

August 14, 2005
Forefeast of our Lady's Dormition

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Now and then I think that the biblical historians must have been men of modest expectations, in the sense that they tended to let people off easy. I have in mind the times when these writers remark, about this or that king, that "he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord," and then go on to describe every manner of reprehensible behavior on the king's part. I fancy sometimes that "he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord" is really a code for "Well, after all, he could have been worse," or "At least he wasn't as bad as so-and-so," or "We can think of one or two sins he did not commit."

An egregious example of this, surely, is King Amaziah of Judah (796-767). Of him both 2 Kings (14:3) and 2 Chronicles (25:2) proclaim, "he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord," but then they proceed to paint a life in which one is hard pressed to find a solitary thing that the eyes of the Lord could have found acceptable.

All right, I exaggerate. Amaziah did *one thing* that was right in the sight of the Lord—he did not retaliate on the families of his father's murderers (2 Kings 14:6; 2 Chronicles 25:4). One thing, then, he did right in the eyes of the Lord, and there you have it. The biblical writers, after exhaustive thought on the matter, were able to discover one sin that Amaziah failed to commit. "He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord," it seems to me, is a pretty generous judgment on that fact. The rest of Amaziah's reign, not to put too fine a point on it, was a disaster.

Both inspired historians seem to sense the problem. Thus, immediately after announcing that Amaziah "did what was right in the eyes of the Lord," 2 Kings admits that he did not measure up to high moral standards set by David (who, if memory serves, was a murderer and adulterer). By way of explanation, the writer comments, as though to reassure the squeamish, that Amaziah "did in all things like Joash his father had done." Now this is, to say the least, a dubious concession, inasmuch as Joash of Judah (who likewise, let it be noted, "did what was right in the eyes of the Lord"—12:2) was an idolater and a murderer (2 Chronicles 24:18,21,25).

On the matter of Amaziah, the author of 2 Chronicles also hedges his bets. After declaring that the king "did what was right in the eyes of the Lord," he promptly adds the disconcerting caveat, "but not with a loyal heart." Oh, a heart problem? We will consider this later.

The Chronicler's treatment of Amaziah is longer and more detailed. Whereas 2 Kings tells the story of his invasion of Edom in a just one verse (14:7), the Chronicler needs nine verses (25:5-13). Only the Chronicler, moreover, tells of the two prophets sent to warn Amaziah (25:7-9,15-16). Treating Amaziah's reign in greater detail, however, the Chronicler inevitably makes him look worse.

We may begin with Amaziah's response to the prophetic instruction against taking mercenaries along for his invasion of Edom. When he complied with that instruction, the mercenaries retaliated against the king by sacking the villages and killing the citizens of Judah (25:13). Perhaps this was the incident that turned Amaziah sour on prophecy, because the next time a prophet appears and starts to speak, Amaziah threatens him with death (25:16).

Then comes Amaziah's disastrous challenge to Joash, the king of Israel, where the difference between 2 Kings (14:8-14) and 2 Chronicles (25:17-24) is most noticeable. The difference lies in two details proper to the Chronicler.

First, the Chronicler introduces the story differently by mentioning that Amaziah "sought counsel" (*yīwa'ats*) before making his unwise challenge to Joash of Israel (25:17). This verb, *ya'ats*, is a cognate of the noun *'etsah*, which was the last word in the preceding sentence, where the prophet tells the king, "I know that God has determined to destroy you, because you have done this and have not heeded *my counsel* [*'atsati*]" (25:16).

Thus, the counsel that Amaziah now seeks, counsel apparently sought from within his court, is contrasted with the counsel that he has just refused to accept from the prophet who was sent to warn him. That is to say, Amaziah receives both bad and good counsel, but he walks "in the counsel of the ungodly" (*ba'atsath resha'im*--Psalms 1:1). Accordingly, Amaziah meets the biblical definition of a fool.

Only the Chronicler, anyway, notes these two "counsels" provided for Amaziah, and they form the structural frame for his assessment of the king.

Second, only the Chronicler explicitly tells of the Lord's intervention to bring low the throne of Amaziah. This intention was also related directly to the king's refusal to hear prophetic counsel: "But Amaziah would not heed, for it came from God, that He might give them into the hand of their enemies, because they sought the gods of Edom" (25:20). This interpretation of the events is related directly to the prophecy that followed that matter of the gods of Edom: "I know that God has determined to destroy you" (25:16).

Amaziah was a failure because he embraced the Edomite gods, the same gods that had already proved—as the prophet pointed out to him—so useless to the Edomites themselves (25:14-15,20). Across the brow of each of these gods was chiseled, as it were, the word "Loser," and this may be taken as the final comment on Amaziah as well, because he exemplified Israel's most consistent sin—the foolish adoption of gods already discredited. The Chronicler admitted that Amaziah's problem was his heart. The disloyalty of Amaziah's heart (25:2) led, then, to the hardening of his ears. Such is the spiritual deafness associated with idolatry.

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