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Judging God: Learning from the Jewish Tradition of Protest Against God

By Daniel London

Within the last few decades, a Christian movement has emerged led by scholars such as Claus Westermann and Walter Brueggemann to reclaim the tradition of protest against God as an effective resource for dealing with suffering and catastrophe.[1] In attempting to reclaim protest against God, it would behoove Christians to sit at the feet of the Jewish people who have been utilizing and developing the prayer tradition beyond the canon of Scripture for the last two millennia. This essay offers a theological explanation for the persistence and development of the tradition of protest against God in Judaism and its paucity in Christianity. After a brief survey of the Jewish tradition of protest against God, the essay will move towards a comparative moment by seeking new perspectives on Christian spirituality in light of Jewish protest against God.

The tradition begins in the Hebrew Bible with prophetic intercessions and personal complaints. According to Jon D. Levenson, "One of the most remarkable features of the

[1] See Claus Westermann, *Lob und Klage in dem Psalmen* (Göttingen: Vadenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), Gordon Mursell, *Out of the Deep: Prayer as Protest* (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1989), Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), John Swinton, *Raging With Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 90-129. Scott Ellington, *Risking Truth: Reshaping the World through Prayers of Lament* (Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock Pub, 2008).

Hebrew Bible" is not just that people argue with God, but "the possibility that people can argue with God and win."[2] The audacity to seize such opportunities to argue with God is a quality displayed by the biblical prophets, who argue with God *on behalf of* God's people. When God grows incensed with his creatures and feels the urge to stomp them out, a prophetic voice often disrupts God from carrying out his destruction.[3] A prophet, according to Yochanan Muffs, is not just someone who declares God's harsh decrees, but "an independent advocate…who attempts to rescind the evil decree by means of the only instruments at his disposal, prayer and intercession."[4] Abraham steps into this prophetic role when he bargains with God on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah, asking, "Shall the Judge of the world not do justice?" (Gen 18:25). "This," Richard Elliott Friedman writes, "is the first time in the Bible that a human questions a divine decision."[5] Although Sodom and Gomorrah *do* eventually suffer God's wrath, Abraham succeeds in talking God down to sparing the city if only fifty, then forty-five, then forty, thirty, twenty, and finally ten righteous people can be found. The God of Genesis is not teasing Abraham like a cruel older brother who lets his younger brother earn some hopeful points only to squash him. God *does not know* how many righteous people might be found in Sodom as God Himself admits: "I will go down to see whether they have acted altogether according to the outcry that has reached Me; if not, I will take note" (Gen 18:21).[6] God is willing to withhold his destruction if ten righteous people are found. By taking the role of prophet, Abraham puts God at risk of changing his divine plans. According to Levenson, "Abraham doubts, questions, argues and even convinces God to back down from an extreme position."[7]

Although bold and bordering on brash, Abraham sprinkles his intercessory argument with humble declarations: "I who am but dust and ashes" (Gen 18:27) and "Let not my Lord be angry if I speak but this last time" (Gen 18:32).[8] Levenson explains that this combination of humility and protest in Abraham captures "both the *necessity* and the *absurdity* of a person's telling God what to do."[9] Abraham asks and argues on behalf of Sodom, and God responds by revealing his willingness to be moved, persuaded, and perhaps reminded of his own eagerness to forgive and reluctance to punish. The prophet intercedes on behalf of

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[2] Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 149.

[3] The Jewish literature (biblical and post-biblical) uses both male and female metaphors in describing the God who ultimately transcends human categories of gender; however, throughout this essay, in order to avoid the repetition of nouns, I employ the masculine pronoun for God, as it is used throughout most translations of the literature.

[4] Yochanan Muffs, *Love and Joy: Law, Language and Religion in Ancient Israel* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 9.

[5] Richard Elliott Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 65.

[6] J. H. Hertz explains that "I will go down" is "an anthropomorphic expression…to convey the idea that before God decided to punish the dwellers of the cities, 'He descended,' as it were, to obtain ocular proof of, or extenuating circumstances for, their crimes." J. H. Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs* (London: Soncino Press, 1960), 65.

[7] Levenson, 152.

[8] According to *Chullin* 89A, God said, "I deeply love you [Israel], for even when I give you abundant greatness, you make yourselves small before Me. I gave greatness to Abraham, and he said 'I who am but dust and ashes.'"

