

REVIEW ARTICLE

Arguing with Each Other about Arguing with God

David R. Blumenthal, with a response by Anson H. Laytner

The Mystery of Suffering and the Meaning of God, Anson Hugh Laytner, Resource Publications, Eugene, 2019 (ISBN 9781532675546), xvii + 176 pp., pb \$25

Abstract

The question of suffering and God is as old as humanity. Anson Laytner offers a very modern reading of this problem based on a learned knowledge of the Jewish sources and his own very personal experiences of death and of God. The whole is set in the context of the Book of Iyyov (Job). Rejecting the supernatural understanding of God, Laytner proposes an acceptance of God as a presence and force for good, together with a healthy spirituality based on our newer understanding of our place in the universe, on modern cosmology, on the apparent laws of nature, and on mutual respect for our various faith traditions. The reviewer disagrees and affirms the personalist theological language of the biblical and Jewish traditional sources. In addition, he affirms the ability, indeed the obligation, of the believer to adopt a theology and, indeed, a liturgy of protest. To keep such a theology and praxis from overwhelming those who took them seriously, he suggests that protest theology and protest liturgy have to alternate with healing theology and healing practice. In this essay, Laytner responds to the critique.

Key Words: Jewish theology, God-concept, suffering, healing, spirituality

Anson Laytner has written a courageous and beautiful book in contemporary Jewish theology – courageous because he draws deeply and poignantly on his own experience of suffering, of God, and of community; and beautiful because he writes well and the reader is drawn into his suffering and into the caring that leads him toward healing.

Chapter 2 (pp. 23–26) tells the story of the death and serious illness of several close family members, including his wife, his sister-in-law, his mother, and father, and then his own injury and the diagnosis of leukemia for his daughter, with Laytner being the caregiver and witness to

their suffering. Chapter 10 (pp. 120–34) tells the story of the last days of his wife and the tender care with which he and his family managed her dying, her death, and the period of mourning. In addition to the two chapters on suffering, Laytner tells clearly the story of three primary experiences of God's presence – in nature (pp. 89–90), in the story of the almost-sacrifice of Isaac (pp. 78–80), and at a funeral of his sister-in-law who had died at an early age at which he spoke of God and justice (pp. 63–64).

The stories of suffering and of spiritual experience are interwoven with narratives of anger and distrust as well as of support, love, and healing. Laytner's experience of God in nature is central to this. The whole is set in the context of the biblical character of Iyyov (Job), drawing the reader into a deep and complex tapestry of Job's/Laytner's suffering and his wrestling with its religious depths.

The book is also courageous because Laytner has clearly set forth his own theology in Chapters 8–11 in which he states his views on God, on revelation, on the afterlife, and on deeds and community. Not many rabbis and Jewish thinkers would do that.

In this process, Laytner rejects the supernatural God of Jewish tradition:

Associated with this concept of the supernatural God are qualities that I reject as contrary to my experience, repugnant, or archaic; first and foremost, that God is omnipotent and omniscient; second, that God has the ability to intervene in history and/or individual lives; third, images of God as male, a warrior, king, judge, punitive father or husband [...]. All these attributes are a problem to me because of how petitionary prayer does not work; they are a problem because of unwarranted suffering in our world; they are a problem because I think a supernatural God belongs to an era in which the earth was at the center of the universe [...] with God enthroned [...]. For me, that God is dead; but YHVH is and shall be [...] I have let go of the traditional perceptions of God and let go of the issue of divine providence in order to let God simply be YHVH (pp. 103–04).

Laytner repeats this theological position as a goal for all humanity: 'As we gradually become a global civilization, we are ever so slowly replacing the anthropomorphic, personal, intercessory, and supernatural God of our traditions with God-concepts that are based on our newer understanding of our place in the universe, on modern cosmology, on the apparent laws of nature, and on mutual respect for our various faith traditions' (p. 149).

