

## ARE YOU ASKING GOOD QUESTIONS?

Isadore Rabi, winner of a Nobel Prize in physics, was once asked why he became a scientist. He replied, "My mother made me a scientist without ever knowing it. Every other child would come back from school and be asked, 'What did you learn today?' But my mother used to ask: 'Izzy, did you ask a good question today?' That made the difference. Asking good questions made me a scientist."<sup>1</sup>

How blessed "Izzy" Rabi was to have a wise mother who understood and modeled what is basic Jewish child-raising psychology from the Hebrew Scriptures ... the encouragement to ask good questions. For it is of the essence of Jewish consciousness that in all our relationships --- whether horizontal with each other or vertical with God --- we discover truth for ourselves.

So far as our walk with God is concerned, Jews have always understood that the Living God is not after blind, unquestioning, rote faith. He desires transparent relationship, based on respectful dialogue. And a basis of healthy dialogue is an atmosphere where good questions can be asked, and helpful answers can be given.

Since we are made in the image of God --- the ultimate Mind --- asking probing questions with seeking minds is a hallmark of genuine humanity. Do we not observe how God has stamped every child with a beautiful questioning, seeking mind? Where is the parent of any 4 or 5 year old child who hasn't been worn down by the constant questions, "But why, mummy?" And "How, daddy?" Asking questions is programmed into our DNA.

Indeed, God wants children to ask intelligent questions. It is a rabbinic tradition that four passages of Scripture represent four different kinds of children: One wise, one wicked, one rebellious, and one too stupid to know how to ask questions:

And it will come about when your children will say to you, "What does this rite mean to you?" that you shall say, "It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD who passed over the houses of the sons of Israel in Egypt when He smote the Egyptians, but spared our homes" (Exodus 12:26-27).

And it shall be when your son asks you in time to come, saying, "What is this?" then you shall say to him, "With a powerful hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery ..." (Exodus 13:14).

When your son asks you in time to come, saying, "What do the testimonies and statutes and the judgments mean which the LORD commanded you?" then you shall say ..." (Deuteronomy 6:20-21).

And the fourth passage that contains no question from the child, but simply has the instruction is:

And you shall tell your son on that day, saying, "It is because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt" (Exodus 13:8).

Reading these four passages together, the rabbinic sages concluded that it's right and proper that children should be allowed to ask questions, that parents should encourage children to ask questions in an atmosphere of acceptance, and that any child who does not ask questions should be encouraged to do so. With such principles is it any wonder that to this very day there are more Jewish Nobel Prize winners per capita than any other ethnic or religious people on the face of the planet? Asking good questions produces independent, strong, free people.

For those of us who have grown up in a society with traditional Judeo-Christian values, it's not always easy to appreciate how this mindset contrasts with other cultures. In many societies both past and present, children were to be seen and not heard. In fact, most traditional cultures see the responsibility of the child is to submit and to unquestioningly obey, and they will be severely punished for anything less.

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<sup>1</sup> I owe this story and some of the substance following to Rabbi Sacks, a popular and current Jewish spokesman. It comes from 'Bo-Covenant and Conversations' number 5777

Rabbi Sachs illustrates this by telling how Socrates, who spent most of his life teaching people to ask questions, was condemned by the citizens of Athens for corrupting the young. But in Judaism it was the opposite. It was considered a *religious duty* to teach children to ask questions, for that is how they grow and develop healthy minds. This caused the historian Paul Johnson to observe that “rabbinic Judaism was an ancient and highly efficient social machine for the production of intellectuals.”<sup>2</sup>

#### JESUS WAS A MODEL JEWISH LAD

The Gospel of Luke records for us the only boyhood story of Jesus. You know it well. At the age of 12 Jesus goes up with his parents to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem. After the festivities the extended family starts back for home. Mary & Joseph suppose Jesus is “in the caravan”(as the NASB translates it) but after a day’s travel they realize a wheel must have fallen off because there is a terrible wobble in the van ... Jesus is not on board and can’t be found!