[9] Levenson, 151.

others by reminding God of his mercy. "Prophecy," Muffs explains, "does not tolerate prophets who lack heart, who are emotionally anesthetized. Quite the contrary, one could even argue that, historically speaking, the role of intercessor is older than the messenger aspect of prophecy. After all, Abraham is not a prophet messenger, yet he is considered a prophet nonetheless."[10] Although Abraham generally does not enjoy the status of prophet in Judaism (as he does in the Qur'ān and the larger Islamic religious tradition), "God treats Abraham as a prophet, disclosing His plans to him, and Abraham, like one of the prophets of Israel, eloquently demands justice for God and pleads for mercy."[11]

In his essay "Who Will Stand in the Breach? A Study of Prophetic Intercession," Muffs surveys the intercessory arguments of prophets as they protest against God's devastating anger in the hope of diminishing painful punishment.[12] Moses argues on behalf of Miriam (Num 12:13) and Aaron (Deut 9:20) and the Israelite people, all of whom God, at one time or another, wants to obliterate. Moses appeals to God's reputation and reminds God of his former promises and, like a friend holding someone back at a budding bar fight, the protest prayers of the prophet restrain God's fists from clobbering God's people (Ex. 32:12-13). In his creative and iconoclastic book *Joseph's Bones: Understanding the Struggle Between God and Mankind in the Bible*, Jerome M. Segal offers a colorful interpretation of Moses' role as intercessor:

> Moses….has been chosen by God precisely in order to protect the Israelites from God himself. Moses, named by Pharaoh's daughter to signify 'I drew him out of the water,' is to function as God's rainbow. God knows that he needs a buffer between himself and humanity, and he has chosen Moses precisely because Moses has the courage and wit to play this role.[13]

According to Segal, God chooses Moses to protect God's people from Himself and to serve as a living reminder of the promise he made to Noah and humanity.

In the case of Ezekiel, God looks like a furious man about to rip off someone's head, but at the same time, screaming, "Hold me back! Hold me back!": "I searched for somebody who would stand in the breach against Me on behalf of the land, that I not destroy the land. But I did not find one, and I poured out My wrath upon them" (Eze 22:30-31). In this case, Muffs writes, "In the depths of His heart [God] desperately hopes that the prophet will fight against Him and force Him to cancel His decree. The prophet who is lacking in autonomy and bravery of spirit causes the destruction of the world."[14] In the case of Jeremiah, God cries out in his fierce anger, "Don't even *try* to hold me back!": "Do not pray on behalf of this people, for even if they fast, I will not listen to their supplication" (Jer 14:11-12). In spite of this, Jeremiah persists, pushing God to own up to his own deceit: "Ah, LORD God! Surely You have deceived this people and Jerusalem" (Jer 4:10).

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[10] Muffs, 11.

[11] *The Jewish Study Bible*, edited by Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 40.

[12] Muffs, 9 – 48.

[13] Jerome M. Segal, *Joseph's Bones: Understanding the Struggle Between God and Mankind in the Bible* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2007), 124.

[14] Muffs, 31-32.

Eventually, when it becomes clear that God will not budge (Jer 16:10), Jeremiah breaks down and spews out his vitriol and despair: "Why is my pain interminable, and my wound incurable?…Why have You been to me like a dry gulch, an unreliable source of water?" (Jer 15:18). Muffs concludes, "The prophet curses and blasphemes the Lord [and so apparently] God does not oppose prophetic independence that expresses itself in stormy prayer."[15] The prophet needs to pray prayers "stormy" enough to engage and combat God's tumultuous wrath.

"…when it comes to the safety and survival of others, the prophetic option is to argue rather than to obey."

"Both arguing with God and obeying him," Levenson concludes, "can be central spiritual acts, although when to do which remains necessarily unclear."[16] Based on this brief look at the prophetic protests, arguing with God appears appropriate and expected when done *on behalf of* others. Although the prophets certainly have some 'skin in the game' when it comes to the survival and success of Israel, the prophets, for the most part, use their heavy 'intercessory' artillery to protect others, and not themselves. Often, they pray vehemently for others at the expense of their own wellbeing and sanity. They are like soldiers going to war so that others might enjoy safety. And in this war, God is the enemy.[17] Sometimes the prophets can keep the enemy at bay by winning their argument against God.[18] Sometimes they cannot. But when it comes to the safety and survival of others, the prophetic option is to argue rather than to obey.[19]

This understanding of prophetic prayer illuminates the acquiescence of Abraham when God tells him to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Abraham does not argue with God about this command because Isaac represents Abraham's blessing and future. Isaac is an extension of Abraham in a way that his nephew Lot of Sodom is not. If Abraham were to argue on behalf of Isaac he would, therefore, be arguing on his own behalf, and as a result, no longer be engaged in prophetic protest prayer. Instead, he would be engaged in personal protest prayer.

As the canon continues into the Ketuvim, the protest prayer tradition expands to allow poets and other non-prophetic individuals to argue with God for their own safety and wellbeing. This expansion may have resulted from a lack of prophets or, more likely, a lack of *effective* prophets. As the Bible itself shows, the prophets proved mostly unsuccessful in staving off disasters. Sodom and Gomorrah were still destroyed after Abraham's prophetic

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[15] Muffs, 30.

[16] Levenson, 153.

[17] As Muffs asserts, "The enemy is not the army of the gentiles that is placing a siege around Jerusalem. The Lord himself is the enemy, the warrior who is setting His face against Jerusalem to destroy it." Muffs, 31.

[18] Levenson, 149.

[19] Dov Weiss highlights the fact that God never reprimands individuals for challenging him, excluding one fairly clear exception in Isaiah 45:9-10 in which God reproaches those who question his method by comparing them to clay that questions the potter. Dov Weiss, "The Sin of Protesting God in Rabbinic and Patristic Literature." *The Journal of the Association for Jewish Studies*. Vol 39 No. 2 (November 2015), 371, n. 13.

intercession. Jerusalem still fell to Babylon after Jeremiah's prayers.

