

A questionable God: Exodus 3:1-15; Matthew 16:21-28; Romans 12:9-21

by [William L. Hawkins](#) in the [August 14, 2002](#) issue

When a rabbi was asked, “Why is it that you rabbis put much of your teaching in the form of a question?” the rabbi replied, “So what’s wrong with a question?” The rabbi may be on to something.

Consider the question that Moses knew the Hebrews would ask him about the liberating God. “What is his name?” Given the polytheistic environment of the ancient world and the ancestral gods of the people, the question seems reasonable. But God’s answer likely frustrates Moses: “I am who I am” or “I will be who I will be.” YHWH is the only answer Moses is going to get. Furthermore, there is nothing in that name that either he or the Israelites can use, and the use of the name is what they want.

At Mount Sinai we learn that the use of God’s name ranks third on the Top Ten list of dos and don’ts: “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God.” Or as Walter Harrelson translates it, “You shall not lift up the Lord’s name for mischief.”

Perhaps Moses had something less than a “hallowed” use in mind when he inquired as to God’s name. But the third commandment prohibits the use of “God” for entrapping, circumscribing or trying to control what the Divine One will be and do. Among the ancients, knowing the name of a god gave one divine power. As Moses begins his journey with YHWH, he is aware that he has no god on a leash, no genie in a lamp, no chip in the big game he can produce on demand. Humankind is on notice that this God is elusive; giving a name that is not a name, a moving, not a fixed, target, a God who is not here, not there, but everywhere.

Thinking he can seize the reins of the divine initiative and usurp God’s prerogative, Moses receives a boomerang—a name that takes the form of a larger question redirected to him. He learns that only God can ask this question, and that the answer for Moses or any of us is to give our lives. It is as though God were saying, “If you want to know my name, come with me and spend the rest of your life finding out.”

The move from Moses and YHWH in the Sinai to Jesus and Peter at Caesarea Philippi presents something of a role reversal. Now the “I Am,” the God-with-us, speaks, and Moses the questioner becomes Peter the questioned. “Who do you say that I am?” asks Jesus. Peter’s confident reply of “Messiah” is quickly followed by Jesus’ command for silence about his identity.

While not a name, the title of “Messiah” is a close second to a name, perhaps even a “handle” that might give power to those who possess insider information. If this handle on divine power is Jesus’ concern, one would think his call for secrecy a needless command.

Does Jesus really think any of the Twelve would divulge this information and risk losing his place in the kingdom hierarchy? Or does Jesus call for secrecy because he realizes that Peter did not get the answer right, but only the words?

The title of “Messiah” had been forged centuries ago and proclaimed by the prophet Nathan (2 Sam. 7). Though Peter knew Jesus was greater than the heroes of the past, he too thought of a messiah as one of those who had controlled kingdoms of this world. When Jesus announces his impending suffering and death, his meaning of “Messiah” clashes with Peter’s. A suffering and dying Messiah does not fit with Peter’s image, and he exclaims, “God forbid this should happen to you!” Suddenly Jesus calls him “Satan.”

Then Jesus warns that what will happen to him will happen to the Twelve and even to you and me. Confessing Jesus as the Messiah means living lives marked by denying and picking up, losing and saving, forfeiting and finding. It means living lives in a faith community where the ethical exhortations of the apostle Paul shape both the individual and common life. It shows in those who have willingly embraced limited certainties and unlimited sympathies while leaving the rest to God.

Answers like the one Moses sought and the one Peter offered are vastly overrated and can be dangerous for our faith. Like two-day-old manna that can poison. Like clinging to an outdated notion of the “Messiah” that puts us on the side of Satan. When it comes to our relationship with God, the answers we seek or think we already know have a limited shelf life. Better for us to live with questions—provided they are the right questions, those grounded in the mystery of the name YHWH and heard on the lips of Jesus then and now.

Elie Wiesel tells of once getting this advice: "Every (ultimate) question possesses a power that does not lie in the answer." There is always more to the answer than we are capable of comprehending at any one time. This is why we must return to the question again and again. Rainer Marie Rilke offers sage advice: we are to learn to "love the questions" and not "search for the answers which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to . . . *live* the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without noticing it, live your way into the answer."

"So what is wrong with a question"—especially when it is *the* question, the question we were meant to answer with our very lives?