After rushing back up to Jerusalem, and after a desperate search with that sick feeling in the gut that only a parent who has lost their child can relate to, mum and dad finally find Jesus after three frantic days. Jesus is in the Temple, “sitting in the midst of the teachers.” And what is this good Jewish boy doing?

He is “both listening to them, and asking them questions” (Luke 2:46)! Jesus is clearly a free spirit with an intelligent enquiring mind. And note that Jesus is asking good questions in the right order and with the right attitude of respect for his superiors. First, he listens! That is, he seeks to understand the viewpoint of others. He pays them the respect of hearing their words. And only then, does he ask his good questions:

And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers (Luke 2:47).

Thus the lad who listened and asked good questions earned respect and admiration. I am sure he understood this principle of creation: God has given us two ears and one mouth, and we should keep the proportion! No wonder we then learn that Jesus “increased in wisdom and in maturity, and in favour with God and men” (Luke 2:44).

And if you follow rabbi Jesus’ teaching method into his later ministry, you discover he carried these characteristics over into his adult life. You will find him time and again disarming hostility or ignorance or doubt with a well-aimed question. One of my favourite instances is when the religious authorities challenged Jesus, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” (Matthew 21:23).

Knowing their refusal to accept the obvious answer to their own hostile interrogation, Jesus masterfully answers by saying to them, “*I will ask you* one thing too, which if you tell me, I will also tell you by what authority I do these things (v.24). An insolent question is undone first by one good question! The opponents are disarmed.

And what about the time when the unholy alliance of the Pharisees and Herodians seeking how “they might trap him in what he said” asked Jesus in buttery tones, “Teacher, we know that you are truthful and teach the way of God in truth, and court no man’s favour, for you are not partial to any. Tell us therefore, what do you think? Is it lawful to give a poll-tax to Caesar, or not?” A good question but concealed in poison.

Remember how Jesus, upon showing the crowd a Roman coin, answered their sneaky question by asking another clever question, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” By this question Jesus snapped shut their trap (and their traps!).<sup>3</sup> They had answered it themselves; give to Caesar the things that belonged to him and give to God what bears His image, namely themselves (Matthew 22:15ff).

All of this is classic Jewish methodology. The Jewish faith is comfortable with asking deep and difficult questions that sometimes would even seem to shake the very foundations of its own beliefs. Their greatest patriarchs knew how to ask God Himself good questions ...

When Abraham was interceding for Lot in Sodom, he asked [and it is certain God wanted him to ask], “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is right?” And who can forget Moses questioning Yahweh God, “Why have you

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<sup>2</sup> As quoted by Rabbi Sachs in *Bo-Covenant and Conversations* number 5777.

<sup>3</sup> “Traps” is Australian slang for “mouths”.

brought all this trouble on your people Israel? And if you blot out this people, won't our enemies say You were not able to save your own people?" Or Jeremiah who asked God, "Why do the wicked prosper? Why do the faithless live at ease?" And the book of Job is full of questions with the conclusion being 4 chapters of deeper questions posed by the Almighty to Job himself.

Quite evidently, it is a mark of godliness to ask good questions even of God Himself.

#### MODERN SCIENCE AROSE FROM GOOD QUESTIONS

Not only are we to ask good questions of God Himself in our relationship with Him, but God has set within man's nature the desire to ask questions that arise out of a world formed by His in-built wisdom;

The LORD by wisdom founded the earth; By understanding He established the heavens (Prov. 3:19).

Recent discoveries in the field of nuclear physics have demonstrated that sub-atomic particles are not solid particles at all, but rather the manifestation of fields of energy. Matter, in other words, arises from a structured substrate of information. Tangible matter is the manifestation of information. I know it sounds rather bizarre, but it seems apparent that matter reflects mind! The late George Wald, Nobel laureate, organic chemist, professor of biology at Harvard University, envisioned that mind is the source of matter.