The rejection of the supernatural understanding of God implies the rejection of the traditional concepts of revelation, prayer (especially, petitionary prayer), and so on – as, indeed, Iyyov rejects the theodicies of his interlocutors. In its place comes an acceptance of God as a presence and force for good (p. 107), of life as a given, even as a blessing ('life is all there is', p. 130), and of a community of 'healthy spirituality' (p. 150) – Iyyov's theophany in the final chapters of the Book of Job in which he is restored

but wounded nonetheless (p. 136). All of this is beautifully written and poignant in the suffering and in the religious wrestling that it draws us into.

But I disagree with Laytner's theology. Biblical language about God is precisely personal; it is anthropomorphic and anthropopathic (having human feelings). God is not only a transcendent force in and behind the universe; God is also human, given to anger, to compassion, to love, and even to error. These tropes are also the language of rabbinic midrash. And the language of liturgical prayer. And the language of Zoharic mysticism. And part of the understanding of God in European Hasidism. There is, to be sure, a river of Jewish theological language that emphasizes the ineffability of God and ascribes little importance to the personalist language of the tradition. This is the language of Isaiah, Chapter 40; of some rabbinic views; of Maimonides and, in modern times, most prominently of Mordecai Kaplan. But the predominant view of God is 'personalist' (I think that this is also true of the divinity/incarnation of Jesus in Christian scriptures, liturgy, and preaching with its parallels in more philosophic theology). Taking the personhood out of God, then, does not appear to me to be the best answer to personal or historical suffering.

In his first book, *Arguing with God: A Jewish Tradition* (Jason Aronson, 1977), Laytner traced the motif of arguing with God in biblical, rabbinic, medieval, and modern Jewish literature, making it clear that arguing with God is a fully acceptable reaction to unjust suffering. In my own book, *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), I took this insight two steps further and argued forcefully that, given the providential nature of God, one can only see God's action in the shoah as abusing (ie, as unjustifiably violent); and that, given the personalist nature of biblical-rabbinic language about God, the proper solution was protest to God, even within the received liturgical framework.

My theological conclusion was uncompromising, and my liturgical suggestions were radical. To keep them from overwhelming those who took them seriously, including myself, I suggested that protest theology and practice had to alternate with healing theology and practice. In sailing a boat, one cannot sail directly into the wind. To go in that direction, one must 'tack' (sail forward) to one side and then 'tack' to the other side, repeating the process in order to advance. If one stays on one 'tack' for too long, one cannot return to one's desired path. So it is in many areas of life, we alternate our tactics to achieve our goals. Thus, we discipline and love our children, and we fight evil and heal the wounded. I have often regretted that people who read the book did not realize how important the chapter on 'Seriatim' is. In the context of suffering and God, then, one should not take the personalist dimension out of God; rather, one should assert it and then alternate between protest and love. This is the solution I have used. For a while, I used my own severe liturgical modifications. Later, I no longer needed them but I still pray "Our Father, our King,

act for the sake of those who were killed for Your Name" – 'You did not do that in the shoah, we remember and we call You to account, as we are obligated to do under our covenant with You'. And when I do this, I love God, and I am grateful that so much of my life has been devoted to following His calling.

I have not suffered the deep personal losses of my 'fellow trailblazer' (p. 99) Anson Laytner and so I hesitate to say this, but I must: I also disagree with Laytner's therapeutic suggestion that one reaches peace by depersonalizing the source of evil (I do, however, agree that one cannot achieve peace without a healing mission). I think, rather, that we achieve some measure of peace when we realize that the other has limits that do not permit him or her to love more deeply. Take, for example, one's parents: Unless one has been enormously lucky, one feels resentment and anger toward one's parents for the injustices that one has experienced, especially if the parent has been abusive. Sometimes, one can protest, but confrontation is not always possible or advisable. And, even if one has protested, peace comes in realizing that one's parent is simply emotionally, intellectually, and morally limited. Not exempt from reproach, but limited. The same is true of one's children: They, too, are limited in their emotional, intellectual, and moral capacities. They cannot always do what is right, or best, for themselves and for others. And for one's spouse. In truth, we, too, are limited; not above justified reproach, but limited. It is our compassion for ourselves and for others that enables us to reach this judgment.

