

December 14, 2014
Sunday of the Forefathers

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings
Joshua, Judges, and the Cursing Psalms

The books of Joshua and Judges, which begin with the conquest of the Holy Land by the Chosen People, are dominated by the imagery of warfare. It is not surprising, I guess, that some modern readers express shock and concern about the emphasis on combat in these books, the bloodshed, the conquest, the seizure of the property of others, and so forth. These two books if taken in a merely literal sense, might be used to justify all sorts of dreadful behavior, and, truth be told, some Christians deliberately avoid Joshua and Judges for that very reason.

The arguments directed against these two books, run parallel, then, to those alleged against the "cursing psalms." In both cases, the question is legitimately posed: Are we not dealing here with a very primitive and immature level of religion that we should not pursue? Should not Christians, who have been enlightened with the greater grace of the Gospel, simply ignore such an early and more barbarous expression of religion? I even know of monasteries where the cursing psalms are omitted from the recitation of the Hours.

It is arguably in connection with these problematic texts that we perceive most clearly Paul's distinction between the letter that kills and the Spirit that gives life (Cf. 2 Cor 3:6).

We Christians today, after all, are hardly the first biblical readers to sense a problem with too literal an application of these more aggressive parts of Holy Scripture. Since early in Christian history great care has been taken to interpret the Bible's battles, bloodshed, cursing, and hostility in a more spiritual sense, imaginatively applying these narratives to the struggle that Christians must exert to do battle with Satan, who goes about the world as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8).

A good number of sermons and Christian commentaries on these problematic texts have come down to us from the early centuries of the Church, and all of them are marked by this same pastoral concern. The vigorous fighting recorded in Joshua and Judges, as well as the robust

cursing of enemies that one finds in the Book of Psalms, were habitually understood by those ancient preachers and commentators as referring to the daily struggles involved in the Christian life.

To sustain the validity of this traditional approach, I offer two reflections here:

First, the application of these historical events to the more spiritual dimensions of our life in Christ is not farfetched, inasmuch as Ancient Israel's struggles with the Canaanites and her other enemies were not simply political and military. Those were idolatrous cultures, devoted to the worship of demonic powers. The religion of those peoples was hateful to God. As offensive as this may sound to modern ears, Israel was involved in a godly task when it endeavored to destroy those cultures. Although Christians are forbidden to employ such violent means to eradicate idolatry and perversion from our modern culture, we are no less obliged to dedicate ourselves to that struggle and to that eradication.

Indeed, the perversions of the ancient Canaanite may seem a bit tame in comparison with the demonic conditions that surround Christians in the world today. Arguably more than the Church Fathers, we modern Americans—our culture shaped by Philistines and our government run by Baal-enthusiasts—are in an excellent position to understand the evils of the Amorites, the atrocities of the Jebusites, and the cruelties of Moloch-worship.

Second, Christians sometimes fail to take seriously their struggle against the forces of evil rampant in their own souls. Too frequently the strenuous, biblically enjoined obligation to "work out our salvation in fear and trembling" has been dismissed as simply a species of works-righteousness.

There is no question here, surely, of "earning" our salvation. There is, however, the elementary concern that in all things God be glorified, and often enough God is not glorified by our scant concern for rooting out evil from our souls—the various faults, habits, and dispositions inimical to divine grace. It was to Christians, after all—not to pagans—that Paul sent the warning not to grieve the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:30). It is a perversion of Holy Scripture to use the doctrine of salvation through faith as an excuse for spiritual laziness and self-indulgence.

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