

REVIEW ARTICLES

What are the Limits of Protest Theology? A Review Essay

David R. Blumenthal

Pious Irreverence: Confronting God in Rabbinic Judaism, Dov Weiss, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017 (ISBN 978-0-8122-4835-7), xii + 287pp., hb \$69.95

Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest, David R. Blumenthal, Westminster/John Knox, Louisville, 1993 (ISBN 978-0664254643), xxviii + 319 pp., pb \$40

Abstract

Pious Irreverence presents the classic rabbinic traditions that embody, or allow, protest of God's actions as well as the anti-protest tradition that opposed criticism of God. By arranging this material chronologically, Weiss is able to analyze the development of both traditions. He concludes that the rabbis expanded the anthropomorphic and anthropopathic semantic field and, in so doing, allowed very deep criticism of God as a sign of God's intimacy with the Jewish people. Blumenthal, reflecting on Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest, twenty-five years after its publication, in light of the new material brought forth by Weiss, enters into a dialogue in which he shares second thoughts about his earlier work.

Key Words: protest theology, Facing the Abusing God, Pious Irreverence, rabbinic Judaism, parrhesia, dialogue, David Blumenthal, Dov Weiss

How extensive was the Jewish protest tradition and how deep did it run? Dov Weiss proposes an answer in his new very scholarly, well-documented, and orderly book. No one will be able to deal again with this material without confronting Weiss' presentation and analysis.

In the Introduction, Weiss summarizes the main theses of the book. He lists, in several places, all the verbs and nouns for protest in rabbinic Hebrew. There are many more than one would suspect. He also lists, briefly, biblical protests and contrasts it with the Greek *parrhesia* ('frank talk'). Finally, Weiss distinguishes between tannaitic sources (2nd and 3rd centuries: Mishna, Sifre, Mekhilta de R. Ishmael, etc.); amoraic sources (5th through

the 7th centuries: Genesis Rabba, Lamentations Rabba, the Babylonian Talmud, etc.); post-amoraic sources (late 7th century: Tanhuma-Yelammedenu, Exodus Rabba, Numbers Rabba, Deuteronomy Rabba, Pesikta Rabbati, etc.); and even later sources (Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer). This is important not only from a scholarly historical point of view but because Weiss maintains that, with the passage of time, the rabbinic view of protest changed.

In Chapter 1, Weiss traces the *anti*-protest tradition. While this tradition continues throughout the rabbinic period and even into modern times, Weiss notes that it is at its strongest in the tannaitic period (2nd–3rd centuries). The personalities of Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Elazar were uncompromisingly opposed to any protest against God. They prohibited such protest, sometimes ranging toward punishment for those who did protest, and spent a great deal of energy reinterpreting instances of biblical protest (e.g., Job and Moses) as being prayer and not outright protest.

Weiss moves on in Chapter 2 and traces the development of the *pro*-protest tradition, primarily in the amoraic period (5th through the 7th centuries). He begins expanding the list of biblical injustices committed by God – the omnicide of the flood, the tower of Babel, Sodom, the Akeda, Isaac's blindness, Jacob's thigh, the punishment of Miriam and Korah, Moses' exclusion from the Holy Land, and more – each of which could have been grounds for protest by one of the characters in the narrative. Weiss labels this 'ambivalence'. He, then, goes on to cite texts (Tanhuma, Genesis Rabba, Exodus Rabba, Lamentations Rabba, etc.) that actually put protest in the mouths of biblical heroes; for example, Moses after the golden calf and even God Himself when He calls forth protest by saying, 'Who will stand and defend My children'; the Jerusalem Talmud (Berakhot 4:4): 'When one invites the cantor ... *bo u-kerav* / make war for us'; and the Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 105a): 'Even *hutspah* against heaven is effective' (p. 71).

In Chapter 3, Weiss jumps into the astounding *pro*-protest tradition in post-amoraic sources (late 7th century). He begins by listing the *types* of protest that are, and are not, acceptable even in these sources: prayer, which is a request or seeks to persuade God is sanctioned, but not speech that is derogatory of God or fault-finding toward God; protest that is not self-oriented is acceptable but not protest on behalf of oneself; and protest that flows from an intimate relationship with God is permissible but not protest that flows from alienation from God. Weiss, then, goes on to list various *forms* of acceptable protest: courtroom lawsuits, prayer, and parables. The section on lawsuits is particularly well done. All of these constitute '*acts of ventriloquism*' in which the creators of such texts make the figures therein say what the author wants to say, often reversing the simple meaning of the biblical texts on which the commentary is based. This ventriloquism 'intensif[ies] the challenge ... granting greater leeway for the challenger to radicalize her formulations ... provid[ing] religious shelter for irreverent content ... pious acts ... offer up best defense ... textual distancing ...' (p. 119).

In the next chapters, Weiss switches focus and deals with the question of *why* the rabbis critiqued God. After summarizing the usual rationales, which are not very convincing (pp. 121–25, and previously, pp. 79–87), Weiss proposes that ‘the sages often place challenges against God into the mouth of a biblical character to express their own struggles, ambivalences, and discomforts with morally troubling divine acts’ (p. 125). He, then, give four examples.

