

July 4, 2004

## Fifth Sunday After Pentecost

### Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Arguably one of the most puzzling verses in Holy Scripture is that which tells why Moses' mother did not drown him at birth. Just to introduce this subject as a matter of inquiry, but without recommending the accuracy of the translation, I quote the relevant verse in the New King James Version: "And when she saw he was a beautiful child, she hid him three months" (Exodus 2:2).

Now when I describe this statement as puzzling, I have two considerations chiefly in mind. First, taken as a plain assertion-"he was beautiful, so she hid him"-the verse just won't do. All babies are beautiful to their mothers, and no mother wants to drown her newborn child. There is surely something more at work here. Since the beauty in Moses' case is given as the reason for his parents' refusal to obey Pharaoh's command ("Every son who is born you will cast into the river"), we suspect that a deeper, subtler significance is intended.

Second, ancient interpreters did, fact, tend to treat this text as a puzzle. Though differing among themselves somewhat with respect to details, they agreed that its meaning is more profound and mysterious than first appears.

We may begin with the New Testament witnesses, Stephen and the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews. In their reading of this verse, both these early Christians maintained the adjective *\*asteios\**, which the Septuagint used to describe Moses. Although this word is most often translated as "well formed" or "beautiful" (as we saw in the NKJV), each of these sources recognized that the appearance of Moses was of a quality different from merely human beauty.

Thus, after the adjective *\*asteios\**, Stephen added the qualifying expression *\*to Theo\**, "to God," which effectively changes the sense of the verse to "well pleasing to God" (Acts 7:20). Moreover, Stephen described Moses himself, his relationship to the Lord, not his mother's assessment of the child. In fact, Stephen does not even mention Moses' mother.

In the Epistle to the Hebrews, where the appearance of the newborn Moses is given as the reason why his parents "were not afraid of the king's command," the entire context is that of faith: "\*By faith\* Moses, when he was born, was hidden three months by his parents, because they saw that he was a beautiful child" (11:23). Here the point is very subtle indeed. When the parents looked upon little Moses, they were able to discern "by faith" some aspect of the child's appearance that was not otherwise obvious. We recall that this section of Hebrews began by defining faith as "the substance of \*things hoped for\*, the evidence of \*things not seen\*" (11:1). Faith gave Moses' parents a special discernment in regard the child.

These early Christian interpretations of Exodus 2:2 are not unlike those found among ancient Jewish readers of the text. For example, Philo wrote that the newborn Moses "had a beauty more than human" (\*de Vita Moysi\* 1.9), and Josephus apparently agreed (\*Antiquities\* 2.9.6 §224), adding that Moses' mother felt no pangs in childbirth (2.9.4 §218). Rashi, in his commentary on Exodus, went even further, speculating that the house was filled with light at Moses' birth. Indeed, he wrote, when Pharaoh's daughter opened the little basket floating on the Nile, she beheld the Shekinah, the luminous cloud of the divine glory.

All of these readings, differing among themselves in detail, are nonetheless in accord in their search for a deeper, subtler meaning in the Bible's description of the newborn Moses. They all agree, furthermore, that his appearance was revelatory of God's purpose.

I respectfully offer here another approach to the passage.

Most of the authors that I have cited (Rashi the exception) based their interpretations of Exodus 2:2 on the Septuagint translation. For my part I suggest that we should look more closely at the underlying Hebrew text, which asserts of Moses' mother, \*wattere' 'oto ki tov hu'\*. This clause literally says, "and she saw that he was good."

The most obvious parallels to this passage, I submit, are the several places where the Book of Genesis says of Creation, "And God saw that it was good," \*wayyar' 'Elohim ki tov\* (Genesis 1:10,12,18,21,25,31). It is remarkable that both passages employ the identical predicate (\*ra'ah\*) and exactly the same objective clause (\*ki tov\*). That is to say, each of these books begins with the selfsame assertion, \*ra'ah ki tov\*

- " . . . saw that . . . was good." Moreover, this verbal correspondence between Genesis and Exodus, too manifest for doubt, is certainly deliberate on the author's part. Thus, God's salvific deed in Exodus is here set in intentional parallel with His creative work in Genesis. I propose that this theological harmony pertains to the deeper, subtler significance of the text.

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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](mailto:phri@touchstonemag.com)

**Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:**  
[www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html](http://www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html)  
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