

## Is God Useful?

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Exodus 17:1-7

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“Is the Lord among us or not?”

How we interpret this question, it seems to me, even before we venture to answer it, is the supreme test of religious faith in our time. In fact, it may be the supreme test of our humanity at this moment.

The people following Moses thought they were testing the Lord God by asking this question; they were demanding that God demonstrate his relevance to them. If God was relevant to them, then they might just privilege God with their loyalty.

Again, much like the text we had before us last week, they ask why has Moses (and the Lord God himself) bothered to liberate them from slavery in Egypt just to place them in a desert plagued with danger. This could be accepted as garden variety complaining, of course. And some of the most venerable ancient commentaries on this text say just that. Squeaky wheels get the grease, or the manna and quails and (this time) the water.

But, it appears to me that something more is going on than just complaining. The people are also weighing their religious options.

The philosopher Charles Taylor, the leading authority on the subject of religion and secularism, has said that secularism boils down to the conviction that we have a wide variety of choices to make from among various faith options. As such, he and many others would say that secularism is a modern invention, something that emerged out of the ferment of the Age of Enlightenment, something that flourished especially since Galileo de-centered the earth, and Newton mechanized the universe, and Darwin de-throned humanity from its biological pedestal, and Freud undercut our confidence in our conscious minds, and Einstein relativized time and space.

Surely these experts in secularism have a point. But it is also true that there have been wars among the gods from time immemorial. And people have made choices throughout history about which god they will burden with their allegiance. Baal and Yahweh duked it out in the presence of their prophets in the time of the kings of Israel. And here, centuries before, we find the Israelites shopping for a deity who could best serve their current needs.

“Is the Lord among us, or not? they ask.

They were trying to figure out which god would benefit them most. If the Lord is among them, then he needs to get with it, if he wants to retain their patronage.

The people of Israel in that moment seems to be asking questions that wouldn't seem strange to many religiously-inclined people in any age:

Would a god from Egypt be most useful to them? Would a god from the Egyptian pantheon, that included the Pharaoh himself, serve their needs best? Maybe they had been rash to leave Egypt in such a huff. Pharaoh had enslaved them, sure, but he had also provided adequate water to drink and food to eat. Every god, the Children of Israel seemed to reason, has his or her shortcomings; the gods of Egypt were bloodthirsty and cruel, but their meal plan was pretty good.

Or would they continue to worship the Lord God, who brought plagues upon Egypt, divided the sea so they could pass through, and defeated Pharaoh's army so they could reach freedom? All good.

But what did the Lord God offer them now?

Liberation, of course. But you can't eat liberation. Was freedom to die in the desert the only thing the Lord God could provide? "Is the Lord among us or not?" the people ask. "If the Lord is with us, then we should see the benefits."

The argument over the "benefits" of salvation reached a fever pitch in our own church's history a couple of hundred years ago, but the conflict was still rattling around presbyteries when I was a young pastor.

Do we worship and serve the Lord because he is true God, no matter whether we get anything out of the relationship or not? Or, do we worship the Lord God because of the "benefits" he offers? Sort of like weighing two competing benefit plans from an employer.

There's an old joke, and I'm pretty sure you've all heard it if you've hung out with Don Frampton lo these many years, about the young seminary graduate being examined by his home presbytery. A generation ago these oral examinations were dreaded by Presbyterian candidates for ministry across the country.

This one kid had been raked over the coals on every conceivable theological and biblical subject you can imagine, while the pastors and elders used the occasion of his examination to air their own doctrinal differences, posing impossible theological conundrums and then objecting to every answer the kid offered.

An old minister rose and asked the kid, "Son, would you be willing to be damned for the glory of God."

The poor candidate for ministry stood there in a pool of sweat, looked the old minister in the eye and said, "Sir, I would be willing for this whole presbytery to be damned for the glory of God."

Now, in reality, there's a serious point at stake in the old minister's question - although I would disagree with many of his Puritanical embellishments: Do we believe in God because of what we can get out of the relationship, or do we believe in God because he is God, and because we trust that he has revealed himself in the long history of Israel and in Jesus of Nazareth as one who is trustworthy?

Moses has met the Living God. Standing before that burning bush, the holiness of God scorching the soles of his bare feet, Moses experienced the sacred reality that beats within all things, the Holy who transcends all being, the force of reality for whom a supernova is a tinker toy, who, nonetheless, in his infinite power still takes compassionate notice of all his creatures.

But Moses has been pushed almost to his limit by these complaining people, blaming him and blaming the Lord for their freedom, and their hunger, and their thirst.

"If you're thirsty, why come to me," Moses says. "I don't have power over water. Ask God."

Finally, however, under the avalanche of their complaints, Moses relented, and asked God for them, and the Lord instructed Moses to strike a rock. And behold a spring of water came forth.

Thirst is a powerful thing. Thirst is a powerful motivator, but their thirst wasn't the issue, not really.

Their attitude was the problem. Specifically, their attitude toward God.

Is God a utility? You pay your bill and the tap always flows (although sometimes with a warning to boil the water before drinking it)?

Is God an insurance policy? You keep up your premiums, and when a storm bears down, God will steer it toward your neighbor's house and not yours?

Or is God something else altogether? Is God what the great Christian philosopher Soren Kierkegaard called, "Wholly (Entirely) Other," what the Reformed theologian Karl Barth called, "*Totaliter aliter*" (Totally Other).

I suppose another way to ask the question would be like this: Does God belong to us? Or do we belong to God?

That's really what the people are asking when they ask, "Is God with us or not?" Will God obediently serve us?

Many of us will remember the phrase in German, "*Gott mit uns*" ("God is with us"); it has a long history in Germany, from its first recorded use in a sixteenth century biblical translation to its use by Prussian military. In the First World War, the phrase was written on the helmets of German troops, and in the Second World War, it emblazoned German soldiers' belt buckles.

I believe that God is with us. I believe that God is always with us. But was that the meaning of that phrase on the German soldier's belt? No. Of course not.

It is such a dangerous temptation, such a pernicious temptation, to believe that God is with us in the sense that God is on our side. It is such a short step from there to believing that God's thoughts are our thoughts, that God's ways are our ways. Oh, I pray that my actions are in accordance with God's will. Sometimes I pray that God will change my "internal wanter" so I will want what God wants. But what a danger to insist that my way and God's way are identical.

It's so easy to see the mistake when it is made by soldiers of the Third Reich, isn't it? But it is so easy to stumble here ourselves.

What's the use of a God you can't house-train? That's what the people are asking Moses. What's the use of a God who won't play fetch?

What's the point of worshiping a God who is just as likely to hold us accountable as he is to bless us, just as likely to demand unconditional obedience from us as he is to confer unconditional love upon us? What's the point of a God whose end-game is utterly foreign to our highest aspirations, who, when we've asked for a little plastic surgery gives us a heart-transplant instead? What's the point? What's the point of a God who refuses to be useful?

Moses, and the Children of Israel, decided to test God, to find out if God was useful to them, apparently not realizing it was they who were taking the test. God was among them, and God would remain among them, and God would go with their children and their children's children into a new land. But they would never set foot there.

"Is God among us, or not?"

Amen.