

October 30, 2011

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

It will be instructive to remark further on the textual change made in the quotation from the Psalter in Ephesians 4:8. As we reflected earlier, the original wording of Psalms 68--- "You have ascended on high, / You have led captivity captive; / You have received gifts among men"----was changed in this epistle to, " When he ascended on high, / he led captivity captive, / And gave gifts to men."

Since Paul seems to appeal here to Holy Scripture in order to bolster a theological argument, it seems legitimate to inquire of him, "Saint Paul, if your case invokes support from the Old Testament, what one would normally do---and we mean this with full respect---is quote text accurately and not change the words to suit one's purposes. Now, observe, please, that both the Hebrew and the Greek texts of Psalm 68 say that the Lord 'received' gifts; it does not say He 'gave' them. Just how does one justify changing this verb to what is, in effect, its antonym? This does not appear to be a legitimate way to argue from Holy Scripture."

Students of Holy Scripture have proposed various explanations for this anomaly. It has been suggested, for instance, that Paul may have been following an Aramaic paraphrase (Targum) of the psalm. Later Rabbinic texts, after all, interpreted this line as a reference to Moses ascending Mount Sinai to "capture" the Torah and confer it on Israel as a gift. One of those sources, Rashi, cited a Targum of Psalm 68: "You ascended the firmament, Prophet Moses, and led captivity captive. You learned the words of the Torah and gave them as gifts to the sons of men." Was Paul, following a Targum of Psalm 68, perhaps engaging in a polemic against a Rabbinic interpretation of this psalm?

Support for this theory is pretty thin, since it relies on Rabbinical sources many centuries later than the New Testament. Rashi, for instance, lived a whole millennium after St. Paul.

An easier explanation seems more likely. Let us take it in stages:

The first thing to observe about Paul's quotation is the manner of its introduction. Normally, when the Apostle---or any rabbi, for that matter---quotes Holy Scripture, he begins by saying, "It is written," *gegraptai* in Greek, *katuv* in Hebrew. This, however, is not what we find in Ephesians 4:8. When Paul introduces his quotation here, he does so with another expression: "It says," *legei* in Greek. Now, "it says" is not how a good rabbi quotes the Bible.

Indeed, it does not appear that the Apostle, in Ephesians 4:8, was directly quoting Psalm 68. If he were, he would have said, "It is written," not "It says." That is to say, Paul had in mind to quote some other source.

Second, we receive instruction on this point by observing that Paul used exactly the same introductory expression---*legei*---in Ephesians 5:14: "It says [*legei*], 'Awake, oh sleeper, / Rise from the dead, / And Christ will illumine you.'" This quotation is generally (and, I think, correctly) understood to be taken from a primitive Christian hymn, with which Paul presumed his readers to be familiar.

It is reasonable to suppose that we are dealing with the same phenomenon in Ephesians

4:8. That is to say, the wording of Psalm 68:18 had already been changed when it was incorporated into a Christian hymn. Paul was directly quoting the hymn, not the psalm. This is why he introduced the quotation by "It says," not "it is written."

Third, the incorporation of lines from the Psalter into hymnography and other prayers has been a universal practice among Christians. Perhaps our earliest example is found in Acts 4:24-30, which was a prayer of the Church when the Sanhedrin imprisoned Peter and John. It is notable that the Christians inserted two verses from Psalms 2:1-2 into their prayer and then went on to interpret those verses as part of the prayer. That is to say, the Psalter was not used slavishly in prayer; there was a considerable measure of adjustment.

In fact, Christians have always and everywhere felt a great freedom to incorporate and adjust lines from the Psalter into their hymnography and other prayers. Nothing seemed more natural, and examples of it abound in every tradition I know of: "Oh, God, our refuge and our strength" begins a famous Leonine collect, slightly altering the first line of Psalm 46. Who can cut Psalm 19 out of the hymn that begins, "Jesus shall reign where're the sun / Doth his successive journeys run"? Again, lines from Psalm 51 have found their way into countless prayers of repentance. And so on. Words from the psalms permeate a great deal of Christian prayer, the words being accommodated to a variety of rhetorical contexts.

Third, we can say that Paul was not using Psalm 68 as a "proof text" in a theological argument. He was quoting a Christian hymn as a pedagogical illustration, very much as he did a bit later in Ephesians 5:14. His Christian readers were accustomed to singing, "He ascended on high, / he led captivity captive, / And gave gifts to men." Paul simply quoted the words of the hymn to explain what some of those "gifts" were.

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