

September 1, 2013

Corona Anni

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Esther and Joseph

The Lord revealed His salvific will to the Israelites through their historical experience. Of prime importance in that experience, of course, were the events and institutions associated with Moses, Joshua, David, and Solomon: the Exodus, the Sinai Covenant, the Conquest, the Davidic throne, and the Temple.

Although those components of the Revelation were foundational, they did not exhaust the ways in which the Lord revealed His will to Israel, a fact later demonstrated by the canonization of the Prophetic Books.

Through the Prophets the Lord disclosed, among other truths, that Israel's painful experiences of exile also revealed His salvific will. Indeed, the Israelites' historical familiarity with exile—the Diaspora—became so dominant and extensive that it altered, in many minds, their regard for the Holy Land itself. The 'Erets Israel, once the majority of Israelites, through several generations, no longer lived there—and had no intention of returning—became a diminished point of reference.

In accordance with this mental shift, later biblical literature came to include what I want to call a "Diaspora perspective." With this expression I mean to describe those later parts of the Old Testament that reflect concern for how the devout adherent to Israel's God was to live outside the Promised Land and other normal experiences associated with that Land. It is easy to recognize this perspective in the books of Daniel, Esther, and Tobit

The authors of that literature had at hand a sort of model for this perspective even in the Torah; namely, the story of Joseph, who spent most of his life outside the Holy Land, working for the Egyptian government. In truth, close readers of Holy Scripture have long commented on the resemblances of Daniel to Joseph.

Less well recognized—but not, for that, less recognizable—are the resemblances of Esther to Joseph. Among these it is worth mentioning:

First, in Joseph and Esther we recognize "orphans stories," a feature probably

related to Israel's alienation from its native land. In the case of Esther we are told explicitly that "she had neither father nor mother" and was raised by her kinsman Mordecai (2:7). Joseph, likewise, had lost his mother through death, and, by reason of his exile, had lost his father as well. Both of them, consequently, are obliged to "make it on their own."

Second, in both stories there is an element of secrecy touching the hero's presence in the royal court. In this respect, Joseph's sentence in prison has at least this much in common with Esther's silence, in the king's harem, with respect to her ethnic identity. No one, warns Mordecai, must know she is a Jew. That is to say, there must be some external assimilation to the condition of the exile; otherwise the salvific action becomes impossible. This human secrecy becomes the setting in which—I shall comment presently—a divine secrecy is at work. Each story contains, near the end, a disclosure of the hero's identity.

Third, each of them, Joseph and Esther, has a single opportunity to make the proper impression on their respective royal patrons. Both are successful in this.

Fourth, both Joseph and Esther serve God's purpose to deliver His People. (Once again, however, the "Diaspora perspective" is preserved; neither Joseph nor Esther saves the People by bringing them to the Land of Covenant)

Fifth, both Joseph and Esther are Wisdom figures, though in the later book Esther must share this distinction with Mordecai.

Sixth—and most important to a theological interest—there is some secret providential influence in each story that determines the outcome of events. An unbeliever, in reading these stories, may ascribe their happy endings to coincidence and good fortune.

In the Book of Esther, for instance, events appear to be accidental, but we believing readers know better. We recognize it was no accident when Esther won that beauty contest at the book's beginning; nor was it by chance that Ahasuerus, unable to sleep one fateful night, began to search the archives and thereby discovered the name of Mordecai. It was not fortuitous that Haman fell on Esther's bed just as the king walked in, nor was it mere happenstance that that unwitting scoundrel had already prepared a gallows for his own neck.

God's providential guidance of the Joseph story—the divine secrecy in the narrative—is made explicit near its end, where the hero tells his brothers, "But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to

bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive" (Genesis 50:20). An explicit confession of Divine Providence does not appear in Esther. (Indeed, in the Hebrew text God is never so much as mentioned!) God's activity in this story is too subtle, too secret, too mysterious, for observation or comment. One recognizes it implicitly.

©2013 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

phrii@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:

www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html

Pastoral Ponderings:

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