

Helpful Hobab
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In the midst of planning for the coming year I came across a passage in Numbers that grabbed my attention. The first ten chapters of Numbers describe the organized mobilization of the Israelites in the Sinai wilderness, preparing for what they thought would be a relatively short journey to the land of promise. It was year two, month two, day twenty, and the glory cloud lifted from over the tabernacle signaling God's intention to move (Num. 10:11). The tabernacle and all of its accoutrements were disassembled and packed for the much anticipated trek. The ark would lead the way. They were moving for the first time out of the granite canyons of central Sinai, following God's visible presence into Paran, the more flat and open northern deserts of the peninsula, and looking beyond to Canaan.

At this point an unexpected conversation takes place between Moses and his Midianite relative, Hobab. (The familial relationship is not completely clear.) We're more familiar with the advice of his father-in-law, Jethro/Reuel, but Hobab had a special value to Moses as well. Leaving the closed regions of the Sinai Peninsula, the faithful leader of Israel's masses makes a special request:

"We are setting out for the place about which the LORD said, 'I will give it to you.' Come with us and we will treat you well, for the LORD has promised good things to Israel." [Hobab] answered, "No, I will not go; I am going back to my own land and my own people." But Moses said, "Please do not leave us. You know where we should camp in the desert, and you can be our eyes. If you come with us, we will share with you whatever good things the LORD gives us." (Num 10:29-32 NIV)

Perhaps this is a moment where Moses has an ironic lack of faith. Does he doubt the God who opened the sea, defeated the Egyptian armies, supplied them with food and water in a wasteland, and – more to the point – had been leading them by a cloud and pillar? Is he hanging on to a scout who was useful in his home terrain while God was moving them into a new place of dependence?

There's no way to be sure, but it seems that Hobab had been serving in the capacity as Israel's "eyes" all along. We take it for granted that God's dramatically visible presence was easy to follow. But, apparently, someone intimately familiar with the desert terrain – someone "on the ground" – was helping determine the optimal location for the community's temporary residences. Hobab stands in a long line of desert scouts that extends to the Bedouin baheths of today. They are indispensable for any outsiders moving through desert regions. Even Moses' own general familiarity with the Sinai seemed inadequate for the challenge of camping with God's enormous flock.

In reflecting on this encounter, I couldn't help but think about the gap we often face between a vision, leading, or sense of divine calling and the specific details that need to be worked out. We need help that moves us from the impressionistic painting of a vision

to the photographic clarity of implementation. The actual execution of a God-sponsored mission for an organization often involves formal and informal “environmental scanning.” We examine data and solicit sage counsel from those more familiar with the terrain who have “been there before.” We need consultants with specific expertise. We should welcome such help so long as we never lose sight of the vision.

There’s something else worth noticing in this story. Moses bookends his request for help with two invitations to enjoy the “good things” God has promised His sacred community. Though initially hesitant, Hobab acquiesces and becomes one of the outsiders who benefit from joining God’s people. His services were of use, to be sure. But he had much more to gain from inclusion among those on God’s mission. His role, like Rahab’s a generation later, would serve the Israelites in practical matters, benefit his own family immeasurably, and serve as a model for those who move where God is moving, regardless of personal or ethnic loyalties.

I’m so grateful to be surrounded by a group of fellow sojourners moving with God in a dramatic Spirit-directed journey into promised places we can sometimes only imagine. I’m also pleased to involve the helpful Hobabs who come alongside us with specific insights and perspectives. They are more than welcome to join our crowd and “share the good things the LORD gives to us.”