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Where Are You? The Question That Drives the Scriptures

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Abstract: In Genesis 3, we read the tragic attempt by Adam and Eve to free themselves from the lordship and fellowship of God, followed by the judgment of God. God's first response, though, is a question, The Question: "Where are you," which reveals that God still seeks His wandering children. Indeed, The Question provides a fundamental thread for reading the subsequent record and history of the Old Testament—and on into the New Testament. This article notes key turning points in that history where The Question is pursued, and indeed The Question becomes a quest by God, to redeem His scattered children.

The Voice echoes through the Garden . . . and the universe: "Where are you?" In typical divine economy of words, The Question has a dual purpose. On the one hand, in response to Adam and Eve's choice to leave the presence of the Lord in preference to their own determination of good and evil, the Lord asks The Question, which carries a hard rebuke: "Where are you?" Why are you suddenly nowhere to be seen? Why, for the first time in the history of the world, do you feel it preferable to be by yourselves, cowering behind a tree, away from My presence? The Lord unravels the built-in words of divine curse not only on Adam and Eve, but on the workings of the whole of creation, which He once blessed by proclaiming it "good." With that, Adam and Eve were driven from the Garden.

There seems, however, an "on the other hand" to God's primal question, "Where are you?" As foreboding as the rebuke and the curses are, the door to the future has not slammed shut. Given the promise in Genesis 3:15, The Question bears promise that the future is not an unabated life under the curse. Indeed, The Question implies a sense of invitation that Adam and Eve return to a relationship of love and trust with God. Though the virus of evil has entered and polluted life for them and for the



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world, God does not write them off. “If you don’t/won’t come to Me,” God in effect says, “I’ll come to you,”¹ and so begins the story of Scripture. From this programmatic Question comes the call of Abraham and patriarchs (and matriarchs), prophets, priests, and eventually, “in the fullness of time, God send forth His Son” (Gal 4:4).

As the mark God placed on Cain (Gn 4:15) bears both God’s judgment and God’s promise of protection, so The Question speaks a word of firm judgment but implies also a word of a promise to Adam and Eve and to their children, including to this day. Furthermore, The Question gives the key for understanding the intent and the significance of the entire flow of Scripture. What may otherwise seem a splotchy hodgepodge of disconnected events and people, some noble and some despicable, take relevance as part of the record of and witness to God’s relentless outreach “to seek and to save the lost” (Lk 19:10).

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“. . . in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gn 12:3)

In rather quick strokes, what follows in the first eleven chapters of Genesis records not only the scattering and multiplying of the human race, but the startling spread of evil, with the consequent darkening of the curse. A close look at those evil-curse events, though, shows touches of divine mercy: the promise to Adam and Eve, a mark to protect Cain, the preservation of the human and animal world through the ark. As the story of the Tower of Babel ends, a rather sudden switch of gears takes us into peoples migrating from modern Iraq to Syria.

God’s first step toward pressing The Question was to call one of those migrants, and with that call history turned. For one thing, up to this time, in a book often considered the Book of Israel, there had been no Israel. Furthermore, God reaches out and calls from those migrants one whom Scripture suggests had precious little to commend him.² The Lord calls him to leave home and everything that made him who he was, including whatever dreams of what he may have yearned to be and to place himself fully into the Lord’s hands (Gn 12:1). In Genesis 12:2–3, God states His purpose and Abram’s place in that purpose: (1) God promises to bless Abram, thus providing provisional escape from the self-propelling evil-curse cycle. (2) A verb becomes a noun, and Abram, whom God blessed, now becomes a “blessing,” a new identity for Abram,³ and a new presence in the post-Genesis 3 world. (3) In the final phrase of verse 3, God’s intent becomes clear, “in you all peoples on earth shall be blessed.” The wanderer in all his wanderings brings blessing to the vastly spreading, scattering people. Abram may be just a who-would-have-thought choice,

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but in God's commitment to His Question, Abram is called and equipped to radiate God's blessing to a broken world, to "all peoples on earth," reflected in Genesis 1–11—and echoed in the praises sung before the throne of the Lamb in Revelation 7:9.

This mission from God—that through Abram "all peoples on earth will be blessed"—is given, however, not to Abram alone but to "you and your offspring,"⁴ namely all the generations of Abraham, which eventually overspilled the bloodline of Abraham. Israel responded to The Question and reflected on this calling in psalmody (Gn 22:27–28, 47:9; 72:1), in prophetic words (Is 19:24; Jer 4:1–2), and even in apocryphal meditation (Sirach 44:21). This entire movement of Israel's history was implemented as part of God's pursuit of The Question, and Scripture start-to-finish resonates that calling.