In his 1994 Preface to *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, Levenson highlights "a point usually overlooked in discussions of theodicy in a biblical context." According to Levenson, "The overwhelming tendency of biblical writers as they confront undeserved evil is not *to explain* it away but to call upon God to *blast* it away."[20] When God fails to respond to these persistent calls, Levenson explains, "one is to continue the argument with [God] in the hope that [God] might yet be cajoled, flattered, shamed, or threatened into acting in deliverance. This," he asserts, "is the tactic of the lament literature."[21] This tactic is employed by psalmists in psalms of individual lament as well as by Job. These prayers of protest are not prophetic in the sense that they are not prayed on behalf of others. The "personal complaint" prayers are associated with the Ketuvim more than the Torah and the Neviim, in which "prophetic intercession" dominates.[22] They are impassioned and poetic petitions for deliverance from pain and suffering and often times, impending death.[23] The one who is praying the personal complaint prayer seeks to avoid suffering and pain, or in the case of Job, at least be given a good reason as to why such suffering is taking place.

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Job and many of the psalmists argue with God in their prayers, complaints and laments. They accuse God of not taking care of them, not protecting them, and not keeping His promises. Some of the psalmists, and especially Job, accuse God of not only allowing their suffering but *instigating* and perpetuating their suffering. Although sometimes the Lament psalmists are rescued from their affliction or at least receive an oracle promising liberation, in many cases, they remain in their dire straits, only able to hope in a God who appears painfully absent. In Psalm 89, God is essentially accused of lying when the psalmist complains, "You said, 'I will establish this line forever, his throne, as long as the heavens last'…Yet you have rejected, spurned and become enraged at your anointed" (Ps 89:29, 39). In other words, "You promised that there would always be a king on the throne of David. There is no king, so you lied." God appears to have broken his own ninth commandment.

The Hebrew Scriptures show an evolution and expansion of the protest against God tradition from *prophetic* protest prayer utilized by a select few, primarily for intercession, to *personal* protest prayer used by individuals and communities. Although the protest against God tradition proves relatively marginal in relation to other prayer traditions within Scripture such

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[20] Levenson, *xvii*.

[21] Levenson, *xviii.*

[22] Since the books of the Ketuvim are generally considered to be written later than the books of the Torah and Neviim, one might argue that there is a historical development from prophetic prayers on behalf of others to personal protest prayers. However, many of the Psalms, which contain a bulk of the personal protest prayers, may have been written as early as the 10th century BCE, earlier than many of the books in the Torah and Neviim. Nevertheless, one may recognize a canonical development from prophetic to personal prayer since the Torah and Neviim precede the Ketuvim in the Tanakh.

[23] It is important to note that many of these individual prayers have been used to pray for the deliverance of the nation wherein the individual "I" in the prayer represents the plural "we" of the people. In this way, such personal prayers become somewhat prophetic. However, even when the individual stands in for the nation, the person (or persons) praying still has a personal stake in the prayer more than the prophet, who is often willing to suffer on behalf of the people.

as praise, thanksgiving, and non-protesting petition, the tradition remains a substantial and integral part of the Hebrew Scriptures and thus a significant and viable prayer option for those within the canon and those who uphold it. As has been shown, the protest prayer tradition developed and widened over the centuries that Scripture was recorded. One may wonder, therefore, in what ways the protest prayer tradition continued to develop after the canon of Scripture closed, considering the solid foundation of protest within the canon. History, however, has shown that the tradition became more marginalized after the canon of Hebrew Scripture closed, all but disappearing in Christianity and developing only as a minor prayer tradition within Judaism.

In *Protest Against God: The Eclipse of a Biblical Tradition*, William Morrow acknowledges the persistence of protest prayer and complaint against God in the Jewish tradition while also recognizing the paucity of protest prayer in the Christian Scriptures and its subsequent Christian spiritualties. Though remaining mostly marginal, the protest prayer tradition within post-biblical Judaism still endures and develops, as authors like Anson Laytner and David Roskies show in their respective works, *Arguing with God: A Jewish Tradition* and *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe*. Offering a brief survey of the prayer tradition, Morrow highlights protest against God in Rabbinic, Hasidic, and post-Shoah sources.[24] Reflecting on the marginalization of protest prayer in Judaism, Morrow suggests reasons for its suppression in Jewish liturgy. The dominance of Deuteronomic theology eclipsed protest prayer, according to Morrow, while the revolutionary sentiments associated with protest prayer gave Jewish authorities ample reason to keep the tradition suppressed. Morrow also stresses how the concept of divine transcendence (emerging in the Axial Age[25]) and redemptive suffering (emerging in Second Temple Judaism) contributed to the decline of protest prayer in Judaism. However, the tradition persisted, in spite of its marginality. While Morrow explores reasons for the tradition's suppression, he fails to offer any reasons for the tradition's persistence in Judaism, especially in contrast to the near absence of the tradition in Christianity.[26] What accounts for the persistence and development of the protest prayer tradition in Judaism and its disappearance in Christianity?

