

**December 5, 2010**

Third Sunday of Advent

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

Everyone who knew Him knew that Jesus was not a trained "rabbi." Unlike Saul of Tarsus, He had not been privileged to study "at the feet of Gamaliel" (Acts 22:3) or some other leading rabbinic scholar of the period. Indeed, when Jesus--at about age 30 (Luke 3:24)---commenced teaching in the Galilean synagogues (4:15), His neighbors expressed no little consternation about it: "How does this Man know letters, never having studied?" (John 7:15)

We would be wrong, however, to ascribe an absolute sense to their low assessment of Jesus' education, or fail to consider its context. That is to say, the wonderment of Jesus' contemporaries was prompted by His ability to hold His own in debate with---and even prevail over---the recognized rabbinical experts of His day. His townsfolk did not mean Jesus was utterly unfamiliar with Sacred Letters.

There is no doubt that He was literate---for we find Him reading---and there is every reason to believe He learned the Scriptures as did any other young man from a working class Galilean family: at the local synagogue. Normally, in fact, in a small town, such as Nazareth, copies of the Scriptures were available only at the synagogue.

Now, Luke testifies that Jesus attended normal assemblies at the synagogue each Sabbath, "according to His custom" (Luke 4:16).

As it happens, we know a thing or two about this "custom" (*eiethos*) of weekly synagogue attendance, and what we know precludes any fancy that it was a thing taken lightly---a perfunctory minimum observance. On the contrary, regular attendance at the local synagogue required a very substantial commitment of effort and time: it occupied most of the Sabbath. Flavius Josephus, a Jewish historian contemporary with the New Testament, spelled out the details for his Roman audience:

"We spend every seventh day in the study of our customs [*ethon*] and Law, regarding concern for these things to be important, like anything else, so that we may avoid sin" (*Antiquities* 16.2.4 § 43).

In short, everyone familiar with the Judaism of the day was aware that "Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath" (Acts 15:21). Besides the Sabbath, the two weekly fast days---Monday and Thursday (Didache 8.1; Luke

18:12)---were also occasions for public Scripture readings in the synagogue.

In the synagogues of Palestine these readings, following a common lectionary based on the calendar of Jewish feast days, were measured out so that the entire Pentateuch was completed every three and a half years. To these were added selections from the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures. Eventually some of this material was determined by particular feast days: Esther at Purim, the Song of Solomon at Passover, Ecclesiastes at Sukkoth, Ruth at Pentecost, and so on. We are uncertain, however, how fixed these patterns were in Jesus' time.

The public reading of the Hebrew Scriptures was repeated in translations in the common spoken language, so that it would be understood by the people: Aramaic in Palestine, mainly Greek elsewhere. Since our earliest example for this practice of reading a translation comes from the early post-exilic period (Nehemiah 8: 1-8), it appears that the pattern began during the mid-sixth century---the Babylonian Captivity---when the local synagogue became the defining and essential social institution in Jewish life.

Nor was biblical study in the synagogue restricted to public readings to three days during the week. The *Mishnah* testifies that the Scriptures were constantly maintained in the synagogue---under supervision---so that at any time a literate person with sufficient leisure might come and study them. According to Jerusalem's Ophel Inscription (contemporary with the New Testament), the synagogue was to provide facilities to "read the Torah and teach the commandments."

For this reason, the synagogue was called the *beth hasepher*, the "house of the book." In addition to prayer, it was a place of study, where primary attention was given to the Torah and the other Sacred Writings. That is to say, the synagogue study was literary; it was a pursuit of the *ketubim*, the sacred *grammata* identified as God's word.

Indeed, it was often at the synagogue---in special rooms, or a courtyard, or an attached building---that a young Jew learned to read. It is possible that Jesus learned to read in that setting.

In our own age, when most Bible reading is done at home and privately, it seems important to stress the immediate social context of Jesus' study of Holy Scripture. The synagogue setting provided the sustained atmosphere in which the youthful Jesus, reading the sacred scrolls, took possession of His own historical identity as a child of Abraham and an heir to the Mosaic Covenant.

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