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“. . . you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex 19:6)

Genesis ends on a high note, with family reunited and well-provisioned in Egypt. With another quick sweep through convoluted history, however, Exodus begins with the opposite: Israel oppressed, enslaved, and under threat of extermination. To the Lord they cried, and "God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob" (Ex 2:24). It is worth noting that what God's memory called to the fore was not just His remembrance of the patriarchs, but of His covenant with them, of The Question and of Israel's place in a frightful world.

The story of the struggles of Moses, the confrontations with the Pharaoh, the various plagues visited on Egypt, the final escape from Egypt, and the perilous journey to and across the Red Sea is well known and is celebrated in Passover observance among Jewish people, including messianic Jews, to the present day. There was even a widely enjoyed animated film of a decade or two ago, *The Prince of Egypt*. While in typical Hollywood fashion, the movie ended with the victorious emergence from the Red Sea, the biblical presentation uses that "victory" as simply the starting point of Israel's mission and identity.⁵ There is a strategic pause in the story, when God has Israel linger at the foot of Mount Sinai. There God will explain to Israel exactly what just happened, namely what was at stake in the deliverance they just experienced. In Exodus 20:1–17, God reveals His ten "words," which bring

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God and people, grace and obedience together in words to be carried in Israel's heart wherever they go.

Before the giving of commands and laws, however, God sits Israel down and, in 19:4–6, connects both the deliverance and the commands with The Question. Exodus 19:4 recites in marvelous imagery God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt "to myself." In 19:5 God speaks of Israel as His "treasured possession among all peoples" who keeps His covenant. Then an unexpected phrase appears, where the focus switches away from Israel to the context within which God delivered and prized His people, namely "for (because) all the earth is mine." Given this global focus and the words of the purpose of God's deliverance of Israel, it is uncertain if these words are read best with the words in verse 5 or with the following verse: "you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

With the whole earth in mind and for the sake of the whole earth, Israel is to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." It is striking that the phrase "kingdom of priests" appears nowhere else in Scripture.⁶ Furthermore, Israel's priests were a designated tribe of Israel, whose role it was to be priests to Israel, namely to guide Israel in its worship and sacrifice and to instruct Israel in its faith and life. Here, however, seemingly all of Israel is called to be a kingdom of priests, and to do that "for (because) all the earth is mine." Put simply, Israel, the people of God, is to be among and to the nations what Levi is to Israel, the people of God. What we have here, then, is a variation on Genesis 12:1–3 defining Israel's place in God pursuit of The Question. Israel's role among the nations was to be kingdom of priests through whom all people on earth would be blessed. That's what was at stake in God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt.

Note the second half of God's call to Israel be a "holy nation." Israel is to be so closely aligned with the heart of God that the peoples can hear and respond to The Question through the witness of the people living among them. With this dual calling, namely kingdom of priests and holy nation, Israel is taken up into God's mission so that all aspects of its (our) life, wherever God leads them (us), their (our) mission is to be agents of God's mission.

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“. . . in order that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel” (1 Kgs 8:43)

One of the controverted events in the Old Testament was Israel's clamoring for a king, so that "we also may be like all the nations" (1 Sm 8:20). In today's secular

worldview, these desires for sovereignty, security, and dignity certainly sound like reasonable aspirations, no matter how they are viewed: politically, diplomatically, economically, or militarily. However, there were/are serious dangers, beginning with preferring to be “like all the nations” instead of being a “holy nation” among “all the nations.” Besides, kings tend to love warfare and grandiose projects, and the people pay heavily for both; kings tend to assimilate power and operate in terms of conquest and domination, often without moral, godly concern; kings set the rules however and whenever it suits them. God tried to warn Israel. Not only did every prediction prove true, but the very nature and identity of Israel changed dramatically when a people of God became a nation, a political entity. The children of God became one among many citizens of a nation, some of whom had widely varying faiths and moralities.

As spotty as Solomon’s life was, one high point was in addition to constructing the building: his articulating the purpose of the temple in divine terms rather than in terms of architecture or kingship. First Kings 8 is surely the high point of Solomon’s place in the historical record. He recognizes that the value of the temple is not that God needs a place of residence. The temple is rather a place that God graces with His name and presence, a place toward which people can focus their prayers in faith that God will hear, a place toward which people can confess their sins in faith that God will forgive. In a string of scenarios in which people can look through the temple to God (1 Kgs 8:31–40, 44–51) comes a very striking, if brief, scenario (vv. 41–43). He suggests that there will be foreigners who are “not of your people Israel,” living in a distant land but who will come and pray toward this house, “for they shall hear of your great name and your mighty hand, and of your outstretched arm.”⁷ Solomon prays that God “hear . . . and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to you” (v. 43). But the purpose behind this prayer on behalf of the foreigner is “that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel” (vv. 43, 60). That last phrase indicates a leveling in the temple that almost seems beyond belief, that there be no difference in the prayer and in God’s response to the prayer between Israelite and foreigner.

