

June 5, 2005
Sunday of the Man Born Blind

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

However distressing it might prove, it would not surprise me overmuch, I suppose, to learn that Othniel and Achsah are not everybody's all-time favorite couple in the Bible. If so, it's too bad, for they deserve to be.

As for Othniel, he is perhaps best remembered for the high place he holds in the Bible's military history. He was the first of those that Holy Scripture calls the "Judges." He was a charismatic warrior, the very first man of whom it was written, "The Spirit of the Lord came upon him." (Judges 3:10).

Notwithstanding this charism for combat, the now mature Othniel was probably a reluctant fighter, a gentleman farmer at long last, who agreed to leave retirement only because the times were hard. Of those times the Bible tells us, "So the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord. They forgot the Lord their God, and served the Baals and Asherahs. Therefore the anger of the Lord was hot against Israel, and He sold them into the hand of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Mesopotamia; and the children of Israel served Cushan-Rishathaim eight years" (3:7-8).

The Israelites, thus punished for their infidelity, cried out to God, and He, in response, raised up Othniel to be "a deliverer for the children of Israel." However hesitant Othniel may have felt in assuming this mission, he was bound to reflect that the ancient lore of soldiering coursed in his veins. He was, in fact, a nephew of that singular warrior Caleb (3:9), and in his youth Othniel had marched in the trumpeted ranks encircling Jericho.

Still, prior to this divine summons to deal with Cushan-Rishathaim, Othniel had not gripped a sword for a long time. Instead, he had lived peacefully as a local farmer, tending his crops and minding his herds near the springs of Debir, where he enjoyed life with Achsah, the lovely cousin he had taken to wife many years before.

In fact, it was at the siege of Debir that Othniel had won the lady's hand. The story narrating that event, moreover, was thought to be so fetching that the Bible had to tell it twice: "From [Hebron] they went against the inhabitants of Debir. (The name of Debir was formerly Kirjath Sepher.) Then Caleb said, 'Whoever attacks Kirjath Sepher and takes it, to him I will give my daughter Achsah as wife.' And Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, took it; so he gave him his daughter Achsah as wife" (Joshua 15:15-17; Judges 1:11-13).

Achsah was no ordinary young lady, her greater merit indicated, I think, by the fact that only the conqueror of a city deserved her hand. Moreover, Achsah and her groom-to-be conspired to make sure that her hand, when Othniel took it, should not be empty.

I say *they* conspired because it is not clear which of the two conceived the idea. The Hebrew text says, "Now it happened, when she came to him, that *she urged him* to ask her father for a field" (Joshua 15:18; Judges 1:14). Contrariwise, according to the Greek and Latin versions of Judges, "*he urged her.*" Indeed, the Codex Vaticanus even says, "*Othniel urged her.*"

However this textual difficulty is resolved, it is clear that Achsah herself made the request for the field: "And she dismounted from her donkey, and Caleb said to her, 'What do you wish?' So she said to him, 'Give me a blessing; since you have given me land in the South, give me also springs of water.' And Caleb gave her the upper springs and the lower springs" (Joshua 15:18-19; Judges 1:14-15).

Because this particular inheritance was situated "in the South," in the very dry territory of Judah, these springs were essential to its survival. In fact, Debir (the ruins of which were excavated by W. F. Albright at Tell Beit Mirsim) lay in the Negev Desert.

These were the essential springs that Achsah called "a blessing," and they represented the blessing of this couple's marriage. Their settled life on the fertile land, irrigated by the springs of Debir, calls to mind that earlier garden, watered by the four streams of Paradise. The marriage of Othniel and Achsah, that is to say, represented a renewal of that original marriage.

At length this little inheritance had to be defended against a king from Mesopotamia (which means "in the midst of the rivers"), a king who already had, we would presume, plenty of water of his own. Thus, the Spirit of the Lord came down on Othniel with great might, and he went forth to battle for his land and the lady who lived there.

©2005 Patrick Henry Reardon

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
phrii@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html
Pastoral Ponderings:
http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php