

June 20, 2004

## The Third Sunday After Pentecost

### Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

I have long been impressed by the ways in which the Book of Genesis prepares its readers for the Book of Exodus. This should not be surprising, I suppose, because the contents of Exodus were surely more important to Ezra and the other biblical editors than were the stories in Genesis. Exodus, after all, contains the beginning of the Torah given to Israel at Mount Sinai.

It is worth remarking, in this respect, that our reading of the Bible today differs considerably from that of the ancient rabbis who put the Sacred Text together. Many modern readers, who delight in the exciting stories throughout Genesis, sometimes find themselves getting rather bored and bogged down when they encounter all the rules and ordinances that fill the second half of Exodus. Indeed, those many regulations in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, if not skipped altogether by modern readers, are often read with little interest. This was not the case for Ezra and his associates. The major interest for the ancients was not in the narratives but in those rules and regulations. For them, the important thing was the Law, the Torah, the expression of God's will and mind revealed on Mount Sinai.

This perspective is clear in the Hebrew canon itself. Even the Book of Genesis is subsumed there under the heading "Torah," the first of those books called simply "The Five" (\*Chumash\*), or the "five fifths of the Law." That is to say, in the Hebrew canon Genesis serves as an introduction, a preamble, to the whole Torah. It is an integral part of the Law. Thus, we recall that St. Paul, when he sought to "establish the Law," immediately appealed to Genesis (Romans 3:31-4:3).

If the entire thrust of Genesis is directed towards the giving of the Torah, therefore, it makes sense to find anticipations of the Book of Exodus already in the Book of Genesis.

In fact, these anticipations begin rather early. As soon as the Flood is over, for example, we learn of the sin of Ham, the forefather of those very Egyptians who will eventually enslave Israel (Genesis 9:22). Among Ham's other descendents

were the people of Babel (10:10), who undertook the first recorded example of brick construction (11:3). With those bricks, let us remember, those descendants of Ham endeavored to raise the famous tower at Babel, an act of defiance against God.

That early account of rebellious brick making prepares the reader for the later story of Egypt's various building projects, which will form the context of the opening of the Book of Exodus. In fact, the compulsory making of bricks was Pharaoh's way of oppressing God's people (Exodus 1:10-11; 3:7; 5:6-16). The arrogant monarch confronted by Moses was nothing if not a rebellious builder with bricks.

That earlier building project at Babel anticipates, then, the future building projects of Pharaoh in Egypt. Both building projects use the same material-bricks. In the Bible both Babel and Egypt represent pretty much the same thing, the worldly, idolatrous city rising in defiance against the true God, especially by its advanced technology.

Pharaoh's defeat in Exodus is also prophesied in the Book of Genesis, both by an explicit message to Abraham in mystic vision (Genesis 15:14; Acts 7:6-7), and by the story of Pharaoh's abduction of Sarah in Genesis 12. This latter text merits close examination with respect to our theme.

First, Abraham and Sarah are driven into Egypt by famine (Genesis 12:10), exactly as famine will later be the cause of Israel's sojourn there, which sets the scene for the Exodus (45:6-11). Second, when Abraham and Sarah arrive in Egypt they encounter the high-handed, arbitrary, and menacing behavior of a Pharaoh (12:11-15), just as Moses will. Third, Abraham deceives and outwits Pharaoh with double-talk (12:16), which is what Moses will do as well (Exodus 3:18; 7:16; 8:1,20,25-28). Fourth, Abraham's encounter with Pharaoh leads to plagues inflicted on Egypt (Genesis 12:17). This same word, "plagues" (\*nega'im\*), will be used in the Book of Exodus to portray the punishments endured by Egypt because of Pharaoh's hardness of heart (Exodus 11:1; 12:17). Finally, like Moses and the Israelites (Exodus 3:20-22; 11:1-3; 12:35-36), Abraham is enriched with the spoils of Egypt when he leaves the place (Genesis 12:16,20).

In summary, the various elements of Abraham's brief sojourn in Egypt prefigure the drama of the Exodus: the famine, the arrogance of the Pharaoh, the superior wisdom of the prophet, God's intervention by sending the plagues, the vindication of

the Chosen People and their departure from Egypt, enriched with its spoils. Abraham thus foreshadows Moses. Genesis prefigures Exodus.

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