

September 4, 2005
Feast Day of Moses the Prophet

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

In 2 Kings (15:32-38) rather little attention is paid to the reign of Jotham. We know that his father, Uzziah, being struck with leprosy as a punishment for his sins, was obliged to take Jotham as a coregent in the latter part of his life (2 Chronicles 26:16-21). This period seems to have lasted from about 750 to Uzziah's death in 742 (Isaiah 6:1). Jotham then reigned in his own name from 742 to 735. His sixteen years on the throne (2 Kings 15:33; 2 Chronicles 27:1), then, must include both of these periods. This chronological complexity would explain why Josephus (*Antiquities* 9.11.2 and 9.12.1) leaves out all time references for Jotham.

Both 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles attest of Jotham that "he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord," each also admitting the king's inability to exercise much influence over an unfaithful nation. From Isaiah and Micah, both books partly composed during his reign (Isaiah 1:1; Micah 1:1), we gain some sense of the national infidelity that Jotham was obliged to face.

While 2 Kings (15:35) mentions Jotham's construction of the "upper gate of the house of the Lord," the Chronicler (27:4-6) goes into much more extensive detail about the king's building projects and especially his conquest and treatment of the Ammonites.

Jotham is praised for not pursuing his father's example of usurping rights over the Temple (27:2). Also unlike his father Uzziah, who acted exactly as he pleased, Jotham "ordered his ways before the Lord his God" (27:6). This is an expression of praise we do not often find in the description of biblical kings!

This expression also hints at a potential problem. It is possible that both Kings and Chronicles were puzzled by the reign of Jotham, particularly his inability to get the citizens of Judah to follow his lead. He is faulted in neither source, though they do not tell much about him. Jotham did not enjoy the longevity and success that the Book of Proverbs promises to a wise and virtuous man.

Jotham thus becomes a sort of tragic figure, even though the Bible does not stop to reflect on the nature and dynamics of the tragedy, as it does in the case of Job. One is especially struck by Jotham's resemblance to Job in one particular--namely, the almost "individual" nature of his righteousness, in the sense that nobody would pay his example much attention. In the case of Job this insouciance is found in his wife and children. In the case of Jotham we see it in the citizens of Judah, but especially in his unfaithful son, Ahaz.

Jotham is treated, rather, in the way the Bible treats Abner--as a decent man who did not, in fact, receive all that we would expect a decent man to receive. In these

two historical books, Second Kings and Second Chronicles, the Bible does not pause to reflect on this anomaly, even to reflect that it was anomaly, any more than it does in the case of Abner or, even earlier, righteous Abel.

The Chronicler's chapter on Jotham is, in fact, the shortest chapter written by that author, and he limits himself to his precise task--to chronicle, to record the story of Jotham. Without drawing our attention to it, he describes a reign much shorter and less rewarding than the reigns of some of Judah's other righteous kings, such as Asa, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, and Josiah.

The Chronicler advances no thesis with respect to Jotham's story. He does not indicate, in even the faintest way, how we should view the problem of theodicy implicitly posed by this story. He not only does not answer the implied question. He does not even mention that the story has a question. On all this he remains silent.

We readers, however, are not limited by the interest and intent of the Chronicler. Taking into consideration the whole of the inspired literature, we acknowledge and even reverence the quiet dilemma presented by Jotham's career. We do this, not only because we read the Bible, but also because we read our own hearts. Inasmuch as the Creator has placed in the human conscience the metaphysical sense of justice, we expect God to treat righteous Jotham as a righteous man should be treated, and we are set back on our heels, as it were, at the sight of this righteous man whose righteousness is not acknowledged nor rewarded.

Jotham's reign, then, becomes for us a sort of foreshadowing of the Cross, where the supremely righteous Man is not treated as we instinctively feel a righteous man should be treated. We know, after all that "God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labor of love" (Hebrews 6:10). The question quietly posed in Jotham is loudly answered in Jesus.

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