

Problems with Locating God
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1 KINGS 8:1, 6, 10-13, 22-30

¹Then Solomon assembled the elders of Israel and all the heads of the tribes, the leaders of the ancestral houses of the Israelites, before King Solomon in Jerusalem, to bring up the ark of the covenant of the Lord out of the city of David, which is Zion. ...

⁶Then the priests brought the ark of the covenant of the Lord to its place, in the inner sanctuary of the house, in the most holy place, underneath the wings of the cherubim. ...

¹⁰And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the Lord, ¹¹so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord.

¹²Then Solomon said, "The Lord has said that he would dwell in thick darkness. ¹³I have built you an exalted house, a place for you to dwell in forever. ...

²²Then Solomon stood before the altar of the Lord in the presence of all the assembly of Israel, and spread out his hands to heaven. ²³He said,

"O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you with all their heart, ²⁴the covenant that you kept for your servant my father David as you declared to him; you promised with your mouth and have this day fulfilled with your hand.

²⁵Therefore, O Lord, God of Israel, keep for your servant my father David that which you promised him, saying, 'There shall never fail you a successor before me to sit on the throne of Israel, if only your children look to their way, to walk before me as you have walked before me.' ²⁶Therefore, O God of Israel, let your word be confirmed, which you promised to your servant my father David.

²⁷But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built! ²⁸Regard your servant's prayer and his plea, O Lord my God, heeding the cry and the prayer that your servant prays to you today; ²⁹that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you said, 'My name shall be there,' that you may heed the prayer that your servant prays toward this place. ³⁰Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place; O hear in heaven your dwelling place; heed and forgive." (1 Kings 8:1, 6, 10-13, 22-30, NRSV)

PSALM 84

¹How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! ²My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God. ³Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God. ⁴Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise. ...

⁵Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion. ⁶As they go through the valley of Baca they make it a place of springs; the early rain also covers it with pools. ⁷They go from strength to strength; the God of gods will be seen in Zion.

⁸O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer; give ear, O God of Jacob! ... ⁹Behold our shield, O God; look on the face of your anointed.

¹⁰For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness. ¹¹For the Lord God is a sun and shield; he bestows favor and honor. No good thing does the Lord withhold from those who walk uprightly. O Lord of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you. (Psalm 84, NRSV)

JOHN 4:19-26

¹⁹The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." ²¹Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²²You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³But the hour is coming, and

is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. ²⁴God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” ²⁵The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” ²⁶Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you (John 4:1-26, NRSV).

ACTS 7:44–8:1

⁴⁴Our ancestors had the tent of testimony in the wilderness, as God directed when he spoke to Moses, ordering him to make it according to the pattern he had seen. ⁴⁵Our ancestors in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our ancestors. And it was there until the time of David, ⁴⁶who found favor with God and asked that he might find a dwelling place for the house of Jacob. ⁴⁷But it was Solomon who built a house for him. ⁴⁸Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands; as the prophet says, ⁴⁹‘Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? ⁵⁰Did not my hand make all these things?’

⁵¹“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. ⁵²Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. ⁵³You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it.”

⁵⁴When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. ⁵⁵But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶“Look,” he said, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” ⁵⁷But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. ⁵⁸Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him ⁵⁹While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he died. ...

⁹^bThat day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria (Acts 7:44-8:1, NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

I have occasionally been known to tell my students that we all have a learning disability when it comes to knowing God. I believe that, and I say it because I believe that some humility is warranted.

The first article in the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* has to do with knowing God. I appreciate this article because it says that we can know something about God even as we “humbly recognize that God far surpasses human comprehension and knowledge.” In my opinion, the heart of the matter appears in the commentary section: “God both surpasses human understanding and is truly knowable through revelation.”

Without some positive, constructive knowledge of God through revelation, all we would be left with is some vague impressions of who God might be within a framework that would be essentially agnostic, or perhaps deistic. Without some humility about what we can and cannot understand of God as humans, we tend to put God in a box of our making, or in biblical terms, we create God in our own image, which is idolatry, the biggest sin in the book. So there would seem to be some necessary middle ground between agnosticism and idolatry—ground that I would like to explore with you this evening.

THE TABERNACLE AND THE TEMPLES: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In our text from 1 Kings 8 this evening, Solomon is dedicating the newly built Temple. We know about this Temple only by way of the literature. No archaeological evidence of it remains, though such evidence likely lies buried under the Temple Mount. In 1981 an archaeologist rabbi opened up Warren’s Gate and began to explore the area under the Temple Mount. Because the Islamic Waqf has control of the Temple Mount, this exploration was illegal, and when the sounds of digging were heard by the Muslims, rioting broke out until the work stopped and Warren’s Gate was resealed with cement.

Before the building of this Temple, God’s presence with Israel was known—at least symbolically—by way of the portable Tabernacle. We have in Exodus seven long chapters (Exod. 25–31) in which God gives detailed instructions about how to build the Tabernacle and to make the items that will go into it. The most important item in this portable Tabernacle was the Ark of the Covenant, the space above which seemed to symbolize in a special way the presence of God. Because the Exodus can be dated to either the 15th or the 13th century BCE, the Tabernacle was likely constructed shortly thereafter.

