

October 23, 2011
James, the Brother of the Lord

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

In the Epistle to the Ephesians, written relatively late in his ministry, the Apostle Paul put a particular emphasis on the Lord's Ascension---as the defeat of the hostile powers on high. As Christ conquered sin by his death, and defeated death by his Resurrection, so by his Ascension he was victorious over the inimical powers of the cosmos, the "spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12).

When Christ ascended on high, Paul wrote, God "seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all [*hyperano panton*] principality and authority, power and dominion" (1:20-21; cf. 3:10). Christ's Ascension, then, was a victory parade up to his enthronement, and the forces of evil were led as captives in his train.

Paul took this image from Psalm 68 (Greek 67), which he cited in reference to the Ascension: "When he ascended on high, / he led captivity captive, / and gave gifts to men" (Ephesians 4:9; Psalms 68:18). In fulfillment of the prophetic voice in that psalm, wrote the Apostle, Christ "ascended far above all [*hyperano pases*] the heavens, that he might fill all things" (Ephesians 4:10).

Those familiar with Psalm 68 recognize that Paul dramatically changed its wording. The Hebrew text of the cited line (substantially identical in the Greek) says, "You have ascended on high, / You have led captivity captive; / You have received gifts among men." This change of grammatical voice---from second to third person---in Paul's citation is easy to explain: He had in mind to talk *about* Christ rather than address him.

More striking is Paul's radical alteration of the final clause: Instead of "receiving" gifts from men, the ascending Christ is said to "give" gifts to men. Paul goes on, indeed, to list those gifts: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers--all for "equipping of the saints for the work of ministry" (Ephesians 4:11).

Since Paul was obliged to change the wording of the psalm in order to make his point about the ministry, it is reasonable to inquire why he bothered to cite it. This is to be explained, I believe, by the psalm's full content; Paul drew his inspiration, not just from that one verse, but from the whole of Psalm 68.

This psalm appears to be a processional chant: "They behold Your procession, O God, / the procession of my God, my King, into the sanctuary. / The singers go in advance, then those playing instruments, / among them the maidens with their tambourines."

I am partial to the view that Psalm 68 originally served in the inauguration of either the Davidic sanctuary or Solomon's Temple, when the Ark of the Covenant was borne to its designated resting place.

The psalm pictures this procession as having started long ago and far away; it began when Israel left Mount Sinai, "when You were the vanguard to Your people, / as You marched through the wilderness."

Each time Israel broke camp in the desert and the Levites once again shouldered the long handles of the Ark, Moses shouted, "Arise, O Lord! / Let Your enemies be scattered, / and

may those who hate You flee before You" (Numbers 10:35). This acclamation was adopted as the opening line of Psalm 68. That is to say, the procession in Jerusalem was a continuation of the Exodus march.

The dissipation of God's enemies is thematic to this psalm; it proclaims that the "kings of armies took to flight" and "the Almighty scattered kings." This verse remembers the battles Israel fought to reach this crowing hour in Jerusalem, from the vanquishing of Amalek (Exodus 17) to the defeat of Sisera (Judges 5).

Such victories over Israel's foes, however, were not simply historical facts but also promises that God would, in the future, "wound the head of His enemies, the hairy scalp of him who persists in evils." From His throne in Zion, the holy city of peace, God will "scatter the nations that delight in war."

Paul's appeal to Psalm 68, then, is of a piece with the Christological vision in the Epistle to the Ephesians: Christ, the true Ark of the Covenant, has entered into the true sanctuary of heaven, triumphant over his captive enemies. Their defeat is a guarantee for the future, as well, inasmuch as Christ, who "mounts the heaven of heavens," is placed "far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world but also in that which is to come" (Ephesians 1:21).

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