

July 7, 2002

Second Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Destined some day to be the king of Massa, a small realm in northern Arabia, (cf. Genesis 25:14; 1 Chronicles 1:30), Lemuel was grateful to a wise mother for several verses of practical instruction that would serve him well in the years ahead. That instruction, being brief, could be inscribed on a single small sheet of vellum or papyrus, and Lemuel probably had a number of copies made for his friends. Those copies he also shared with other local kings, so that his mother's instructions made the rounds of various royal courts in the region, carried by emissaries otherwise dispatched to attend to the diplomatic and mercantile concerns of Massa.

In due course, one of those emissaries came to Jerusalem to arrange some commercial treaty or other with King Solomon. Lemuel, well acquainted with the Solomon's universal reputation for wisdom (cf. 1 Kings 4:31), had sent along a copy of his mother's instructions as a personal gift. Now it happened that Solomon was in the process, just then, of editing a collection of traditional wisdom proverbs. Gladly receiving Lemuel's little scroll, therefore, he read it promptly and was so impressed that he incorporated the maternal instructions verbatim into his collection. Thus now, three thousand years later, we read those brief instructions of Lemuel's mother in Proverbs 31:1-9.

Perhaps significant also is the context in which Solomon placed the instructions of Lemuel's mother in the Book of Proverbs. Namely, immediately in front of the famous description of the ideal wise woman (31:10-31). Was Solomon thereby paying the Queen Mother of Massa a compliment, suggesting that she herself exemplified that description? I doubt that I am the only reader who has entertained this thought.

Although the Book of Proverbs several times recommends that a young man pay attention to the teaching of his mother (1:8; 6:20; 15:20), these verses from Lemuel's mother are the only example of maternal teaching explicitly contained in Proverbs. And, on reading this material, we gain the impression that it is not, on the whole, much different from the instruction that a young man received from his father. There are warnings against lust (31:3) and drinking alcohol (31:4), along with an

exhortation to take care of the oppressed and the poor (31:5-9).

Some of the material here resembles that in other ancient collections of teaching intended for future rulers. For example, "The Instruction of King Meri-Kare," an Egyptian manuscript preserved (as Papyrus Leningrad 11 6A) in St. Petersburg, contains a collection of such teaching from near the end of the third millennium before Christ.

Lemuel's royal mother obviously embodied a traditional form of wisdom, heavily accented with good sense and moral responsibility. In this respect her instruction is of whole cloth with the rest of the Book of Proverbs.

The most ancient form of the wisdom tradition, of which Lemuel's mother and the Book of Proverbs are good representatives, was not much concerned with the kinds of thorny speculative questions that preoccupied Ecclesiastes and the Book of Job. It did not normally raise theoretical reflections about the meaning and purpose of life. It contained nothing suggestive of the "cutting edge" of new ideas that might distract from the serious business of getting on with a good and useful life.

The inherited wisdom tended to ask "how" a person should live in a difficult world rather than "why" he should go on living in a difficult world. Instead of inquiring "Why do the innocent suffer?" it suggested ways of avoiding those sufferings that a man might bring upon himself by not living wisely.

The wisdom of Proverbs and Lemuel's mother may be called tried and true, sage and sane, proved repeatedly in the experience of previous generations. It would certainly discourage a young man from "marching to a different drummer" or "doing his own thing." It emphasized such themes as fidelity to inherited standards of responsibility, respect for the teachings of parents and elders, hard work, fiscal conservatism, sobriety, virtue, principled judgment, prudence in one's business affairs and matters of state, personal discipline in the maintenance of time, money and other resources, strict marital fidelity and the consequent joys of home and family.

Although history has left us no other record of Lemuel, we are probably justified in thinking of him living to an old age on the throne the kingdom of Massa, dying secure in the memory of grateful citizens who recalled his wise and benevolent reign.

It should not surprise us, either, if some archeologist should someday uncover his tomb and find the inscription: "Here lies Lemuel, King of Massa, whose final words were, 'I owe it all to Mom.'".

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