In time the Ark seemed to take on almost magical qualities. Sometimes the presence or absence of the Ark of the Covenant seemed to be the key to whether Israel won or lost their battles with the Philistines. Nevertheless, the ark was captured by the Philistines in one particular battle (1 Samuel 4:1b-11), which shows that its presence was not really magical and that Israel’s theology of Holy War was not entirely ideological. That is, sometimes God even fights *against* Israel.

David goes on record as wishing to build a Temple to God, but he received a prophetic word of warning: “You have shed much blood and have waged great wars; you shall not build a house to my name, because you have shed so much blood in my sight on the earth. ⁹See, a son shall be born to you; he shall be a man of peace. . . . ¹⁰He shall build a house for my name (1 Chron. 22:8-10).

David became king around 1000 BCE, and Solomon began to build the Temple in 964 BCE. It was apparently a marvelous Temple that was quite a sight to see. It was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 or 586 BCE. After the Exile in Babylon, the Temple was quickly rebuilt, and probably dedicated around 515 BCE. Ezra 3:12 implies that the Second Temple (sometimes called Zerubbabel’s Temple) was quite modest in comparison to Solomon’s.

By the time that the Second Temple was built, a slight but noticeable shift had occurred in the religion of Israel. The Babylonian Exile had shook Israel to its core. For some it seemed like everything had changed! Israel had been defeated by a foreign power. Worse yet, Israel’s God had been defeated by Babylon’s gods! And the Temple on Zion, the place where God had promised to dwell forever, was destroyed! How could this be? Psalm 137 is so heart-wrenching in part because the Babylonians taunted the Israelites to sing “the Songs of Zion,” which proclaimed Jerusalem as the site where Yahweh dwells, and will dwell forever—the very site that the Babylonians had conquered!

Taken in the first deportation of Israelites to Babylon in 597 BCE, Ezekiel was forced to look deeply into what was going on theologically. In Ezekiel 1 we have a most interesting prophecy in which Ezekiel sees a vision of God. The most remarkable thing about this vision is that Ezekiel was shown that God had wheels! How could this

be? God had always dwelt in Jerusalem! God didn't need wheels! But the Exile demonstrated that God did indeed have wheels and that God could move to Babylon along with the Exiles!

The Temple could indeed be a source of inspiration and joy. Our Psalm in today's lectionary is all about the joy of worshiping in the Temple. Here the Temple symbolizes the presence of God and worshiping there symbolizes connecting with God. Indeed, it shows that God blessed the Temple with God's presence. Just a few verses:

¹How lovely is your dwelling place,
O Lord of hosts!

²My soul longs, indeed it faints
for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy
to the living God." ...

⁴Happy are those who live in your house,
ever singing your praise. ...

⁸O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer;
give ear, O God of Jacob! ...

¹⁰For a day in your courts is better
than a thousand elsewhere.

THE TEMPLE RACKET

In late Second Temple Judaism, around the time of Jesus, the Temple gained significant power as an institution. The Jews had been able to wrest power from the Seleucid kings in the second century BCE and to reestablish their own self-rule for the first time since the Exile. Under the thumb of the Babylonian, Persian, and Greek rulers, Israel was not able to have a king. But they could have a high priest, so the high priest became the focus of power and identity for the Jews. When the Maccabees regained control of the land from the Seleucids, the Maccabean or Hasmonean king felt it politically necessary to serve as high priest as well. This was controversial, since the Law of Moses made it clear that the high priest had to be a descendant of Zadok, himself a descendant of Levi, and the new dynasty of kings was not from that line!

Many people saw that combining the kingship and the high priesthood in one person was politically necessary, but some people thought it important to do what was right. It was during this time that the Essene movement was formed, likely in protest to the king's illegally assuming the role of high priest. The Dead Sea Scrolls are themselves the remains of a library run by this sectarian protest movement, which lasted more than 200 years.

When Rome took control of Palestine in 63 BCE, Israel once again lost the monarchy. But they did not lose their high priest, and once again the high priest and the Temple Establishment became the focal point of Jewish identity and power.

Every faithful Jewish male over 20 years of age paid a half-shekel per year for the running and upkeep of the Temple. This brought significant revenue to Jerusalem and the families and institutions that controlled the Temple became quite wealthy and influential. The Sadducees were the group that controlled the Temple and the high priestly families were at the center of the Sadducees.

Herod the Great was no fool. He was a magnificent builder who built amazing palaces, buildings, and structures both within Israel and outside of Israel. He even built a mountain and named it after himself. He knew that one of the best ways to endear the Jews to him was to renovate and enlarge the Temple. So around 20 BCE, after careful preparation and the assistance of thousands of construction-trained priests, he dismantled the Temple and remodeled it. The work on the Temple itself was finished in about eighteen months.

However, he decided that the area around the Temple was much too small and needed to be enlarged. So he began to bring in thousands of cubic meters of ground fill, raising the area around the Temple Mount. Huge retaining walls had to be built to support the weight of the fill. The resulting area was the largest in the world, about twice the size of the Roman Forum. It was quite impressive, dominating both Jerusalem and the surrounding Judean countryside.