The fifth chapter (pp. 149–60) contains the most important argument of the book. In it, Weiss proposes that the rabbis expanded the anthropomorphic and anthropopathic semantic field of language about God to include: God in exile, God in need of redemption, God engaging in matchmaking, God studying and teaching, God wearing tefillin and tallit and praying, as well as talking of God’s clothing, God’s being alternately an old man, youthful lover, servant, wife, husband, creditor, judge, and so on (pp. 150–51 with detailed footnotes). Weiss calls this the ‘*humanization of God*’. He, then, tellingly notes: ‘... it would be fair to conjecture that, in the context of late antique Judaism, where Jews had neither the temple nor political power, the rabbis were driven to emphasize the intimate bond that God continues to have with Israel. To humanize God was to make God “disarmingly familiar,” to feel His closeness, and to impress upon Israel that, appearances to the contrary, God has not abandoned them. Put simply, by intensifying and radicalizing the anthropomorphic biblical imagery the rabbis effectively minimized the ontological divide between God and humanity. God was, indeed, one of them’ (p. 151). And he notes, with Neusner, that this increased intimacy provided fertile ground to support and generate protest against God. God achieves ‘full personality’ when He is portrayed as freely engaging with, and even arguing with, human beings. In these moments, God and humanity have the ‘same rules of discourse’ and God is ‘held accountable to human standards’ (p. 151 with note 30).

In Chapter 6 (161–82), Weiss wades even deeper into the late rabbinic protest literature citing texts in which God *concedes having done wrong*: ‘... not only is God humanlike in being subject to and sometimes guilty of breaking Torah law, but, most radically God is also humanlike with regard to His moral character. As human beings regret and err, so does God’ (p. 162). Two examples: God bemoans that His children are accusing Him and says ‘And if I have erred, you [Abraham] shall teach Me’ (Genesis Rabba 49:10) and ‘I have not acted properly’ (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 108a).

Weiss concludes the book by accounting for the long and deep protest tradition in Judaism as follows: ‘When a person’s life is infused with a consciousness of a providential and personal God, very real feelings of frustration and dismay are bound to surface. Indeed, disappointment is a typical experience in all loving relationships ... holding back feelings of anger might even be detrimental to an honest and open relationship’ (p. 183).

Given the context of the gradual distance from the trauma of the destruction of the temple and the loss of Jewish sovereignty, and given the triumph of Christianity during the first centuries of this era, and given the development of parrhesia among the bishops of the church and its application to divine-human discourse among Jews, the increasing development of, and emphasis on, the intense humanization of God as a sign of intense intimacy between the Jews and God – even unto strong protest – makes a great deal of sense. Weiss, it seems to me, is spot-on correct in this.

Even though Weiss has given us a very fine study, there are two points that I think merit critical comment. First, one does not capitalize ‘Golden calf’; that just repeats the sin. I’m not sure one can even capitalize ‘Temple’ or ‘Messiah’. Certainly, one does not capitalize ‘Shoah’, ‘Holocaust’, ‘Nazi’, and so on. Second, and much more important, while Weiss is correct that medieval Jewish philosophy (and later Jewish rationalism) ‘neutralize’ the problem of intimacy with the divine, I think he and those he cites are wrong when he writes: ‘The kabbalistic godhead is not a distinct and unified personality or consciousness, but a fragmented, dynamic, and complex machine-like structure that is automatically affected by human actions ... bound up in a causal network that operates with lawlike necessity ... Unlike the unpredictable, historical, and relational God of the rabbis and Scripture, the medieval God or godhead is predictable, described in naturalistic terms, and, most importantly, devoid of any real personality’ (p. 155). Reading the Zohar with Tishby, however, one realizes that God is so human that God even has a subconscious. Grasping the complex relationship between Gevura, Sitra Ahra, and Shekhina, one realizes that God is so human that God is precisely subject to inner conflicts that generate fragmentation, dynamism, and complexity. This, too, is ultimately part of the increasing ‘humanization’ of God in rabbinic thinking, not a mechanistic distancing of the divine.

It is twenty-five years since I published *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest*. At the time, I was aware of the protest tradition. I was not interested in tracing its development historically but in using that tradition to deal with the most searing question of post-shoah Judaism: ‘Where was God in the shoah?’ It seemed to me then, as it does now that, without addressing that question, no Jew (or Christian) can honestly claim to be religious.

