

April 17, 2005
Fifth Sunday of Lent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

One of the bloodiest, most distressing stories in the Bible records how Athaliah, the *gebirah* or queen mother of the slain King Ahaziah, seized the throne of Judah in 841 B.C. and promptly ordered the murder of her own grandchildren in order to guarantee her hold on that throne (2 Kings 11; 2 Chronicles 22). Holy Scripture simply records the event, without accounting for Athaliah's motive in this singular atrocity.

Although such savagery from a daughter of Jezebel might not be surprising, Athaliah's action was puzzling from a political perspective, nonetheless, and this in two respects. First, as the story's final outcome would prove, her dreadful deed rendered Athaliah extremely unpopular in the realm, and her possession of the crown, therefore, more precarious. Second, had she preserved the lives of her grandchildren, instead of killing them, Athaliah's real power in the kingdom would likely have been enhanced in due course, not lessened. As the *gebirah*, she might have remained the *de facto* ruler of Judah until death at a ripe old age. Just what, then, did the lady have in mind?

The historian Josephus, the first to speculate on this question, ascribed Athaliah's action to an inherited hatred of the Davidic house. It was her wish, said he, "that none of the house of David should be left alive, but that the entire family should be exterminated, that no king might arise from it later" (*Antiquities* 9.7.1).

The playwright Racine developed this very plausible explanation in his *Athalie*, where the evil queen exclaims, *David m'est en horreur, et les fils de ce Roi/ Quoique nés de mon sang, sont étrangers pour moi*--"David I abhor, and the sons of this king, though born of my blood, are strangers to me" (2.7.729-730).

Following Racine, this interpretation was taken up in Felix Mendelssohn's opera *Athalie*, which asserts that the vicious woman acted in order that *keine Hand ihr nach der Krone greifen,/ Kein König aus dem Stamme Davids fürder/ Den Dienst Jehovas wieder schützen könne*--"that no hand could reach out for her crown, nor king henceforth from David's line preserve again the service of Jehovah" (First Declamation).

Racine also ascribed to Athaliah a second motive, namely her sense of duty (*j'ai cru le devoir faire*) to protect the realm from the various enemies that surrounded it. Indeed, she boasts that her success in this effort was evidence of heaven's blessing on it (2.5.465-484). However, since it is unclear how the slaughter of her grandchildren contributed to the regional peace that Athaliah claimed as the fruit of her wisdom (*Je jouissais en paix du fruit de ma sagesse*), this explanation is not so plausible as the first.

The third motive ascribed by Racine seems more reasonable and is certainly more interesting--namely, that Athaliah acted out of vengeance for the recent killing of her mother and the rest of her own family. Deranged by wrath and loathing, she imagined that the slaughter of her posterity avenged the slaughter of her predecessors: *Oui, ma juste fureur, et j'en fais vanité,/ A vengé mes Parents sur ma posterité*--"Yes, my just wrath, of which I am proud, has avenged my parents on my offspring" (2.7.709-710).

This explanation, which I believe to be correct, makes no rational sense, however, except on the supposition that Athaliah blamed Israel's God for what befell her own family. In attacking David's house, she thought to attack David's God, whom she accuses of *l'implacable vengeance* (2.7.727).

In this respect, the third motive of Racine's Athaliah is the goal of the first. That is to say, the hateful queen seeks to destroy David's house in order to render void God's promises given through the prophets, especially the promise of the Messiah that would come from David's line, *ce Roi promis aux Nations,/ Cet Enfant de David, votre espoir, votre attente*--"that King promised to the nations, that Child of David, your hope, your expectation."

The motive of vengeance, which later appears in Handel's oratorio *Athalia*, correctly indicates the Christian meaning, the *sensus plenior*, of the Old Testament story. Waging war on great David's greater Son, Athaliah foreshadowed yet another usurper of the Davidic throne, hateful King Herod, who likewise ordered a large massacre of little boys in a vain effort to retain the crown and scepter that were not his.

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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
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