Agreeing with George Wald, Gerald Schroeder, MIT-trained physicist and oceanographer, has said that:

Mind, as information or wisdom, is present in every atom. Mind is ubiquitous in our universe, just as wisdom is the basis of all existence. The tree and every other part of nature express in physical form the wavelike ethereal energy from which they are fashioned. And that elemental energy is none other than the manifestation of the wisdom from which it is built ... And the wisdom of our minds, if used properly, can close the loop, linking with this underlying mind of the creation. <sup>4</sup>

It is a matter of historic record that modern science is the brain-child of the Hebrew-Christian mindset. Stephen Snobelen, Assistant Professor of History of Science and Technology, University of King's College, Halifax, Canada, writes:

Recent work on early modern science has demonstrated a direct (and positive) relationship between the resurgence of the Hebraic, literal exegesis of the Bible in the Protestant Reformation, and the rise of the empirical method in modern science. I'm not referring to wooden literalism, but the sophisticated literal historical hermeneutics that Martin Luther and others (including Newton) championed. <sup>5</sup>

When Snobelen refers to "sophisticated literal historical hermeneutics" he is acknowledging the rich tradition of coming to the Biblical text with lots of questions arising from moral and intellectual presuppositions that God and His world are grounded in rationality. Christians have nothing to fear from good science, for good science arises out of the conviction that a rational Creator has built a world open to objectivity and logical reasoning.

#### SO WHY IS MODERN CHRISTIANITY AFRAID TO ASK GOOD QUESTIONS?

But all of this leads me to ponder something that causes me deep consternation. How is it that much of modern Christianity which has its origins and roots in the Hebrew Bible seems currently unwilling, indeed is often afraid, to ask itself some probing questions? I get the distinct impression that many pastors and Christian adherents seem threatened by anybody wanting to ask them some reasonable questions about their so called "orthodox" beliefs.

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<sup>4</sup> Schroeder, Gerald L. *God According to God: A Scientist Discovers We've Been Wrong About God All Along*. Harper Collins, USA. 2009. pp226-227

<sup>5</sup> Snobelen, S., *Isaac Newton and Apocalypse Now: A response to Tom Harpur's 'Newton's Strange Bedfellows'*. A longer version of the letter published in the 26 February 2004 'Toronto Star', [isaacnewton.ca/mdeia/Reply\\_to\\_Tom\\_Harper-Feb\\_26.pdf](http://isaacnewton.ca/mdeia/Reply_to_Tom_Harper-Feb_26.pdf)

For instance, ask your pastor, “Would you be able to show me one verse in the Bible, Old or New Testament, that teaches God has always existed in Three Persons?”

Or, “After Jesus arose and ascended on High, how could his apostles still say that “no man has seen God” if Jesus was God?”

Or, “If God cannot be tempted, and Jesus was tempted in all points like as we are, how is Jesus God?”

Or, “If God is [a] Spirit, and Jesus testified that he is not a spirit, how is Jesus God?”

Or, if God is omniscient and knows all things, how can Jesus be God if he says there are some things he is ignorant of? And how is it that now exalted in Heaven, Jesus still is ignorant of certain information that God must show him or he would not be able to reveal it to the world (Revelation 1: 1)?”

Or, if God alone has immortality and by definition cannot die, how is Jesus God since he died?”

Or, if God testifies that He is not a man, and Jesus testified he was a man, how can Jesus be God?”

Or, if Jesus is Almighty God, how is it that even now in Heaven he lives and exists by the power of God (2 Corinthians 13: 4)?

#### THE NESTORIAN ‘HERESY’ SEPARATED JESUS’ DIVINE AND HUMAN NATURES

No doubt you will be answered along the lines that Jesus has two natures, and all the human frailties and limitations belonged to his human nature, for Jesus is both “fully God and fully man”.