I divided *Facing the Abusing God* into four sections. The first, ‘Beginning Somewhere’, was a theological prolegomenon in which I dealt with anthropopathic language when speaking of God. I chose the ‘personalist’ language of the biblical and classical rabbinic tradition, identified six personalist attributes of God, and added the quality of holiness. The second section, ‘Text-ing’, comprised four psalms (128, 44, 109, and 27), each of which had four commentaries: one linguistic, one reading the text in its traditional rabbinic sense, one with short comments from the mystical tradition, and one reading the text against the traditional rabbinic sense (‘Con-verses’). The third section, ‘Re-sponse’, comprised an exchange of letters with an adult

survivor of child abuse, another exchange of letters with a professional theologian, and one autobiographical reading of Psalm 27 by a student who had been a victim of rape. The fourth section, 'Con-templation', was the argument of the book. It began by citing abusive acts committed by God in Scripture and by clearly labeling such action as abusive. It continued by presenting the protest tradition as the only theologically acceptable response to the question of 'Where was God in the shoah'. This section then concluded that theology, if it is to be real, must also express itself in liturgy and, so, I went on to propose suggested modifications of the traditional rabbinic liturgy as well as suggesting psalms to be used in prayer after the shoah.

I confess that, when I came to write the fourth section, I was physically ill for three days. I did not want to write what I knew I had to write. I was not some wild-eyed radical Jew; I had always been, and remained, a member of the inner elite of the traditional Jewish world. Writing that section was so counter to what I had been. But, I knew that I had to speak for all those who had perished in the shoah. Someone needed to say that God had been abusing, and someone needed to adjust our liturgy to reflect that.

As the world of Christian clergy involvement in dealing with child and spousal abuse grew, my Christian colleagues were impressed with the book. It was reviewed often and I still get several emails each year from colleagues and from victims of abuse thanking me for the book. My Jewish colleagues never liked it. It was almost never reviewed by Jews. No one even criticized me for the liturgical modifications.

My own reaction to *Facing the Abusing God* has also developed. I teach it in classes and occasionally speak on the topic and, when I read portions of it (especially out loud), I say to myself, 'Did I really write this?' In retrospect, it seems as if I was under the influence of an intense Presence when I wrote it, and, now, with some distance from God, the strength and truth of what I wrote seem unreal. Also, in the beginning, I used the liturgical suggestions that I had created, but, as time passed, I stopped doing so.

Reading *Pious Irreverence* brought back all the intensity of *Facing the Abusing God* for, although these books have different purposes, they deal with the same topic: 'Where was God when evil happened' and how do we deal with our 'struggles, ambivalences, and discomforts' with God's unjust behavior. *Pious Irreverence* forced me to ask, 'What do I believe now? Do I stand by what I wrote then?' So, a few afterthoughts:

First, I still believe that, for those of us who accept the intense, real, and intimate Presence of God in our lived lives, the question of God doing injustice is real and pressing, especially after the shoah. We cannot escape the question of theodicy. Second, I still believe that the usual rationalizations make no sense in the presence of one and a half million babies. Third, I still believe that the only honest answer is to say that God was wrong. And fourth, I still believe that protest is the only answer. We not only need to protest; we are *obligated*, by our living covenant with God, to protest. God, having covenanted with us, is bound by it, and it is our duty to hold God to that truth.

I do, however, have two second thoughts that have been focused by Weiss' book. First, perhaps the word 'abusive', or better by Maimonidean standards 'abusing', was too strong. Weiss notes: 'To be sure, the authors of these late midrashim do not proclaim the imperfection of God as a maxim or normative teaching (e.g., 'Rabbi X says: God sometimes does not judge or act appropriately'). Such a blatant statement would be too radical and subversive for any pious Jew to make It is thus within exegetical narratives – rather than doctrinal maxims – that we can unearth' (p. 161).

Weiss is correct and, by usual rabbinic standards, I stepped over a line by labeling God's actions as 'abusing' and then by speculating that this might be an attribute, or characteristic, of God. However, if my reading of the Zohar is correct, then zoharic Judaism teaches that God does have an 'irrational' side, with all that that implies. If one accepts this zoharic teaching, then I did *not* overstep a boundary by calling God 'abusing', though this is not a doctrine that we teach in public and indeed, I was very discrete about this in *Facing the Abusing God*.

Second, Weiss notes: 'Although the rabbis were not willing to fix a standardized liturgy of protest, they were willing to do so in their spontaneous prayers' (p. 171). Here, again, Weiss is correct and, by usual rabbinic standards, I stepped over a line by creating new liturgy and, even more so, by suggesting public modifications to the rabbinic liturgy. Private praying of psalms and private prayer, including my personal use of these liturgical modifications, would be acceptable, but changing the consensual public liturgy would not be admissible. However, if my reading of the *intentions* of the authors of psalms (e.g., Pss. 44 and 109) and various medieval liturgical poems is correct – that strong public protest within communal prayer was, at least in earlier times, admissible – then perhaps we, after the shoah, *should* return to that tradition of public protest prayer. If that is not admissible today in traditional circles, maybe it should be.

I am grateful to Dov Weiss for forcing me yet again to confront these issues, even though I think that he did not deal adequately with *Facing the Abusing God* in his book. The question of God's injustice is eternal. In bringing us such a trove of sources and in laying them out in an ordered form, Weiss has provided not only a scholarly but also a theological gift.