Even the temple, in Solomon’s inspired prayer, has its place in God’s pursuit of The Question and in people’s (including the foreigners’) response to The Question. At least part of the answer to “Where are you?” lies “in worship, in the temple.” So, by extension, places of worship and nurture to this day take on sacral and missional import as driven by The Question.

“. . . in its welfare (*shalom*) you will find your welfare (*shalom*)” (Jer 29:7)

To the Jews, whose celebration of the Passover included recollection of slavery in Egypt and decades of wilderness wandering, exile in Babylon must have seemed a *déjà vu* experience, only more so, torn away from the Holy Land, from the holy

temple, from a divinely promised present and future. Hope and trust are difficult when life is reduced to oppression, when God's people are carted away and the sacred things of the temple stripped away. As Israel viewed Egypt, so Judah viewed Babylon, with resentment and revulsion. Preserved among the psalms are mournful echoes of those days:

By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our lyres. For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" How shall we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill! Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy! (Ps 137:1–6)⁸

We can see in chapters 50–51 that Jeremiah did not soften his judgment against Babylon. However, his pastoral outreach in chapter 29 is startling, as they continue The Question (v. 4). For one thing, God told Judah to prepare for a stay of three generations. Those whom the Lord drove into exile would themselves likely not see the Holy Land again. What were they to do during that long stretch of seventy years? For one thing, Jeremiah said to build houses to live in and to plant gardens to feed them and, for another, to have children who would have children, seventy years of intergenerational family life (vv. 5–6)! Most important, however, the exiles were to "seek the welfare (*shalom*)⁹ of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare (*shalom*) you will find your welfare (*shalom*)" (v. 7). Their life was not to bemoan their fate in Babylon and certainly not to burn up with hatred. Judah's *shalom* rests in its seeking and praying for *shalom* for Babylon, being a kingdom of priests and a holy nation in Babylon and so that Babylon is given the *shalom* Judah seeks.

God leads Judah into exile so that Judah can return to the Lord, and so that Babylon through Judah can also return to the Lord. This unlikely kingdom of priests is the people through whom foreign, even resented, nations can be blessed.

Where are you, Judah? Away from the Holy Land? Yes. Away from the temple? Yes. But not away from the Lord. God leads Judah into exile so that Judah can return to the Lord, and so that Babylon through Judah can also return to the Lord. This unlikely kingdom of priests is the people through whom foreign, even resented, nations can be blessed.

As Christians from all places wander in all directions, whether by design or driven, these words of Jeremiah have timely relevance for the people of God. Whether people on the run or people who provide hospitality for those on the run,

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the Lord provides context in which unexpected grace can be given and received, and all people on earth can be blessed through the people of God.

“In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall . . . (say), ‘Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you’” (Zec 8:23).

Jeremiah minced no words that Judah’s exile in Babylon was God’s punishment, bitter and bleak. Jeremiah’s surprise for Judah was that what was harsh had an undergirding and an overlay of grace, both for Judah and for Babylon. Judah would likely not have prayed for Babylon without the exile, nor would Babylon have known *shalom* without Judah.

As prophets began to look into a more distant future, a couple of these themes dominate. For one thing, Judah/Israel, like Jerusalem and Zion—all God’s vessels of grace—became beacons of God’s grace as He gathers both the scattered remnant of Israel and also the scattered descendants of Babel, the islands, the peoples from afar, who “are not of my people Israel.” Whether in the form of a faithful remnant or a people whom God graces with a new heart and a new spirit, God continues to use His chosen people to serve the nations. Just as in both exodus and exile, what is at stake is not Judah by itself, but Judah for the sake of the nations. We know the soaring visions of Isaiah and Micah. We see the baffling conversion of Nineveh through Jonah, but Jonah’s resistance to conversion through Nineveh.¹⁰

The passage from Zechariah (vv. 20–23), not as well-known perhaps, provides a similar insight into God’s pursuing The Question. Anticipating the vision of Revelation 7:9, Zechariah describes the coming of people of every tongue among the nations, approaching the people of God because they have heard that “God is with you” (Immanuel). Somehow, as with the foreigners in Solomon’s temple prayer, some of God’s people had been anonymously but faithfully sharing the call of God; and among “all nations” people are drawn to Him to ask The Question, and indeed receive the answer: Where are you? With us—with God. Immanuel.

