

September 7, 2003
Forefeast of Our Lady's Nativity

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Many years ago a devout old woman of Irish extraction told me the story of her family's migration to the United States during the great potato famine, in the course of which crisis, she informed me, the Catholics in the old country could expect no help from that terrible Protestant monarch, Henry VIII. I did not remark on her inaccuracy, of course, not only because a young man does not correct a person more than twice his age, but also because Henry VIII was quite incidental to the story. The lady knew her family history well enough and could likely have named her ancestors for several generations back. Since the account she shared with me pertained to family-not political-history, the correct identification of the relevant British king was. . . . well, irrelevant.

The early stories in the Bible fall very much into this category of "family history." In considerable detail they tell us what various members of the family were doing, such as who begat whom, but allusions to the larger social picture of the time, political references in particular, are scant at best. Such contextual information, if we are keen to have it, we must obtain elsewhere, especially from archeology.

Archeological texts indicate, for example, that there was a large westward migration of Semitic peoples, known as the Habiru, or Hebrews, across the Fertile Crescent early in the second millennium before Christ. The Bible says nothing about that extremely important social phenomenon. It only says that Abraham, who was called a Hebrew (Genesis 14:13), migrated west, along with his family, from Ur to Haran to Shechem to Egypt (11:31-12:10). That is to say, he went up and across the entire length of the Fertile Crescent. Both stories are historically based, but the biblical story pertains to family history.

Then, when Abraham does arrive in Egypt, he has an interesting run-in with the pharaoh who rules the country (12:11-20). That pharaoh, who was surely one of the most powerful political figures in the world at that time, the Bible does not identify. It could have been Amenemhet III, or Tutimaios I, or, for that matter, Henry VIII. It is a family story, after all; the Bible really doesn't care who the pharaoh was.

This insouciance to the larger social picture is clear right through the Joseph Narratives. These latter stories, although they remember the name of Potiphar, never identify the pharaoh pertinent to the events, and, when they do describe a major social innovation in Egyptian history (Genesis 47:13-26), that story is told solely within the perspective of the family's own history.

Indeed, even respecting the Exodus, the most important political event of that ancient family history, the Bible tells us nearly nothing of the larger social setting of the time. The varying fortunes of Egypt's 19th Dynasty, its battles with the Nubians and Hittites, for instance, are never mentioned, nor do we catch the name of a single pharaoh. We do learn of Egypt's massive construction projects during that period, but only insofar as those projects touched the Bible's family history.

This perspective in the Bible does not seriously begin to change until the mid-tenth century B.C. From then on, the biblical story starts to assume a larger social and political interest, undoubtedly related to the international concerns of the reign of Solomon (961-922). Thus, it is not surprising that the first pharaoh identified by name in Holy Scripture is Sheshonq I (945-924), founder of the 22nd Dynasty, who involved himself in the dynamics of Solomon's kingdom (1 Kings 11:40; 14:25).

From the mid-tenth century, biblical history, as narrated in Kings, Chronicles, and the prophetic books, was dated according to the reigns of the kings of Judah and Israel, a system that was switched to the Persian emperors after the fall of those kingdoms (2 Chronicles 36:22; Nehemiah 2:1, etc.). This development, which effectively placed biblical history within the large perspective of social and political history, attained a certain fullness when Luke dated the ministry of John the Baptist, the inauguration of the era of grace (Acts 1:22), "in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar" (Luke 3:1).

This development of perspective also affirms a theological point; namely, that the "family God" of the Hebrews is likewise the Lord of universal history, including political history. He is to be adored and served even in the halls of government, where kings and their ministers are charged with the fortunes and destiny of nations.

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