Perpetrators of the worst suffering, including abusers, nazis, and torturers, are certainly not above reproach. One should protest their acts, if protest is safe. They should be held accountable in the law for what they have done. But, in the end, they, too, are limited in their ability to love. (I tried to indicate the limited nature of perpetrators in *The Banality of Good and Evil: Moral Lessons from the Shoah and Jewish Tradition* [Georgetown University Press, 1999].) If we are to reach peace of some kind with such people, we must recognize that limitedness.

As this is true of persons, so it is true, as I see it, of our relationship to God: If we are to achieve some peace with God, we must acknowledge God's personhood and realize that even God is limited, as indeed Scripture teaches. When God regrets destroying the earth in the flood, God show us His limitedness. When God restores Iyyov (Job), God shows us His limitedness. Even in tolerating – perhaps encouraging or demanding – protest, God shows us the limits of divine omnipotence. Admitting this theologically is the source of whatever inner peace one can achieve in suffering. At least, this is how I see it.

The Mystery of Suffering and the Meaning of God is a courageous and beautiful book, and Laytner's theological and therapeutic path is one that will find resonance in the minds and hearts of modern people. Those who need, or respond to, a more personal God may find my objections and suggestions useful.

Response

by Anson H. Laytner

If I still believed in a traditional Jewish God-concept, a supernatural being with anthropomorphic and anthropopathic qualities, I would believe as my colleague, David Blumenthal, does. One cannot hold that God can intercede in human affairs but, for God only knows what reasons, sometimes chooses not to do so. And, since God is ultimately in charge of everything, to choose not to intervene when evil is being done means that sometimes this God can and should be accused of being abusive.

At that point, a person has three options: One can protest to God, against God, for the evil done, whether by God's passivity or engagement; or one can break off relations with God, never to speak with God again; or one can reframe the problem completely.

Blumenthal chose the first course while I, ultimately, have chosen the latter course. (But both of us remain engaged with the divine nonetheless, each in our own way.)

Where once I believed that it was incumbent upon everyone to use prayer to protest against perceived divine apathy or injustice, I now believe that God has nothing to do with either human or natural evils. Humanity does what humanity does, and the world runs according to its own natural rules. God cannot change that, even if, somehow, God created everything. Matter has its limitations, and God, I suppose, is limited by the materials at hand.

For me, it is no longer a question of 'God will not' but rather 'God cannot'.

Along with this change in perception, I increasingly saw traditional Jewish God-concepts through a human lens, meaning that down through the ages, we have imagined God in very different, sometimes contradictory, ways. This realization led me to seek a divine essence beyond our diverse images and a willingness only to state that God, as YHVH, is and will be. All the rest is commentary.

It is true that I no longer embrace a personalized God concept, but I am not closed to the possibility that at some point in my future, I may choose to reconnect with some of the imagery and attributes Jewish tradition uses to describe our encounter with God. In fact, when I do choose to worship at a synagogue, I notice that I almost instantaneously revert to Blumenthal's position on God, which is at once comforting and disturbing. But I understand it and respect it still.

To put my dilemma in traditional terms, I wonder how long should the people in Israel remain married to her abusive spouse, who is clearly a repeat offender? Better to love Him with all His faults from afar and, mindful of the first two Commandments, put no other god in His place.

However, given the choice between a personal God who must be perceived as occasionally abusive and an impersonal God who somehow imbues benevolence into the world, I definitely prefer the latter.

There is one point on which Blumenthal and I agree: the value of prayers of protest. Life in this world can be painful and difficult, but I think we both believe that everything is part of God and that every event that happens ultimately comes from God. Where advocates of traditional Judaism would state that no matter what obstacles we face, it is all a part of God's plan, Blumenthal and I would assert the spiritual and therapeutic value of protest as an alternate means of coping.