

May 18, 2014

Sunday of the Samaritan Woman

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

When the New Testament uses the expression "Scriptures," it normally refers to the Old Testament. The earliest Christian preaching appealed to that body of literature as a necessary component in the Gospel itself.

For example, in the Church's first recorded sermon the Apostle Peter quotes both the Psalms and the prophecy of Joel as integral to the Christian message (Acts 2:21, 28, 35; Joel 2:28-32; Psalms 109:1; 15 :8-11). Philip explains to an Ethiopian pilgrim how a prophetic book told of Redemption in Christ (Acts 8:26-40). In the synagogue at Ephesus Apollos demonstrates "from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Messiah" (18:28), and Paul appeals to both "the Torah of Moses and the Prophets" to persuade his visitors "with respect to Jesus" (28:23).

This feature of the Apostolic preaching is carried over to the Gospels. Thus, the Evangelist Matthew constantly indicates how something or other in the life of Jesus happens in fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy (1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 5:17-18; 8:17; 12:16-21; 13:35; 21:4; 26:54; 27:9). The same interest is obvious, too, in the Gospels of Luke (4:17-21; 21:22; 24:44) and John (12:37-41; 13:18; 15:25; 17:12; 18:9; 19:24, 38).

Sometimes the Old Testament is said to relate to the Christian Mystery through some form of symbolism, whether designated as allegorical (allegoroumena, Galatians 4:24), or figurative (typikos, 1 Corinthians 10:11), or parabolic (parabole, Hebrews 9:9; 11:19). This vocabulary passed quickly into Christians' understanding of the Old Testament by recourse to its "types" and "allegories." (In spite of modern efforts to distinguish them, by the way, the Church Fathers used these two terms interchangeably.)

It is significant, however, that not a single Church Father—whether Greek or Latin—ever uses the word "typology" to describe a Christian reading of the Old Testament. The complete absence of this term in patristic literature is a pretty good indication that what modern readers call "typology" has little to do with the exegetical understanding of the Church Fathers.

Fidelity to those Fathers will prompt us never to abstract the “types” of the Christian Mystery in the Hebrew Bible from the historical narratives of which they are parts. Christian readers severely limit their understanding of the Old Testament if they read it simply to find literary analogies with the New. What is called “biblical typology,” if it divorces the Old Testament types from the original narratives of which they are integral parts, reduces Bible-reading to an a-historical form of poetic recreation.

The biblical “types,” “parables,” “figures,” “figures,” and “allegories” are integral to the Bible’s historical continuum, and fidelity to the Sacred Text should preclude their abstraction from the biblical story. Christian understanding of the Old Testament must never separate its figurative and allegorical parts from the historical and literary contexts in which they appear.

On the contrary, as the *paidagogos eis Christon* (Galatians 3:24), the Old Testament provides the proper narrative foundational to Christian theology itself. History is an essential component of our faith. Since Divine Revelation cannot be separated from this history in which it is conveyed, Sacred Theology must never permit itself to become a-historical.

Thus, when the Apostles went forth to preach the Gospel, they placed it in the context of Old Testament history. Stephen commenced his testimony to Jesus by declaring, “the God of glory appeared to our Father Abraham in Mesopotamia” (Acts 7:2). Paul, taking his cue from the assigned synagogue reading that day, began his proclamation of Jesus, “The God of this people chose our fathers and exalted the people when they lived as sojourners in the land of Egypt” (13:15).

Indeed, the New Testament starts with a synopsis of Old Testament history: “The book of genesis (biblos geneseos) of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham; Abraham begot Isaac, Isaac begot Jacob, and Jacob begot Judah and his brothers” (Matthew 1:1-2).

These opening verses of the Apostolic Scriptures inaugurate the account of Salvation by taking us to two historical covenants: that with Abraham, established in the nucleus of the Torah, and that with David, positioned at

the core of the Nebi'im. These two covenants gird the structure for “the genesis of Jesus Christ,” who appears in this world to fulfill the promises made to Abraham and David. Then, we are told, implementing the unfailing transmission of these covenants, “Abraham begot Isaac” and “David begot Solomon.” Likewise, when Captivity in Babylon had put all God’s promises in peril—when all hope was lost—“Jeconiah begot Shealtiel.” The New Testament, before it ever speaks of a single biblical “type,” makes sure we have a firm grasp of the whole Old Testament as Salvation History.

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