

May 23, 2004

The Sunday After Ascension

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Even from apostolic times the Church has regarded the ark of Noah as a symbol rich in theological significance. St. Peter himself spoke of it in terms of salvation, referring to "the ark . . . in which a few, that is eight souls, were saved (*diesothesan*) through water." He went on to speak of "an antitype which now saves (*sozei*) us: baptism" (1 Peter 3:20-21). The Epistle to the Hebrews similarly treated of the ark in reference to salvation, saying that Noah "prepared an ark for the saving (*soteria*) of his household" (Hebrews 11:7).

Early Christian testimonies to this understanding follow suit. For example, in the second century Justin Martyr saw the ark as a symbol of the Cross (*Dialogue With Trypho* 138.2-3). In the third century Cyprian of Carthage affirmed that "the one ark of Noah was a figure of the one Church" during the flood, that "baptism of the world in which it was purified and redeemed" (*Letters* 68.2). Jerome (*Letters* 133) and Augustine (*Against Faustus* 12.17) said much the same in the early fifth century. Various combinations of this imagery are ubiquitous in patristic and liturgical texts.

The root of such symbolism is found in the Old Testament's own portrayal of Noah's ark. Genesis calls it a *tevah*, a word used in only one other place in the Hebrew Scriptures, namely, to designate the little box in which the infant Moses floated on the Nile.

Indeed, the juxtaposition of the two stories seems clearly intentional if we examine the manifest similarities between them. First, in respect to both Noah and Moses the *tevah* is a floating container that preserves life from the peril of drowning. That is to say, the threat comes from water. Second, in each case the container is daubed with pitch to keep out the threatening water (Genesis 6:14; Exodus 2:3). Third, both stories contribute to the ongoing biblical theme of God's deliverance of His servants in times of crisis.

There is an even subtler element here, however. The word *tevah* is not Hebrew; it is Egyptian, in which language it may designate a box, a chest, even a coffin. Its use in only these two texts cries out for an explanation.

Why does the Bible borrow this strange word and then use it in only these two places? That is to say, why does the Bible not state, in plain Hebrew, that Noah built a boat (*abarah*) or a ship (*oniyyah*)? And why, when Moses was put into that little container made of reeds, is the thing not simply called, in plain Hebrew, a box (*aron*) or a basket (*tene*)? Why do these two stories in Genesis and Exodus make such a point of employing an improbable, alien word not otherwise found in the Bible?

I can think of a single reasonable answer. Namely, that the biblical author had in mind to tie these two accounts together in a very explicit way, so that the correspondence between them would be unmistakable. The setting of the Moses story may have suggested the use of the Egyptian noun *tevah*. There stands out, in short, a clear literary parallel between the stories of old Noah near the beginning of Genesis and young Moses near the beginning of Exodus.

This correspondence will be evident to those who regularly read the Bible in Hebrew. For example, the medieval rabbinic scholar Rashi called attention to it in his commentary on Genesis (though not, curiously, in his commentary on Exodus).

However, the important literary and theological relationship between Genesis 6-9 and Exodus 2 is all but obliterated in many translations, starting even with the Septuagint and the Vulgate. More recently the English Standard Version, while leaving Noah in his "ark," plops poor little Moses down in a mere "basket." On the other hand, it is one of the merits of the King James Bible that it employs the word "ark" (from the Latin *arca*, meaning box or chest) in both places, thus explicitly tying the two passages together.

And they certainly should be studied together, joining Moses with Noah, and the Exodus account with the narrative of the Flood. As Noah in his *tevah* saved the human race and the animals from utter destruction, so the baby Moses, preserved in a tiny *tevah* of his own, became the deliverer of the

Hebrews. Indeed, Moses' very name, which means "drawn from the water," is a foreshadowing of Israel's deliverance from Pharaoh's army at the Red Sea. Moses is a kind of new Noah. In his *tevah* at the beginning of this story, he makes his own personal exodus, as it were, a promise of the one to come.

The themes in both stories, finally, symbolize the sacrament of Baptism, in which God's people, even today, are "drawn from the water."

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