

October 12, 2008
Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Western Christian writers have long regarded Hannah, the mother of Samuel, not only as a model of patient prayer, but also as a theological symbol---or "type"---of the Church. This understanding rests on the biblical theme of the barren woman, originally exemplified in Sarah, the wife of Abraham.

Indeed, even on an initial reading, the stories of these two women, Sarah and Hannah, are strikingly similar: First, each woman is introduced as barren. Second, both of them have "rivals" within their marriages: Hagar in the case of Sarah, Peninnah in the case of Hannah. Third, both Sarah and Hannah are portrayed as the "senior" wives in their respective marriages. Fourth, both barren women are treated contemptuously by their rivals (Genesis 16:4-5; 1 Samuel 1:6-7). Fifth, each of them-Sarah and Hannah-at last conceives a son through the fulfillment of a divine promise.

Latin Christians have long noted these parallels between the wives of Abraham and Elkanah. In the early ninth century, for example, Rhabanus Maurus worked them out in some detail.

Angelome of Luxeuil developed the parallel even further, comparing Elkanah's two wives, not only to the two wives of Abraham, but also to Leah and Rachel, the two wives of Jacob. In each of these three cases, the barren wife, who conceived later in life and by divine intervention, was contrasted with the more fruitful wife who was less loved.

Furthermore, Holy Scripture develops the correspondence between Sarah and Hannah in order to introduce two major narratives of covenant: the covenant with Abraham in Genesis, and the covenant with David in the Books of Samuel. In each story, the barren woman signifies weakness and imperfection---the human condition---to which God directs the grace of His covenant. The author of Samuel readily found this covenant pattern in Genesis.

Now, it was precisely in connection with the theme of covenant that the Apostle Paul elaborated his contrast between Hagar and Sarah, because "these women are two covenants." Hagar, who conceived according to the flesh, is likened to the Old Covenant, while barren Sara, who gave birth "through promise," symbolized the New (Galatians 4:21-31).

Western Christian readers of Holy Scripture, taking Paul's treatment of the two covenants in Galatians as an interpretive pattern, turned their attention on Hannah. They simply applied to her what Paul wrote of Sarah, and the Bible's narrative parallels between the two women provided ample warrant for doing so.

Thus, many Western Christians have seen symbolized in Peninnah and Hannah---respectively---the Church and the synagogue. This pattern of imagery is found in Peter

Chrysologus, Gregory the Dialogist, Venerable Bede, Haymo of Halberstadt, Peter Comestor, and others.

All of these writers appear to be dependent on Ambrose, who spoke of *Anna Sarrae consterilis*- "Hannah sterile together with Sarah." Summarizing this tradition, Isidore of Seville wrote, "Hannah, who was sterile and afterwards became fruitful, signifies the Church of Christ, who before was sterile among the nations, but now is richly powerful [*largiter pollet*] throughout the whole world by reason of her many offspring."

Following this imagery, Latin writers see in the Canticle of Hannah (1 Samuel 2) the song of the Church. Thus, writes Gregory the Dialogist, when Hannah sang, "My horn is exalted in the Lord," "what is the horn of Hannah except the power of the Church?" Since Hannah's name was understood to mean "grace," it is entirely proper to regard her as signifying "the Christian religion," wrote Isidore of Seville.

Does the New Testament tell of the Church's ill treatment at the hands of the Jews? This was all foreshadowed, Gregory the Dialogist tells us, in Peninnah's contempt for Hanna.

When St. Paul cited the proclamation in Isaiah 54:1 in reference to Sarah-"Rejoice, O barren, / You who do not bear! / Break forth and shout, / You who are not in labor! / For the desolate has many more children / Than she who has a husband"-he provided the interpretive key to understanding all the instances of barren women in Holy Scripture. All of them signify the Church, but few of them so clearly as Hannah.

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