Why Protest Prayer Disappears in Christianity

Although the Hebrew Scriptures may reveal a development from an immanent God to a more transcendent divinity as Morrow suggests, Jewish historian Daniel Boyarin asserts the popular desire, in Second Temple Judaism, for a divinity that is simultaneously accessible and beyond access. The desire for the immanent-

[24] Morrow, 208.

[25] The Axial Age ("*Achsenzeit*"), coined by Karl Jaspers, refers to a period of time from roughly 900 to 200 BCE in which spiritual thinkers and movements flowered: Plato, Lao Tzu, Homer, Isaiah, Siddhartha Gautama, and Confucius. See Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953) and Robert Bellah, *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*, edited by Robert Bellah and Hans Joas (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 2012).

[26] Morrow offers the following caveat: "An exception to this generalization is the African-American spiritual tradition" and notes David E. Goatley's *Were You There? Godforsakenness in Slave Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996) 53, 71-72.

and-transcendent God gave birth to the theology of the Logos. "The Logos," Boyarin explains, "came into general popularity because of the wide-spread desire to conceive of God as transcendent and yet immanent at the same time."[27] The Logos, which also bore the name

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"Memra" or "Metatron," served as a divine mediator between heaven and earth. In the book of Proverbs, the Wisdom of God (*Sophia*), personified as a woman, exists before creation and is active during creation and continually calls out in the streets, eager to share her many blessings with humanity. *Sophia* can be understood as a divine entity who is part of the one God. This divine mediator also appears in the works of Philo, who explained that the wisdom of God is the Logos of God,[28] declaring, "This *Logos* of God is continually a suppliant to the immortal God on behalf of the mortal race, which is exposed to affliction and misery; and is also the ambassador, sent by the Ruler of all, to the subject race."[29]

When the author of the Fourth Gospel wrote his prologue, he synthesized the Wisdom of God in Proverbs with the *Logos* of God in Philo to describe the Word of God in the Gospel, who became flesh and dwelt among us.[30] With this prologue, the theology of the Logos is transferred onto Jesus of Nazareth, thus making Jesus the divine mediator who is also one with the Godhead.[31] As divine mediator, Jesus takes on the role of prophet *par excellence*, and in this way, Jesus embodies the prophetic protest prayer tradition in which the prophet stands in the breach between God's impending punishment and God's people, protesting and reminding God of his patient forbearance.

Although Morrow argues that the Hebrew prophetic tradition promoted the concept of divine transcendence to the detriment of protest prayer, Muffs stresses the crucial role that protest prayer played among the prophets as shown above. The Gospels clearly portray Jesus as a prophet in the same tradition of Abraham and Moses and the other Hebrew prophets (Mt 13:57; Mrk 6:4; Lk 24:19; Jn 1:45, 6:14). If the prophet is one who stands in the breach between God's wrath and God's people as described above, then how does Jesus serve as

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[27] Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 112.

[28] Philo, *Legum Allegoriae*, 1:19:65. Philo was preserved through Christianity and used extensively by the Church Fathers. Living between 25 BCE and 50 CE, his blend of Greek philosophy and Jewish exegesis was part of the *zeitgeist* of the early Christian movement. See Adam Kamesar, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Philo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[29] Philo, *Quis Rerum Divinarum Heres Sit*, 1:42:205.

[30] Although we do not know if Philo's writings had a direct influence on the Fourth Gospel and its author, C.H. Dodd examines the evidence extensively and argues that the Gospel "certainly presupposes a range of ideas having a remarkable resemblance to those of Hellenistic Judaism as represented by Philo." C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 73.

[31] Boyarin, *Border Lines,* 112.

such a prophet? According to dominant Christian theories of atonement in the West, one of the cosmic consequences of Christ's death on the Cross is Christ's perpetual mediation and intercession between God's anger and humanity's sin. The Gospel of Luke underscores Christ's prophetic and intercessory role on the Cross when he writes about Jesus interceding while being crucified: "Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk 23:34). Moreover, Jesus substitutes himself for God's people and receives the punishment that the wrathful God seeks to inflict upon them. In this way, Jesus' death can be understood as a prophetic protest against God's wrath and God's desire to punish His people.[32] If this were the end of the story, then Jesus might be seen as a great Jewish prophet and martyr who protested against God's wrath and interceded on behalf of God's people to the point of death. However, since the Logos was transferred onto Jesus, he becomes much more. He becomes divine and his actions therefore become infinitely significant. His mediation and intercession transcend history and rise to the status of "eternal." As a result, Jesus Christ stands in as humanity's perpetual intercessor and protestor against God's wrath. Not only would it be impossible for humans to play such a role, but humans no longer *need* to play such a role since that role has already been filled, for eternity, by the best possible candidate. Therefore, with Christ as eternal intercessor and prophet, the tradition of prophetic protest prayer becomes obsolete in Christianity. But what about personal protest prayer?