If this is the line of reasoning your pastor or friend supplies, you may now ask whether s/he is aware s/he would be branded a heretic by “orthodox” Church Councils. You see, the Nestorian controversy took centre stage at the “orthodox” Council of Ephesus in 432 AD and officially condemned the teaching that Jesus’ divine and human natures could be separated within his person. The council thus mandated that to separate the natures of Jesus would be to create two different persons in the one Christ!

This is to say, “official Trinitarianism” actually teaches that the human and divine natures of Jesus are so united that one side cannot experience anything that the other side remains segregated from or unaffected by. So, whether they admit it or not, trinitarian dogma has a “God” who was born, grew in knowledge, was tempted, and was killed. Trinitarian apologists try to explain these impossibilities by saying, “Well, the human Jesus was born, but not his eternal Godhood, and the human nature of Jesus did not know some things, and only the human nature of Jesus was tempted, and only the human nature of Jesus died and achieved our atonement, etc.”

In the words of Keegan Chandler:

Many of the very same mainstream Christian theologians who have decried other Christians as “heretical” because they do not adhere to council decisions, have proven equally unorthodox by espousing Nestorian or semi-Nestorian views on the dual natures ... evangelicals like R. C. Sproul teach that “atonement was made by the human nature of Christ ... death is something that is experienced only by the human nature.” But is this not the ‘heresy’ of Nestorius who claimed that “the human aspect of Christ died on the cross, but not the divine.”<sup>6</sup>

Yes, some good questions requiring sound answers are called for. For surely doctrines unexamined, are really dead dogmas? If “Izzy” Rabi became a scientist by asking good questions, will you and I not be stronger Christians if we are prepared to ask good questions about our faith? It’s not good enough to say, “I believe it because the Church Councils decreed it so.” Or, “My pastor says it, so I just accept it.” Or, “My church denomination says I must agree to its Statement of Beliefs and I dare not rock the boat by asking uncomfortable questions.” Or, “Oh, it’s a mystery that I can’t explain, so I won’t delve further.”

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<sup>6</sup> Chandler, Keegan. *The God of Jesus in Light of Christian Dogma: The Recovery of New Testament Theology*. Restoration Fellowship, McDonough, Georgia. 2016. Pp318-319 [Underline mine]

Don't we realise it is honouring to God to examine and to arrive at a thorough understanding of our beliefs? Through his apostle He encourages us to "Prove all things, and to hold to that which is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

It actually *pleases* God when we ask good questions. And when you satisfy your mind with solid, well-grounded answers, you will be rewarded with a healthy heart and happy head. True freedom comes from confidence that your faith can stand up under honest scrutiny. You are assured that God's truth is not afraid of the light. It is only those whose faith is untested and unexamined who are afraid of questions because they have secret and suppressed doubts.

#### COLLECTIVE WISDOM

Of course it's not wrong to seek out consensus from a tried and true Christian community. "In a multitude of counselors, there is safety" (Proverbs 11:14). But the question is whether that community is itself a group that is comfortable with asking good questions and examining matters openly, or only wants to dominate and control your thinking. We all know the dangers of the "cult", but it's much easier recognizing the signs from outside. When we ourselves are immersed in "the group" it's hard to find objectivity by asking relevant questions.

When Paul wrote to the church in Corinth he expected the community to examine whatever was being taught or shared. Everything in the church meetings was to be done in an orderly and respectful fashion, and after hearing the teaching or the word of exhortation, Paul instructs, "let the others pass judgment" (1 Corinthians 14:29). This doesn't sound like God wants people to sit in church and just swallow whatever is dished up! It sounds like He is encouraging an atmosphere where open discussion and good questions can take place. How good would it be, if after the pastor delivered his sermon, an opportunity for the audience to ask questions and seek clarification was offered! Unfortunately, many preachers and pastors would freak out at this prospect.

