

Mixed Blessing: A Biblical Inquiry into a "Patriotic" Cant

By Ched Myers

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This week a Baptist friend from North Carolina wrote me asking for some biblical background to the phrase “God Bless America.” He was commendably trying to discern the spirits of the times, a difficult task in days of warmaking.

I got to work right away because of all the annoying mantras circulating currently in the public discourse, I find this phrase to be the most odious—patriotic litmus test or not. There is something shrilly insistent about this bare imperative, much more presumptuously directive than the traditionally religious optative mood (i.e. “May we receive your blessing!”). I simply do not believe that the God of the Bible blesses on demand—and is certainly not at the beck and call of the rich and powerful. On the other hand, I do think the God who “hears the cry of the poor” is inclined to listen to the petitions of a contrite heart and broken spirit.

Curious, and convinced that the phrase itself invites theological investigation, I did a little looking into how often in the respective biblical testaments the imperatival forms of the verb “to bless” appear. The results were fascinating, and germane.

In the Hebrew Bible, the imperative “Bless!” occurs only 30 out of the several hundred times the verb *barak* generally appears. Of those thirty occurrences, the majority are liturgical exhortations to “bless the Lord,” mostly in the Psalter (e.g. Ps 66:8; 96:2, 104:1, etc). In other words, the act of blessing is most often directed toward heaven, not solicited from it!

Only four times in the entire Hebrew Scriptures do we find direct requests for divine blessing. In one case God instructs it—but only after the people vouch that they have been obedient (Deut 26:15). In another Moses, as part of his farewell litany on Mt. Nebo, petitions God to bless the tribe of Levi (Deut 33:11). And King David twice invokes God’s blessing, once for himself (II Sam 7:29) and once for the people (Ps 28:9).

This is as close as the Bible ever comes to the billboards and bumperstickers of our present moment—a pretty thin theological foundation indeed. And unlike the current cant, the Bible always situates the request in a prayerful or liturgical context: requested, but never demanded.

My Baptist friend wrote that ‘God bless America’ seemed to him like “an entitlement claim, an assertion of righteousness if not hubris, a call for our tribal god to defeat their tribal god.” He further wondered whether the correct approach ought not rather to be “entreaty language, suggesting humility, beseeching, even begging.” He is exactly right. But our presumption is deeply rooted in our national ideology of Manifest Destiny. While as theology this may be heretical, it certainly has proven compelling as political rhetoric in the theater of wartime. I would hasten to add that the same is true for a Muslim militant’s assumption that Allah is on the side of his jihad.

Even more interesting (or troubling, from the point of view of the “patriots”) is the evidence of the New Testament. Of the 41 appearances of the Greek verb *eulogeoo* (literally “speaking a good word”), only twice do we find it in the imperative mood. In neither case does it involve God. It does, however, involve us. In Jesus’ famous Sermon on the Plain he invites his disciples to “Bless those who curse you” (Luke 6:28). These instructions are later echoed by the apostle Paul: “Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse” (Rom 12:14). Sadly, in the days following September 11th too many churches have been busy endorsing the nationalistic slogan, oblivious to this remarkable scriptural cue.

Perhaps the etymology of the English term “bless” is also germane. Webster’s tells us that it derives from the Old English *bledsian*, meaning to consecrate, usually with blood. Are our national demands for God’s blessing—particularly when uttered from presidential or Pentagon pulpits as retaliatory bombs fall on Afghanistan—somehow euphemistic for our deep desire for blood-vengeance? If so, they (like those of the mujahedeen) could not be further from the biblical tradition. For as far as Jesus and Paul are concerned, the only blessing we should be soliciting is our own “good word” directed toward our enemies. Had our churches the courage to preach this, however, they would no doubt receive decidedly mixed blessings.