

**November 25, 2012**

Saint Catherine of Alexandria

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

### Changing Perspectives on the Prophets

It is easy to detect, over the course of biblical history, significant changes in Israel's interest in the prophets.

The most significant change, I suppose, comes with the emergence of literary prophecy in the eighth century. In the previous century Israel's interest in the prophets was especially expressed in narrative form; major sections of the books of Kings are taken up with stories of Micaiah, Elijah, and Elisha. Although rather little of the teaching of these men is preserved in the Sacred Text, many pages are devoted to stories *about* them. With respect to Elisha, for example, we do find him in the posture of a teacher (cf. 2 Kings 4:38), but no one bothered to write down very much of what he taught. Instead, they recorded anecdotes of his extraordinary exploits: making iron float, purifying a spring of water, striking an entire army with blindness, healing a leper, and restoring life to a dead child.

In the big shift of interest during the eighth century, it is not as though Israel gave up its "biographical" approach to the prophets. On the contrary, details were included of the personal lives of Amos (cf. Amos 1:1; 7:10-16), Hosea (cf. Hosea 1:1-9), and Isaiah (cf. Isaiah 6:1-8; 7:1-3; 8:1-3; 36---39; etc.). On the whole, however, far more pages of Israel's eighth century literature are devoted to the teaching of the prophets than to the stories about them. Of the personal life of Micah, indeed, we are told next to nothing.

This evolution of interest continues into the seventh century. While precious little can be said with certainty respecting the lives of Zephaniah, Nahum, and Habakkuk, we know a great

deal of what they taught.

There is a clear exception in the case of Jeremiah, because he was fortunate enough to have a secretary and editor, Baruch, who included---along with the oracles and teaching--many elements of the life of the prophet himself. Indeed, the two literary forms---biography and didactic material---are integrally united in this book; God speaks, not only through the mouth of Jeremiah, but also through the very fabric of his personal experience. Whereas---knowing nothing about Zephaniah's life---we are able to comprehend him, this is inconceivable in the case of Jeremiah.

In the sixth century, the development of this integrated approach reaches a unique form in the life and ministry of Ezekiel. In his case the narrative material is autobiographical; Ezekiel not only records the details of his revelatory visions; he also provides their actual dates. Here we discern what we may describe as an autobiographical perspective in prophecy. There had been earlier elements of autobiography in the "vocation narratives" of Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. In the prophecies of Ezekiel, however, the whole prophetic work is autobiographical.

Ironically, his recourse to autobiography tends to render Ezekiel's perspective more "objective" than Jeremiah's, in the sense of being less emotional. We do not find in Ezekiel the tones of the highly sensitive, deeply troubled soul of Jeremiah. There is in Ezekiel, rather, a disposition toward abstraction, in which the prophet's habit of discursive analysis is able to scan a broad historical vista in a unified perspective. Ezekiel certainly suffers, but we don't find him complaining about it much.

Hence, the biographical elements of Ezekiel differ considerably from those in Jeremiah. Ezekiel is the prophet who is instructed not to weep even at the loss of his wife (cf. Ezekiel 24:15-18). He is able to stand back and examine his

message in a calm, reflective way. Ezekiel remains so "detached" from his ecstatic visions that he can carefully record their exact dates.

There is still interest in narrative in the post-exilic prophetic books. In Haggai, for instance, the message is inseparable from the story of the construction of the Second Temple, and Zechariah's inclusion of visionary experience links him to Ezekiel. There is virtually no biographical material in Malachi and Joel, but one finds ample compensation for this in Jonah, where the prophetic message itself is reduced to about half a verse (Jonah 3:4).

Although the Book of Daniel was composed too late to be included among the Hebrew Bible's prophetic books, its literary integration of biography and prophecy warrants mention here. In its appeal to visionary experience this book most closely resembles Ezekiel, though the high color of its memorable stories may put the reader in mind of Elisha.

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