One of the best pastors I sat under was a man who told me that he did not agree with me. In fact, he promised that "until the cows come home I will not change my mind". So, you might think, why would I say he was a good pastor? Precisely because he told me that I was welcome in his church because he was not in the business of trying to get everybody to agree with him. In the church, he said, he would encourage people to think for themselves, even if they came to different conclusions than him. He wanted an atmosphere where adults could agree to disagree agreeably. All kudos to him.

Unfortunately, the next pastor in that church displayed the attitude that is the antithesis of wisdom. For him, it was "my way or the highway"! He gathered around him only "yes men" --- folks who were afraid to question him and suggest other points of view. And what do you guess happened? That's right. A large number of his congregation voted with their independent feet and took their bats and balls and went home, or hopefully to other churches, so were not lost to the Lord.

#### THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GOD AND SATAN'S METHODS

One of the observations I have come to, is that the Almighty is not frightened or threatened by good questions and freedom of individual thinking. Being omnipotent and omniscient He is quite secure. But it's the opposite with His adversary, Satan. Satan is not almighty nor all-knowing. He has a narcissistic and brittle ego, and so displays paranoia when challenged. Have you noticed that his little fiefdom is characterized by bullying and oppression and threatening and mind domination? Any government, church, or company that tries to stifle independent thinking and open debate is demonstrating characteristics of that dark kingdom.

There is a unique Greek word used to describe "people who were sick and *afflicted* with unclean spirits" (Acts 5:16). The verb [*ochloumenous*] at base means "to mob", thus by implication, to harass by overwhelming. Note that the New Testament maintains a clear distinction between ordinary illness and demonic oppression, even when the symptoms appear to be the same. People who were sick were healed by the laying on of hands, but people who were oppressed by demons were healed by the command in the name of Jesus to depart. But the salient point is that in Satan's domain, peoples' minds are described as though being mobbed, overrun, harassed, thus distressed and unable to get control of their own minds.

We all abhor the pictures of the North Korean populace marching and applauding like automatons before their leader Kim Jong-Un. We know that anybody who dissents or has dared to differ has already been taken out the back and either shot or put in a correction camp for “re-education”. None of us wants to live in a dictatorship where our minds are “mobbed”.

But have you observed a disturbing trend in our Western societies recently, where violent and noisy protests against speakers with alternate views are increasingly trying to silence and shut down what should be the open and free exchange of ideas in democracies once built on Christian values [e.g. moderate voices questioning the rush towards same-sex marriage, moderate voices calling for a moratorium on certain would-be immigrants, now being howled down with the familiar accusations of “racism”, “intolerance”, “bigotry”, “islamophobia”, “homophobia”, etc.]. Such “mobbing” surely is a tell-tale sign of which kingdom is being promoted. I think this trend of shouting down alternate views is a classic sign that our society is definitely post-Christian and heading towards darkness.

In Christian circles, why do we feel the need to conform to those church decrees that were enforced by excommunication or worse following Nicea or Chalcedon? Those asking good questions in the church often feel like the group and its leadership are mobbing them, ridiculing them, harassing them, shutting down decent discussion.

We are taught that the wisdom of this world is “earthly, natural, demonic” and engenders “bitter jealousy and selfish ambition” and displays arrogance. On the other hand, the wisdom which is from above, from God, is “pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable ...” and leads to goodness and peace (James 3:13-18).

A man or woman outside of Christ is said to be in a condition where their understanding is darkened because of the ignorance that is in them, and so they are excluded from the glorious life of God (see Ephesians 4:18). Such an unbeliever is said to be walking according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, [and] of the spirit that is now working [*literally*, energising] the sons of disobedience” (Eph. 2:1-2). Ignorance is not bliss --- it’s bondage! Satan loves mind-control, and a key part of his *modus operandi* is ignorance and the distaste for good questions that can bring light.

It’s time for Christians everywhere to awaken and ask some good questions! God expects nothing less of His children. It’s time to follow Jesus’ example and both listen and ask good questions. He showed that’s the pathway to wisdom and maturity and favour with God and men.

So, have you asked any good questions today?