Although still a prophet, Jesus practices the prayer of personal complaint as well. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus takes on the role of the lament psalmist, praying for personal liberation from suffering and impending death. In Matthew and Mark, Jesus echoes the passionate prayers of the Psalms when he prays, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death" (Mt 26:38; Mrk 13:34). Several psalms share similar language in describing "overwhelming" emotions (Ps. 42:5; 61:2; 119:20; 142:3). Also in the spirit of personal complaint, Jesus boldly yet humbly petitions the Lord for his cup of suffering to be removed, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me" (Mrk 14:36; Mt 26:39; Lk 22:42). In Matthew and Mark, Jesus repeats this prayer three times. Although Luke records Jesus praying only once, a later redactor appears to compensate for the missing triple prayer by describing Jesus sweating drops of blood to convey the intensity of his agony.

Considering the fact that the Gospels portray Jesus praying a personal protest prayer at least seven times altogether, one would think that Christians would feel empowered to do the same, to bring their suffering before God and boldly ask Him to do something about it. However, Jesus' personal protest prayer

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[32] This theological and soteriological understanding of the Cross is based on the "Penal Substitution Model," which has held dominance among evangelical theologians ever since Charles Hodge (1797 – 1878) argued its case in Volume 2 of his *Systematic Theology*. However, the "Penal Substitution" model has medieval roots in the "Satisfaction Model," which was initially argued by Anselm of Canterbury in *Cur Deus Homo* and developed later by Luther and Calvin, who writes, "God in his capacity as judge is angry toward us." *Institutes* 2.15.6. Other theories of atonement include the "Ransom" and "*Christus Victor*" models. Although it is important to note the various theories of atonement and their particular nuances, it is beyond the scope of this essay to do so. For a helpful summary and assessment of these models, see Joel B. Green & Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament & Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

becomes less of a protest and more of a sad submission as it changes from Mark to Matthew to Luke. Matthew turns Jesus' imperative "remove this cup" into a jussive "let this cup pass from me." Mark's Jesus boldly reminds God of his power to save ("for you all things are possible") in order to make God act while Matthew's Jesus submissively begs, "If it is possible." Luke keeps the imperative, but adds "If you are willing" and omits the other two repetitions of the prayer.

In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, he describes how he himself prayed three times for God to remove his suffering, most likely in imitation of Jesus' prayer (2 Cor 12:8).[33] However, like Jesus' prayer, Paul's request is not granted. As a result, the suffering, which both Jesus and Paul prayed to avoid, later becomes understood as not only necessary, but profoundly beneficial and redemptive, thus fueling the theology of redemptive suffering which reaches new heights of popularity in Christianity.[34] In the Gospel of John, Jesus does not pray for his suffering to be removed at all but almost seems to look forward to his suffering, which he describes as his glorification: "Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you" (Jn 17:1). The submission to the suffering eventually eclipses the protest to the suffering entirely. As a result, personal protest prayer also becomes obsolete because the suffering that one seeks to avoid will likely prove beneficial and redemptive.[35] Furthermore, if God refused to grant the bold and persistent petitions of his beloved Son Jesus Christ and his apostle Paul, then why would he grant the bold and persistent petitions of their followers?

Why (and How) Protest Prayer Persists in Judaism

While the Christian transference of the Logos onto Jesus resulted in the disappearance of protest prayer in Christianity, Jewish transference of the Logos tradition onto the Torah equipped the Jewish people with an effective tool and weapon in their arguments with God, thus fueling their protest prayer. In demarcating the partition of Judaeo-Christianity into what later became orthodox Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism, Boyarin argues that the final "definitive move for the Rabbis" was the transfer of "all Logos and Sophia talk to the Torah alone."[36] By doing this, the Rabbis accomplished two things: they gave themselves

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[33] Although the Epistles were written before the Gospels, it is likely that the story of Jesus' three prayers in the garden was well known among the churches by the time Paul was writing.

[34] For a summary and critique of Christian theologies of redemptive suffering, see Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: The Trouble with Redemptive Suffering and the Search for What Saves Us* (Boston MA: Beacon Press, 2002).

[35] Dov Weiss underscores the hermeneutical gymnastics employed by early Christian thinkers such as Gregory the Great, John Chrysostom and Didymus the Blind, who attempt to reinterpret the biblical protests against God in light of this Christian approach to suffering. Early Christian authors essentially render all apparent arguments against God (by Abraham, Moses, Job, etc.) as a misreading of the biblical text, concluding "[W]e must not argue with God." John Chrysostom, *Commentary on Job*, trans. Robert C. Hill (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2006), 181. As quoted in Dov Weiss, "The Sin of Protesting God in Rabbinic and Patristic Literature," in *The Journal of the Association for Jewish Studies*. Vol 39 No. 2 (November 2015), 376. Also see pp. 374-376, 386-388.

