

July 17, 2005
Fourth Sunday in Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

We all admit that war is a bad thing, but let us also concede that pitching a battle has the merit, from time to time, of bringing forth good poetry. Is there some sort of communion between the two?

I don't mean, of course, that the literary possibilities offered by the prospect of combat are normally computed in the *casus belli*. It is not as though Agamemnon and his friends, conferring on a recent affront from the Trojans, turned at length to a poet sitting over in the corner and asked, "Well, what about it, Homer? If we go lay siege to Troy, do you think you could do a thing or two with it?"

Nor is it reasonable to suppose that one of the commanders at Balaclava, stymied by the superior position of the Russians, suddenly blurted out, "Blimey, you know, it's only half a league onward. Why don't we just send the Thirteenth Hussars down there right in the face of their artillery? I say, Tennyson old thing, that should get the old literary juices flowing, what?"

When I suggest a communion of battle and poetry I mean, rather, what Keats had in mind when he wrote of "the clanging harp of war." Literary history testifies to a mysterious affinity between the steady march of armies and the pen's long marshalling of measured lines. There is in each case a true cadence, the resolute and disciplined falling of feet pushing on toward the settlement of a determined thesis.

It seems a thing of nature, then, when reasonable men resolve that this or that affront lies beyond toleration-when they feel compelled to steel their souls for the terrible ordeal of combat and put into ordered thought the reasons that compel them to draw the sword-they also take hold of the pen, often enough, to record in words of elegance the destiny, even the drama, of their enterprise. This has been the case of men in every tribe and tongue.

This plain fact does not imply, of course, that the value of the poetry thus produced is necessarily proportioned to the weight of the conflict that produced it. That notion is absurd on its face. Not every great and significant war produced even a single line of memorable poetry, whereas on occasion the muse has been overly generous toward the most insignificant battles ever fought.

The example I have in mind right now comes from Numbers 21:27-30, and because the Bible took the care to record it, I must do at least as much:

Come to Heshbon, let it be built;
Let the city of Sihon be repaired.
For fire came forth from Heshbon,
A flame from the city of Sihon;
It consumed Ar of Moab,
The lords of the heights of the Arnon.
Woe to you, O Moab!

You have perished, You people of Chemosh!
He has given his sons as fugitives,
And his daughters into captivity,
To Sihon king of the Amorites.
But we have shot at them;
Heshbon has perished as far as Dibon.
Then we laid waste as far as Nophah,
Even to the reaches of Medeba.

Now what I find remarkable about this poem is that it was inspired by the Amorites' defeat of Moab, in the early 13th century BC, just slightly before Israel arrived on the scene and, in turn, defeated the Amorites. That is to say, this is not a poem about a battle of Israel but about a war between two other peoples, the Moabites and the Amorites (21:26). That war, strictly speaking, had nothing directly to do with Israel itself. Unlike, say, Exodus 15:1-18 and Judges 5:2-31, this is not a poem about Israel's military history, or even its theological interest.

The historian reasonably inquires, then, what impulse directed the inspired author of Numbers to insert into the Sacred Text this little piece of pagan military poetry? I can think of only one reason. It was a good poem about a real war, earlier waged in territory that had recently fallen to Israel's inheritance. It made no difference that the war itself was not waged by Israel nor was the poem written by an Israelite. It sufficed that this was a really good poem about the destiny and drama of combat.

This poem thus served to broaden the Bible's own vista. Israel took care to preserve these Amorite verses for the same reason that Irish monks, as they copied Greek and Roman literature, perceived that the epic quality of that literature raised it to a level of universal interest and sympathy. That is to say, the impulse prompting the assumption of this poem into Holy Scripture was what we may call classical, and it reveals a bit of God's own take on the matter.

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