Notice also the special touch in a couple of verses before Zechariah 8:23, where the nations are getting themselves ready: “Let us go at once to . . . seek the Lord Almighty. I myself am going.” It sounds just like the words of the shepherds that one starry night (Lk 2:15), as they mustered up impetus to seek the Newborn, the solution to The Question.

Where Are You? Question and Answer

Like the prayer for Babylon above (or Abraham or Israel at Sinai or the temple), only with much fuller completion, the prophets look ahead to what The Question is

looking to fulfill. This is the mission into which God calls and invites his Old Testament saints, a quest long and tortured but never neglected or abandoned.

This is the mission into which God invests His Son—He who both is and speaks the Word and who grants the gift which is the name and the mission God gave Him, Immanuel—the solution to The Question.

This is the mission that continues with those whom Word and Spirit call and empower to live both The Question and the solution. The church of all ages and specifically the church of our age continues to press The Question to our world. We articulate and interpret the evil, the pains, the sufferings, the pollutions and corruptions that infest a world that has removed itself from God. Like the prophets, we proclaim the word of God’s judgment. As God Himself, however, we also reflect the heart behind The Question, namely that God “desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tm 2:4). Therefore, we proclaim Him whom God sent into the world to seek and to save, Christ crucified and risen. As a holy nation, we offer ourselves, in word and deed, as witness to God’s forgiving love and grace.¹¹ As people of God, we offer not only The Question but the answer. Where are you? I am in Christ. Come and join me—us. Immanuel.

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Immanuel.

Endnotes

¹ This sense of yearning in the heart of God, in addition to the words of judgment, is reflected in Hosea 11:8–9, in the Lord’s weeping over Jerusalem (Lk 19:41), and in the admonition not to “grieve the Holy Spirit of God” (Eph 4:30).

² According to Joshua 24:2, Abram and family “served other gods.” A biblical precedent is set here, namely that there is little to commend any of those the Lord called to serve Him, e.g. Jacob, Rachel, Hosea, Jeremiah, Mary Magdalene, the twelve, Paul.

³ On this precedent of the call of the Lord providing new identity to those He calls, the motley group of fishermen, tax collectors, and other no-frills men of the Gospels were called not only to follow Him, but to assume a new identity, “fishers of men,” and eventually apostles.

⁴ Cf. Gn 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14. Just for the record, unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Scripture are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

⁵ Though clarity of focus and restrictions of length prevent side trips, there is one intriguing tidbit worth noting in the account of the exodus. Ex 12:37 refers to the Israelites who escaped as a body of some “six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children.” The next verse then adds that “a mixed multitude also went up with them,” which indicates that it was not just direct descendants of Abraham who experience the deliverance of the exodus and who likely proceeded to Mount Sinai and on through the wilderness. As they enter the Promised

Land, there is a covenant ceremony (Joshua 24) that provides opportunity for that “mixed multitude” to respond, as the Lord desires, to The Question.

⁶ First Peter 2:9 quotes Exodus 19:6, but seems to use the Septuagint translation, which has “royal priesthood” rather than “priestly kingdom.”

⁷ This “foreigner” is not the “sojourner” who has cast his/her lot with Israel and is included in the worship life of Israel, but one who stands outside the faith and life of Israel. One wonders how and from whom this foreigner will “hear of Your great Name.” There’s some otherwise unreported sharing of Israel’s faith, perhaps on the pattern of Naaman’s servant (2 Kings 5).

⁸ The remaining three verses of the psalm move to a vengeful curse of Babylon. Verses 1–4 were put to song some forty years ago by the group Boney M. The upbeat calypso tone cannot supplant the haunting sadness of the verses, however, nor the addition of a softer prayer from Psalm 19:14.

⁹ *Shalom* is one of the most beautiful words of the Hebrew language and of the Old Testament. It may be best remembered from the way all the various words of blessing in the benediction of Numbers 6:24–26 are summed up by the final “*shalom*.” *Shalom* means peace, wholeness, harmony in every aspect of one’s life, from health to family to freedom from worry (about sufficient food, about oppression, about danger) to proper and trustful life with and under God. Part of The Question is the gift of *shalom*, which includes but also invites further growth in the life only God can give.

¹⁰ It is interesting to read the Book of Jonah through the lens of The Question, both God’s questions to Jonah, God’s dealing with Nineveh, and Jonah’s response to God. At the end of the book, that Question rings and haunts without clear reply from Jonah and thus continues open-ended to the present day.

¹¹ Note the marvelous variety of imagery, each with its own flavor and emphasis, that Scripture uses to describe the mission of Church and Christians: “salt of the earth” (Mt 5:13), “light of the world” (Mt 5:14), “fishers of men” (Mk 1:17), “my witnesses” (Acts 1:8), “aroma of Christ” (2 Cor 2:15).