

April 6, 2003

St. John of the Ladder

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The career of Ehud, Israel's defender against Moab, comes to an end in Judges 3:30, with the note that "the land had rest for eighty years." The fourth chapter begins with the clause, "When Ehud had died." These two verses would seem to provide an untarnished and seamless narrative transition.

They don't, however, because between them falls another verse, introducing yet another character, as though out of nowhere: "After [Ehud] was Shamgar the son of Anath, who killed six hundred men of the Philistines with an ox goad; and he also delivered Israel." Just who was this Shamgar, of whom we are told so very little?

Well, the Bible places Shamgar, like Deborah and Barak, after Ehud, which would make him roughly a contemporary of those two. This impression is later confirmed by the mention of him in Deborah's canticle in Judges 5:6. In addition, we can fix Shamgar geographically, because the Sacred Text tells us that he fought against the Philistines, which places his activities in the west of the Holy Land. Thus, while Deborah and Barak were occupied with Israel's enemies to the east, Shamgar was dealing with those in the west.

But there is more. Shamgar is called the "son of Anath," a designation that appears not to be a patronymic, because Anath is not a masculine name. It is more likely a reference to Shamgar's birthplace, the Canaanite city of Beth-Anath, ("house of Anath"), which served under tribute to Israel since the time of the Conquest (Judges 1:33). Consequently, Shamgar was likely not an Israelite by blood. He certainly belonged to the Chosen People by allegiance, however, and Israel's enemies were his own.

Some historians, realizing that "son of Anath" (ben-Anath) is a geographical and not a patronymic reference, propose emending the Hebrew text to "of Beth-Anath" (beth-Anath), which would require changing only a single letter. Even this is unnecessary, however, because we know of another "son of Anath" a century or so earlier, during the reign of Pharaoh Ramses II; he was a Syrian sea captain allied to Egypt. Thus, the name itself was not unique, and no emendation of the Hebrew text is required to make Beth-Anath Shamgar's city of

origin.

The Canaanite city Anath and the Greek city Athens were both named after the same patronal goddess, a lady well known in all the lands bordering the eastern Mediterranean, including Africa. The Ugaritic texts from Ras Shamra indicate that she was a goddess of war for the peoples of the Middle East, and Shamgar showed himself worthy of that martial tradition.

However, this does not mean that Shamgar was a warrior. Indeed, he seems to have preferred farming, as indicated by the reference to his ox goad. It is entirely reasonable to picture Shamgar, when there were no pesky Philistines around to distract him, patiently pacing hour-by-hour behind the plow, steadily looking straight ahead and not looking back (Luke 9:62). Resting on the plowshare, meanwhile, lay the pointed end of a sturdy piece of lumber, roughly eight feet long and about two inches in diameter at the other end, which Shamgar, while he plowed, kept tucked under his arm. This was his ox goad. Should the draught animals slow down more than he thought proper, the plowman let the thicker end of the long pole drop down into his hand and gave them a modest thrust with its point. Over time the oxen learned that it was hard to kick against the pricks (Acts 9:5; 26:14).

Shamgar was a steady, patient fellow who loved to till the soil, a man so quiet that the Bible tells us not a single word he ever spoke. He was also a pacific man, who did not even own a weapon. For all that, Shamgar was not someone safely messed with. He was particularly ill disposed toward the Philistines, those recent invaders from Crete, uncouth and troublesome fools who, neglecting their own fields, bothered honest plowmen during working hours. Shamgar expressed his annoyance, over the years, by employing his trusty ox goad to dispatch some six hundred of the rascals to the nether regions. Six hundred was a respectable figure, evidence of a conscientious citizen doing his part to preserve decency and advance the public order. It earned Shamgar a brief place in the Bible, where he appears as a kind of Semitic Cincinnatus, occasionally obliged to interrupt the simple joys of agriculture in order to deal with knaves and ne'er-do-wells.

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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
phri@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html

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