When Herod died about 15 years later, work on the newly expanded area was still going on, as it was when Jesus was crucified about 35 years after that. In John 2:20 we have the remark that the Temple had been under construction for 46 years at that point. Mark 13:1 shows that even the disciples were quite impressed with the size and splendor of the Temple. Josephus mentions that the construction work finally came to an end in the 60s, just a few years before it was destroyed in 70 CE by the Romans in the First Jewish Revolt against Rome.

It's not just that the Temple was a magnificent building on an impressive platform; it was also a powerful institution. Besides the money, Jewish men and women from around Israel and even around the world came to Jerusalem on a regular basis to take part in the festivals. Various Psalms were written as songs sung during the pilgrimages. Josephus notes that Pilate regularly had to dispatch additional cohorts of soldiers from Caesarea Maritima to go up to Jerusalem to do Temple duty whenever there was a festival there, since festivals were particularly dangerous times. Anti-Roman sentiment was particularly strong during these festivals and crowds had a way of becoming unruly.

In some settings and circumstances, power and wealth have a tendency to corrupt, and that seemed to take place in Jerusalem in the first century. Sometimes the priests seemed more interested in preserving their wealth and power than in serving God. So there was a lively, if small, underground protest movement against the Temple Establishment.

Many Jews faithfully went on pilgrimage to the Temple. Most or all of them paid the requisite annual Temple Tax. And many tended to ignore or adapt themselves to the financial and political power game—or racket—that the Temple had become. Not Jesus. It wasn't that he was against the Temple; rather, he was against what it had become—a commercialized racket. Stephen seemed to go a step further. In his defense before the Sanhedrin in Acts 7, he rehearses the history of Israel in such a way that implies that everything went wrong when Solomon had the hubris to build a house for God!

No house had ever really “housed” God. Even Solomon in his prayer of dedication notes, **8²⁷**“But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!” I cannot help but wonder whether this reflects a historically authentic memory of protest against the Temple already in the tenth century BCE!

Protests against the Temple establishment were not all from one cloth. In the 5th century, Trito-Isaiah protested the hubris that could conceivably be seen in the idea that someone could build a house—a location—for God:

66¹ Thus says the Lord:
Heaven is my throne
and the earth is my footstool;
what is the house that you would build for me,
and what is my resting place?
2 All these things my hand has made,
and so all these things are mine,
says the Lord.
But this is the one to whom I will look,
to the humble and contrite in spirit,
who trembles at my word.

In the 5th century BCE, there was a great confrontation between the Jews in Jerusalem and the Samaritans who lived just North of them. We know little about this confrontation and what we have comes from the perspective of those in the South. During this confrontation, a Temple was built on Mt. Gerizim, which became the holy authorized temple for the Samaritans for more than 300 years. Since Trito-Isaiah likely dates from the 5th century, he may have been responding to the Jerusalem-Gerizim controversy when he wrote 66:1-2.

In 128 BCE, this Samaritan temple on Mt. Gerizim was destroyed by John Hyrcanus, a Maccabean king in the Hasmonean dynasty. After its destruction, the Samaritans drafted their own edited version of the Pentateuch that played down Jerusalem and Zion and that emphasized Mt. Gerizim as the place where Yahweh had chosen to dwell.

This controversy is reflected in Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well of Jacob in John 4:

¹⁹The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” ²¹Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²²You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. ²⁴God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

Both Jesus and Stephen seem to imply that whatever its origins and whatever the joy of worshiping in the Temple, it *can* become an idolatrous means of controlling God. According to Stephen, the Temple had indeed become that in the case of the Sanhedrin. He utterly rejects their authority ... and he pays the ultimate price for that rejection.

JEWISH RABBIS ARGUE

Jews often use G-d to speak of God as a reminder that we do not—we *cannot*—even begin to say who God is or to define who God is. God is beyond our naming. The Tetragrammaton (the four-letter name of God) is not to be spoken aloud. Whenever a Jew comes to this word in Scripture, he or she is to substitute Adonai (which simply means “LORD”).

One time when I was doing a Clinical Pastoral Education program at South Bend Memorial hospital, I recited the 23rd Psalm in Hebrew when visiting an eight-year-old Jewish girl. I slipped and I said the name of God in Hebrew. She was not offended, but she said that if the rabbi had been there, he would have rapped my knuckles!

CONCLUSION

What does this have to do with Temples and locating God? It is that we cannot ... or should not ... put God in a box. That is a bit of a trite expression, but the point is that God cannot be “located” in the transitive sense by humans. God is bigger than the universe God created. God is both transcendent (above human experience and knowledge) and immanent (intimately involved in human affairs). Although God draws near in the Incarnation—and can indeed be known—God remains inscrutable. Mystery remains. We do not have to have everything resolved in our understanding; we should be able to live with some ambiguity in life, because at the end of the day, we may discover that the person with whom we had been walking on the road to Emmaus was God.