[36] Boyarin, 129.

the power to act as the sole interpreters and leaders of the tradition while also maintaining a strict monotheism.[37] However, I would add another achievement to Boyarin's list of accomplishments resulting from the transfer of the Logos to the Torah. By elevating the Torah to the status of Logos and divine mediator, the Rabbis equipped themselves with a tool, nay a weapon, to argue more assertively and aggressively with their God. We can see the elevated status of Torah in Genesis Rabbah 1:1, which claims that God consulted the Torah in creating the Universe.[38] Like the Logos and Sophia, the Torah existed in the beginning, during creation (Prov 8:22-23). However, according to this Jewish midrash, the Torah *precedes* creation. In fact, the Torah serves as God's blueprint for creation. God consults the Torah before creating the heavens and the earth and, according to the Talmud, God continues to study Torah three hours a day.[39] In some ways, it appears that the Torah might have greater authority than God himself since God appears to be a student to its teachings. Furthermore, God appears open to having his interpretation of Torah overruled by human interpretation, as in the story of the Oven of Akhnai.

In the Talmudic tractate *Bava Metzi'a*, a story is told about an argument between Rabbi Eliezer and a group of other rabbis regarding the oven of Akhnai. The rabbis insist that the oven cannot be purified while Rabbi Eliezer argues that it indeed *can* be made pure. In order to prove his argument correct, Rabbi Eliezer performs a series of miracles, causing a carob-tree to move, a stream to flow backwards and walls to bend. Finally, a voice from heaven affirms that Rabbi Eliezer is correct. Yet, even after the heavenly voice, the rabbis use the Torah to prove that *they* are in fact correct and Rabbi Eliezer is wrong. As a result, God laughs with delight at the sages and declares, "My children have defeated me, my children have defeated me."[40] Although the rabbis are not engaged in protest prayer or complaint against God, they are still in contest with God, with the divine voice. They are not holding God responsible for any suffering or accusing God of any malfeasance. They are simply arguing over *halakha* and disagreeing with God in this particular case. What is important to highlight in this *aggadah* is the fact that the rabbis have no fear or hesitation about arguing and disagreeing with God. "Boldness," according to the Talmud, "is effective—even against Heaven."[41] Moreover, God lets them win or perhaps recognizes the superiority of their argument. *And* God delights in their victory. God, as the loser, laughs. Though the tradition of protest against God might take a back seat in Talmudic literature, boldness against Heaven remains strong as ever, and is even welcomed by God. If the Torah enjoys divine status on account of the transfer of the Logos thereto, and the Rabbis have just as much authority in interpreting the Torah as God (if not more), then the Rabbis are equipped with a tremendous resource to argue with God.

Another example of the Torah being used in an argument with God is found in Lamentations

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[37] Ibid.

[38] "The Torah speaks, 'I was the work-plan of the Holy One, blessed be he." Jacob Neusner, *A Theological Commentary to the Midrash: Genesis Raba* (Lanham MD: University Press of America, 2001), 2.

[39] *Avodah Zarah* 3b

[40] *Bava Metzi'a* 59b

[41] *Sanhedrin* 105a

Rabbah, in which Abraham asks God, "Who testifies against Israel that they transgressed the law [and should therefore be punished so severely]?" God responds by telling the Torah to come and testify against Israel. However, God's plan backfires when Israel's advocate, Abraham, reminds the Torah of how all the nations rejected her except for Israel. Remembering Israel's acceptance, the Torah "stood aside and gave no testimony against them."[42] God then calls on the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet in which the Torah is written to testify against Israel. Again, God's plan backfires when Abraham reminds *aleph* of how Israel accepted the Torah when other nations rejected her, *beth* of how zealously Israel embraced the Torah at Sinai, and *gimel* of how the Israelites observe the commandment of the fringes.[43] As a result of Abraham's reminders of Israel's faithfulness, the first three Hebrew letters as well as all the subsequent Hebrew letters stand aside and refuse to testify against Israel. The three patriarchs and Moses then proceed to cite their faithfulness as attested to in the Torah and finally conclude with a complaint. By refusing to testify against Israel when called upon God to do so, the Torah indirectly accuses God of unjustly punishing Israel. If Israel's disobedience to the Torah is the only reason for God's punishment of Israel and the Torah itself refuses to corroborate with this allegation, then the fault falls back on God, who can provide no reason for punishing Israel. Thus, Abraham and the others end up using the Torah to condemn God.

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The Torah continues to be used to condemn God in more subtle ways throughout the Jewish protest prayer tradition. The Torah, which upholds justice and responsibility, confers upon the Jewish people a keen sense of ethical values, forcing them to confront the dissonance inherent in having a deity who fails to meet such standards. This dissonance compels the Jewish people to ask the age-old question of suffering in a way that is not afraid of sounding accusatory or condemning. According to a Jewish midrash, it was asking the question of suffering that gave birth to Judaism. God's call to Abraham is compared to a man nonplussed by a house in flames, who asks, "Is it possible to say that such a great house has no one in charge?"[44] In the same way, Abraham asks, "Is it possible for the world to endure without someone in charge?" His question entertains the possibility that there is either no ruler or that there is an irresponsible and incompetent ruler. Like the house in flames, the beautiful world appears to be wracked by violence and suffering. Abraham's question, which calls the ruler of the world to task, receives an answer from God: "I am the one in charge of the house, the lord of all the world." The divine response awakens enough faith and trust within Abraham for him to devote his entire life and family to God, giving birth to a people that will continue to ask bold and accusatory questions of God, propelled by the ethical power of the Torah.

