. Likewise, that Moses, as was the case with the Law, should come to an end, but that Joshua, as the word—and no untrue type of the Word made flesh—should be a preacher to the People. It was also appropriate that Moses should give manna as food to the fathers, whereas Joshua gave wheat, as the first-fruits of life, as a type of the Body of Christ, for Scripture declares that the Lord's manna came to an end when the People ate of the wheat of the Land" (Fragments 198).

Joshua does not fit comfortably into the usual biblical categories. Truly he was unique for what he was not. For instance, Joshua is never called a prophet, even if he sometimes sounds like one. Nor does Holy Scripture list him as a judge, though his ministry included elements associated with that vocation. Finally, even as the conqueror of kings, Joshua was never a king. This apophatic quality, this "negative uniqueness," may explain why, when Joshua died, the Lord chose no one to replace him.

What, then, was Joshua? Two titles stand out. First, with respect to Moses, Joshua is called "minister" or "assistant" (*meshareth*, *parestekos*, *hypourgos*) (Exodus 24:13; Joshua 1:1). Second, he is called "servant" or "slave" (*'eved*, *doulos*) with respect to the Lord (Joshua 24:29; Judges 2:8). This latter title, applied to an identifiable servant of God, is not common in the Old Testament. Aside from Joshua, it is used only of Moses (Deuteronomy 34:5), David (Psalms 18 and 36 [in Greek 17 and 35]), and God's Suffering Servant in the Book of Isaiah (42:1 etc.).

From the perspective of history, Joshua was an instrument and figure of transmission, linking Israel's period in the Desert to the era of the Conquest. The Bible is hardly subtle in its comparison of Joshua to Moses. Thus, each man was called in a theophanic experience (Exodus 3, Joshua 5). As Moses moved the Israelites from a settled place to a time of wandering, so Joshua moved them from wandering to settlement. Both Moses and Joshua were eighty years old when they began the final stages of their lives. Moses delivered God's People through the dried-bed of the Red Sea; Joshua led them into the Holy Land through the dried-up bed of the Jordan River. We keep hearing the steady drumbeat of as-Moses-so-Joshua (Joshua 1:5,9,17; 3:7 etc.).

Above all, Joshua represents salvation. Indeed, such was the meaning of his original name, Hosea (Numbers 13:8; Deuteronomy 32:44). Moses changed that name to Joshua by prefixing it with the first syllable of the Sacred Tetragrammaton, thus forming "Joshua," which means, "The Lord is salvation."

Justin Martyr, another Church Father born in the Holy Land, remarked on the prefix added to Joshua's name, which made its bearer a prefiguration of the Savior in the New Testament. The earlier Joshua, gave Israel "a temporary inheritance, for he was neither Christ, who is God, nor the Son of God." The later bearer of that name, however, "after the Resurrection, gave is an eternal possession" (Dialogue With Trypho 113; cf. 132).

The theological meaning of this name, Yeshua (cf. Nehemiah 8:17)—identical to that of our Savior—is often a source of reflection among Christians. For example, the announcing angel drew attention to it when he instructed Joseph, “you shall call his name Yeshua, for he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). It was with respect to this name, Yeshua, that Peter declared, “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

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