

**September 5, 2010**

Saints Zachary and Elizabeth

### **Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings**

Someone who embarks on writing a biography---especially of a statesman, philosopher, or literary figure---must be prepared to cite the "influences" brought to bear on the conscience and thinking of his subject. We commonly expect this in a biographical account.

Thus, for instance, if I were to write a life story of Russell Kirk, I should devote some consideration to his reading of Marcus Aurelius. The calm and clarity of Kirk's thought---by his own admission---owed a great deal to his early study of Stoicism.

So, too, a biographer of Arthur Koestler should at least mention---as Michael Scammell does---his subject's sympathetic study of Otto Weininger. Although Koestler might have turned out to be a woman-abuser anyway, his youthful reading of *Sex and Character* provided an intellectual basis for that very bad trait.

This approach does not work so well for understanding Jesus! Although our Lord certainly read Isaiah, it is legitimate to doubt He read Isaiah the way Macaulay and Acton read Johnson and Burke. I, for one, find it difficult to picture Him looking up, suddenly, from a page of Job or Ecclesiastes and exclaiming, "Wow, what an insight! That really does settle it!"

The silliness of such a conjecture, however, should not darken the truth about Jesus: He *did* read books and learned from them. It is not sufficient to say He studied the works of Moses, David, and Jeremiah. These authors, rather, truly gave shape to His mind and conscience.

When Luke tells us, "Jesus increased in wisdom," it is wrong to imagine this growth was unrelated to what Jesus read and thought about---any more than His increase in stature was unrelated to the meals He ate (Luke 2:52).

Luke is, in fact, the evangelist who describes Jesus reading and interpreting Isaiah near the very beginning of His public ministry (4:16-21). St. Bonaventure, when he wrote his long and detailed commentary on the Gospel of Luke, prefaced it by a discourse on this scene. For him, this event in the synagogue at Nazareth was the essential key to the message of Luke.

Bonaventure's approach showed great insight into Luke's intention, I believe; the correct understanding of Jesus---the essence of "orthodox theology"---is rooted in Jesus' self-understanding, and Jesus' self-understanding is inseparable from His understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures. Christian theology begins with---and is inseparable from---understanding the Hebrew Scriptures as Jesus understood them. This dominant theme in Luke is

introduced in the synagogue scene at Nazareth.

To speak of the "influence" of the Hebrew Scriptures on the mind of Jesus, however, dramatically transcends our normal use of that expression. Indeed, it is misleading to speak in this fashion. The Law and the Prophets shaped the self-awareness of Jesus in an unparalleled way, because He found in those writings the defining lines of His identity and vocation. Jesus' understanding of those texts---an understanding at the root of Christian theology---is the very substance of His "self-regard."

What David and Isaiah wrote was not something different from who Jesus knew Himself to be and what His Father expected of Him. This self-knowledge is what He shared with the Church. In the very act of sending the Apostles out to evangelize the world, Jesus "opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures" (Luke 24:45). Christian theology, that is to say, radically consists in understanding the Hebrew Scriptures as Jesus understood them. The proclamation of the Gospel without the Hebrew Scriptures is a monstrosity. It is no longer the apostolic message.

The Gospel of Luke indicates, however, that this understanding increased in Jesus. He took possession of the Hebrew Bible bit-by-bit, as He lived and ministered. As events unfolded in His life---and particularly when He "endured such contradiction of sinners against himself" (Hebrews 12:3)---He grasped ever more explicitly the meaning of the Scriptures. They governed His life and self-awareness. When our Lord read about Isaac's burden in Genesis, the paschal lamb in Exodus, the atonement for sin in Leviticus, David's opprobrium in Samuel, the pierced side in Zechariah, the Suffering Servant in Isaiah, and the persecuted just man in the Book of Psalms, Jesus recognized Himself. He understood the Scriptures from within. They were components of who He knew Himself to be and what the Father wanted of Him.

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**All Saints Orthodox Church**  
**Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America**

4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641

Church Office: (773) 777-0749

<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

**Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor**

[phrii@touchstonemag.com](mailto:phrii@touchstonemag.com)

**Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:**

[www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html](http://www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html)

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