Accusation against God reunites with protest prayer, particularly in the prayers of 18th

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[42] *Eichah Rabbah*, in *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe*, edited by David G. Roskies (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 53.

[43] Abraham reminds *aleph* that God's revelation on Mt Sinai opens with *aleph* when God said, "*I am the Lord your God*." He reminds *beth* that the Pentateuch begins with *beth* in *bereshith*. And he reminds *gimel* that *gimel* is the first word in the commandment to wear fringes: גְּדִלִים

[44] *Genesis Rabbah* 39:1

century Hasidic leader Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev. Popularly known as the "champion prosecuting attorney of the Hasidim," Levi Yitzhak brings the suffering of his people before God in prayer and then boldly holds God responsible for all of it in order to get God's attention and bring salvation to his people.[45] He prayed, "O Lord, if you want the throne of Your glory to be established…, then deal mercifully with Your children and issue decrees for their salvation. But if you deal with us harshly then the *tzaddikim* of the generation will not permit You to sit upon Your throne. You may decree, but they will annul."[46] In other words, "God, if you want to be treated and worshiped as our God then start acting like our God and show us some mercy!" In his bold prayers of protest, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak acts as though he has the power and authority to kick God off His throne for not taking care of His people. Levi Yitzhak offers no theology to reconcile the dissonance between the deified Torah and the God who fails to follow it. Instead he brings the dissonance to God in prayer and offers prayers of intercession for Israel, not too unlike the intercessions of the biblical prophets.

Boldly, Levi Yitzhak interprets the verse "They stand this day for Your judgments, for all things are Your servants" (Psalm 119:91) to mean "they stand this day—if one may utter it—to judge You! 'For all things are your servants,' that is, they judge You for everything we bear—wicked and cruel decrees, pogroms and persecutions, poverty and sorrow—all these things are come upon us only because 'we are Your servants.'"[47] In this interpretation, Levi Yitzhak puts God on trial and blames God for all the suffering and sorrow of the Jewish people. Levi Yitzhak is the plaintiff; God the defendant; and the ethics of the Torah preside as Judge.

In *Arguing with God: A Jewish Tradition*, Anson Laytner traces the law-court pattern of prayer throughout the Jewish tradition of protest against God. "The appeal," Laytner writes, "is both against God yet also to God, making Him, paradoxically, both judge and defendant."[48] Using the ethics of the Torah as Judge against God is a prayer practice that continues with new momentum and anger in the modern era, in light of new catastrophes such as the Shoah.

After the horror of the Holocaust, authors and theologians tapped into the protest prayer tradition with an urgent intensity. Throughout most of the Jewish tradition, we have records only of rabbis and other spiritual leaders utilizing the Torah as a weapon in their protest against God. However, in post-Shoah literature the use of the Torah as a weapon against God becomes more popular and accessible. In the case of Zvi Kolitz's *Yossel Rakover Speaks to God*, the speaker confesses, "I love [God], but I love His Torah more, and even if I were disappointed in Him, I would still observe His Torah."[49] Although Yossel loves God, he loves the Torah even more and uses the ethics of the Torah to judge and question and protest against God. After this confession, he writes, "Therefore, my God, allow me…to argue things out with You for the last time in my life…You

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[45] Anson Laytner, *Arguing with God: A Jewish Tradition* (New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1990), 180.

[46] Samuel H. Dresner, *Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev: Portrait of a Hasidic Master* (New York: Hartmore House, 1974), 81.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Laytner, xviii.

[49] Kolitz, 22.

say that we have sinned? Of course we have. And therefore that we are being punished? I can understand that too. But I would like You to tell me *whether any sin in the world deserves the kind of punishment we have received*." Yossel knows from the Torah that sin deserves punishment, but he also knows from the Torah that the punishment should fit the crime. He cannot fathom what crime deserves the punishment that he has undergone. Certainly there is no such crime. So Yossel confronts and judges God with the ethics of the Torah. And, under judgment of the Torah, God appears wholly guilty of excessive punishment.

In his reflection on *Yossel Rakover Speaks to God*, Emmanuel Levinas writes, "Matured by a faith derived from the Torah, [Yossel] blames God for His unbounded majesty and His excessive demands. He will love God in spite of His every attempt to discourage his love."[50] The fictional character Yossel Rakover represents the Jewish people who are "matured" by the ethical standards of the Torah and then hold God up to those same standards. When God fails to meet these standards, the Jews still love Him, because the Torah has also teaches them to forgive.[51] "The text," Levinas continues, "shows how ethics and the order of first principles combine to establish a personal relationship worthy of the name. To love the Torah more than God—this means precisely to find a personal God against whom it is possible to revolt."[52] So loving and obeying the Torah becomes a way of judging and revolting against God. This same approach of judging God with the ethics of the Torah is also utilized by Elie Wiesel, particularly in his *Trial of God*, in which God is put on trial for the crimes committed against his people and is deemed guilty.

