

June 24, 2012
The Birth of John the Baptist

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

It often occurs to the contemporary Bible reader, accustomed to the expectations of modern historical study, to wonder about the "sources" employed by the authors of Holy Scripture. Indeed, a significant part of biblical scholarship, over the past couple of centuries, has been devoted to that very subject, and I confess that the question of historical sources lies near the surface of my own mind just about any time I open the Bible, especially the narrative sections.

When I examine the Gospel stories, for instance, it is psychologically impossible not to ask myself such questions as, "How was this account of the leper transmitted to Mark?" Or, "Who told John of the visit of Nicodemus to Jesus?" Or, "What was the common source used by Matthew and Luke when they wrote of the healing of the centurion's servant?"

Now the curiosity that spawns such questions is certainly "modern," in the sense that earlier Christians, for many centuries, seldom or never thought of asking them.

For this reason, it is legitimate to inquire, "What good are such questions? Do they represent anything more than a vain academic curiosity?" That is to say, if the likes of Basil and Chrysostom did not care about these matters, what justifies the modern interest---not to say preoccupation---in this area? Do questions of this sort really help in the study of Holy Scripture?

Several lines of response are possible, each of them, I think, valid:

First, if Holy Scripture is God's unfailing Word for all generations, it seems reasonable to suppose that it will provoke different sorts of questions at different times. In other words, why would we not expect someone in the contemporary world to ask the Bible questions quite different from those asked in the fourth century? After all, fourth and fifth century readers of Holy Scripture most certainly posed inquiries that never occurred to Bible readers three centuries earlier.

Second, much of the modern interest in "biblical sources" has been prompted by a sincere desire to defend the historical truth of Holy Scripture, a desire amply warranted, I think by the historical nature of biblical revelation.

Third---and here, perhaps, my answer is more original---I am persuaded that our very understanding of the Bible, our grasp of its full content, may be enhanced by a judicious consideration of the sources employed by the biblical writers.

I limit my considerations here to a single example: the Gospel accounts of Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin.

The differences among the four narratives of that trial are well known, nor, I think, do

they warrant serious doubts about the historicity of the story. It appears that the Sanhedrin, or parts of it, questioned Jesus several times during the course of that night, and probably none of the Evangelists had access to anything resembling transcripts or a court record.

In each case, nonetheless, the story of Jesus' trial is told in vivid detail, indicating that the four Evangelists relied on the testimony of eyewitnesses. Now this, I submit, invites---in my case, demands---an explanation. Just who were these eyewitnesses?

One of them, surely, was the anonymous disciple mentioned in John 18:15-16, and another may have been Peter, who spent much of the night around the home of the high priest. Others may have included the servant girl who questioned Peter, or the anonymous "relative of him whose ear Peter cut off" (18:17,26). Like Joseph of Arimathea, a Sanhedrin member who "had not consented to their decision and deed" (Luke 23:5), these latter doubtless became Christians in due course.

Another of these, I strongly suspect, was the man of whom John wrote, "One of the officers who stood by struck Jesus with the palm of his hand, saying, 'Do You answer the high priest like that?'" (18:22). I infer this man himself to be John's eyewitness, for one reason: Jesus actually addresses him and complains to him. This is the sole instance, in all the accounts of Passion, where Jesus does this: "If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil; but if well, why do you strike me?" (18:23). This instance, so extraordinary and unique, suggests that Jesus took a special interest in this "officer." He offered to this sole individual the mercy of a question. As Jesus asked Paul, in a later episode, "Why do you persecute me?" so he asked this Sanhedrin official, "Why did you strike me?" This "why?" was an inchoate summons to repentance. In my mind, there is no doubt that this man is the first-hand witness to the event. John the Evangelist knew him, just as surely as he knew the man born blind, the paralytic at the pool, and the woman at the Samaritan well.

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