

October 16, 2005
St. Longinus the Centurian

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

It is very instructive to compare the Bible's two accounts of the reign of King David, in 2 Samuel and in 1 Chronicles. Let me say, moreover, the instruction derived from such an exercise may take the student of the Bible far beyond an interest in David himself.

Since this comparison must begin somewhere, I suggest that we start at a point where the two biblical accounts perfectly coincide, the moment when David's forces have conquered Rabbah, the capital city of the Ammonites. The Sacred Text says in both sources, "Then David and all the people returned to Jerusalem" (2 Samuel 12: 31; 1 Chronicles 20: 3).

Immediately, however, we observe that the two accounts go off in very different directions. Second Samuel proceeds to tell the long drama that begins with Absalom's first offense and ends, nine chapters later, with the incident of David and the Gibeonites. This is the sequence, one suspects, more familiar to regular Bible-readers.

Nonetheless, in the precisely corresponding place in 1 Chronicles every last bit of this long story is missing. To appreciate the surprise of this omission, try to imagine a biography of Lincoln that failed to mention the Civil War! The simple fact, however, is that none of this material in 2 Samuel was of interest to the Chronicler. It lay outside the perspective of his historiography. He obviously intended to write a very different and, to his mind, more important story.

We grasp something of the Chronicler's intent in this matter if we observe another omission in the biographical sequence, an omission this time on the part of 2 Samuel. The latter text, after giving us David's "last words" (2 Samuel 23: 1), spends its final chapter narrating the sad tale of the king's ill-advised census and the plague that was its aftermath. That story forms the very end of 2 Samuel, and we then go on to read of David's death early in 1 Kings. From this account in 2 Samuel we would never suspect that a single thing of significance happened during David's later years, his life after the census and the plague.

When, however, we turn to the Chronicler and examine exactly the same period of David's biography, the old king appears to be just getting started on the most important and significant part of his life! Immediately after the story of the census and the plague in Chronicles, David begins

his extensive, minute preparations for building the Temple and arranging the liturgical services to be conducted there (22:1-29:20). (These elaborate preparations include, among many other things, gathering an orchestra of four thousand musicians, quite a task for a man we might expect to be already on his deathbed—23:3.) Nonetheless, all of this vast material, filling nearly a third of 1 Chronicles, is completely missing in 2 Samuel.

From this comparison, it is obvious that both historians followed distinct approaches to the historical significance of David, each selecting the available material in order to elaborate his unique perspective. It is the same David all along, of course, but how differently the two historiographers looked at him and interpreted the meaning of his life.

Now whatever may be said about David himself in these two accounts of his reign, their differences point to an important quality of biblical historiography in general—namely, its diversity. In a word, the historiography of the Bible manifests a striking disposition to variety.

Now this variety of perspectives in Holy Scripture gives rise to another question: How is this diversity related to the Bible's claim to divine inspiration? I pose this question especially to those Christians who imagine that divine revelation is essentially propositional—that the "doctrines" of the Bible are reducible to a series of creedal tenets proposed to man's consenting belief, timeless dogmas laid forth in an infallibly written book.

It is not obvious that such a view of divine revelation is indicated in the Bible itself, however. On the contrary, I believe it is a distortion of the Bible to regard it as a reservoir of dogmatic propositions that can be abstracted from their historical expressions and shapes. Divine Revelation takes place in concrete deeds and words, not in eternal ideas drawn from them.

Let me be clear. Not for a moment do I question the unerring witness of the Sacred Text or its permanent canonical authority. I simply inquire how this undeniable diversity of historical perspectives is related to that canonical authority?

It appears to me that this diversity of historical perspectives in the Bible is not only compatible with the divine authorship of the Sacred Text; I suggest there is also a sense in which the Holy Spirit's authorship of the Scriptures actually encourages, perhaps even requires, such diversity. This Spirit-given variety of historical perspectives within Holy Scripture

indicates, that is to say, the richness, the fruitfulness, of the divine revelation contained in the biblical events themselves.

God's Self-revelation, we Christians believe, did not take place solely in the verbal inspiration of the Bible, but also in those events that the Bible records. The entire process--history becoming historiography--bears the character of divine revelation.

This consideration prompts yet another, having to do with the formal structure--and not merely the material content-- of biblical historiography. That is, history-writing is itself historical. Historiography in the Bible is an historical act.

The doctrine of divine inspiration, after all, does not imply that the biblical historian viewed his subject from a detached, timeless perspective. On the contrary, each historian in the Bible, in his treatment of earlier times, embodied also the concerns and questions of his own times. What we find in the Bible, then, is a progression in which history interprets history.

It also shapes history. The Bible provides the narrative context in which future generations are guided, both in the interpretation of their own times and in the formation of their own historical decisions. Indeed, one does not have to be a believer to discern the historical importance of the Bible in this respect.

Finally, it is all a single history, and we are included. Just as biblical doctrine cannot safely be separated from biblical history, so our reading of the Bible should not be removed from our own times. I do not mean--heaven forbid that I should mean--that we interpret the Bible by the standards of our own times. On the contrary, we go to the Bible to interpret our times and to inform our decisions within the days given us on the earth.

We must know, however, that it is all one. The "fixed" character of the Sacred Text does not render it timeless, but . . . well, timely.

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