

April 27, 2014

Saint Thomas Sunday

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Bible-readers do not have to advance very far into the text before they find the Lord's invitation and promise to Abraham: "Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them. . . .So shall your descendants be" (Genesis 15:5).

Now most of us would agree, I believe, that this text refers to the numerous promised progeny of Abraham. The command to "count the stars" appears to imply as much.

Well, not so fast. The verb *saphar* does, indeed, mean to "count." The etymological root of the word, however, is richer and a tad more complicated. In its various forms and contexts, *sphr* can mean, not only "to count," but also "to recount," or "to narrate," "to take account of," or "to make accounting of," "to interpret," "to explain." That is to say, the purely numerical sense of the root rather quickly extends to forms of narrative and understanding. Thus, the Hebrew word for book is *sepher*, and a *sopher* is a scribe. The heavens, according to the Psalmist, declare the glory of God; the stars transcribe a story. They adorn the celestial vault in order to be read. Stars form the handwriting on the surface of the sky. From earliest times men knew their duty to connect the dots.

So God could be telling Abraham something like this: Have a good look at those stars and consider them well, because your own descendents are going to be very much like them; they will be exalted like the stars. Students of the Bible have long recognized that Jacob's blessings of the Twelve Patriarchs were coded in the imagery of the zodiac.

Fanciful? I don't think so, and mine is hardly the first imagination to run in this direction.

Consider, for instance, the following interpretation of Genesis 15:5 by Sirach in the second century before Christ:

"Therefore by an oath [God] gave him glory in his posterity, that he should increase as the dust of the earth, and that He would, like the stars, exalt his seed (hos astra anypsosai to sperma avtou), and they should inherit from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth" (44:22-23).

Observe that the dust of the earth here is a metaphor for Abraham's numerous children, whereas their likeness to the stars has to do with a certain "exaltation." That is to say, the metaphor of the dust is quantitative, whereas that of the stars is qualitative; Abraham's descendents will resemble the stars in the beauty of their light and the wisdom of their courses.

Not convinced? Well, consider how Philo of Alexandria reads the text two centuries after Sirach:

"And after [God] has conducted [Abraham] out, he says to him, 'Look up to heaven, and count the stars, if thou art able to number them; thus shall be your seed. He says quite appropriately, 'Thus (houtos) shall be your seed,' not 'so many' (tosouton), as though equal in number to the stars. He does not allude here merely their number, but also to certain other features, which pertain to perfect and complete happiness. The seed shall be, He declares, like the ethereal light displayed before him, heavenly (ouranion) as it is, pure and unshadowed, because night is banished from the heavens, and

darkness from the ether. It shall be the likeness of the stars (asteroeidestatōn)" (Heir of Divine Things 86-87).

If this interpretation still seems improbable, you may want to consult Irenaeus of Lyons a century later. He writes, "And that Abraham might know, not only the great number, but also the splendor of his seed, God led him out at night and told him, 'See if you can count the stars in heaven; thus will be your seed'" (Demonstration 24). The difference here, of course, is that Irenaeus is reading the text as a Christian; he goes on to comment,

"Thus [Christ] fulfilled the promise made to Abraham by God, that he would make his seed like the stars of heaven; Christ accomplished this by being born of a Virgin descendent from Abraham's seed, and by establishing as lights in the world those who believe in Him, justifying the Gentiles by the same faith as Abraham's" (Demonstration 35).

A century after Irenaeus, Origen wrote of Abraham and Sarah, that 'they heard about such a hope of posterity, and that the glory of their offspring would be equal to heaven and its stars" (On Romans 4.6.7).

A century after Origen the identical interpretation of Genesis 15:5 was taken up by Ambrose of Milan, who wrote,

"Abraham looked up to heaven and beheld the splendor of his posterity; it was not less luminous than the radiance of the heavenly stars." Those stars, says Ambrose, are ourselves, whom God justifies by our sharing in Abraham's faith. By that faith, "we are prepared for heaven, we are united to the angels, we are made equal to the stars" (Abraham 1.20-21).

God did not just tell Abraham, "You are going to father a great number of children." He also told him, in effect, Your faith will glorify and transform human destiny. Your children will be lights upon the earth, the very stars by which mankind will be guided and enlightened.

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