The protest prayer tradition reaches a vitriolic peak in the work of David R. Blumenthal, who in *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest* writes,

> We will point the finger, we will identify the Abuser, we will tell this ugly truth. We will not keep silent, neither out of fear nor out of love. We will not be drawn into the conspiracy of silence, or into the cabal of rationalization. We will cling tenaciously to our rage, and we will speak. And, in our speaking, we will accuse, we will place the blame where it belongs. We will say, 'The fault was not ours. You are the Abuser. The fault was yours. You repent. You return to us.'[53]

Although the protest prayer tradition remained marginalized in Judaism, the transfer of the Logos to the Torah gave the tradition fuel to persist and develop into a rich resource for

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[50] Emmanuel Levinas, "To Love the Torah More than God" in *Yossel Rakover Speaks to God: Holocaust Challenges to Religious Faith* (Hoboken NJ: KTAV Publishing House, 1995), 31.

[51] In the final chapter of *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest*, David Blumenthal writes, "It is not my place to suggest modifications to Christian liturgy, but in the interest of dialogue and without intending any offense whatsoever and in the spirit of theology of protest, I offer the following inter-pretation of the Lord's Prayer: 'Our Father….Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. *Ask forgiveness of us, as we ask forgiveness of those who wrong us*. Lead us not into temptation…" David Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest* (Louisville KY: John Knox Press, 1993), 297. Also, Rabbi Yosef of Brod prays, "Ruler of the Universe! I have forgiven you for all the suffering, the hardship, and the torment, but You must also forgive me." Simcha Raz, *Hasidic Wisdom: Sayings from the Jewish Sages*, trans. Dov Peretz Elkins, Jonathan Elkins (Jason Aronson: Northvale NJ, 1997), 4.

[52] Levinas, 32.

[53] David Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest* (Louisville KY: John Knox Press, 1993), 267.

dealing with horrific suffering. Unlike Christianity, which transferred the Logos to Christ thereby making protest against God obsolete for Christians, Judaism's transfer of the Logos to the Torah laid the foundation for a tradition of protest against God that helped frame Jewish responses to catastrophes, such as the Shoah.

"The Torah empowered the Jewish people to argue with God and to unleash their anger in the face of traumas and catastrophe."

Harold Kushner reads the idea of using Torah to grab God's attention back into the Book of Job. In *The Book of Job: When Bad Things Happened to a Good Person*, Kushner argues that God appears to Job only after Job invokes the Torah. "Job," Kushner explains, "is not an Israelite, of course, and not bound by the Torah, but the author and his readers might well assume that God's standards of justice extend to all societies."[54] Kushner then draws attention to Exodus 22: 10-11, which reads,

> When someone delivers to another a donkey, ox, sheep, or any other animal for safekeeping, and it dies or is injured or is carried off, without anyone seeing it, an oath before the LORD shall decide between the two of them that the one [who was in charge of the property while the owner was away] has not laid hands on the property of the other; the owner shall accept the oath, and no restitution shall be made.

According to Kushner, in Job's final discourse, he invokes this law and swears an oath of his innocence: "As long as God lives…I hold fast my righteousness" (Job 27:2, 6). Job, in Kushner's words, is saying,

> I have begged and pleaded. I have proclaimed my innocence. I have asked Why? But I received no answer from God. Now I will use this one last, desperate tactic in my quarrel with God. No more pleading, no more begging. I invoke God's own law against Him. I hereby swear in the name of that same God who has denied me justice but in whom I still believe that I am innocent of all possible charges. I swear by the Name of that God that I have done nothing wrong. God, according to Your own laws, You are required to appear in court, to present evidence against me or, by failing to do that, recognize me as innocent and drop all charges.[55]

After Job swears by his oath of innocence, God finally appears. Kushner's creative reading of Job's "final tactic" reveals more about Kushner's own spirituality than that of the book of Job, showing once again how the tradition of protest against God in Judaism has evolved since Job to the extent that the Torah has become an employable and effectual tool for protest and argument with God.

In attempting to explain why protest prayer persists in Judaism beyond the Hebrew Scriptures while disappearing in Christianity, I have shown how the transfer of the Logos to the Torah equipped the Jewish people with an effective "judge" to take God to court. The deified Torah continued to be used throughout

[54] Harold Kushner, *The Book of Job: When Bad Things Happened to a Good Person* (New York: Schocken Books, 2012), 125.
[55] Kushner, 126.

the Jewish tradition of protest prayer. The Rabbis used the Torah to strengthen their boldness against heaven by making it backfire against God in Lamentations Rabbah. Hasidic leaders like Levi Yitzhak used the Torah to judge God and put him on trial as the divine defendant answering to the ethical standards of the deified Torah. Post-Holocaust authors amplified the admonishments against God with their anger and vitriol under the shadow of the Shoah. The Torah empowered the Jewish people to argue with God and to unleash their anger in the face of traumas and catastrophe.

Towards a Comparative Moment

So what can Christians learn from this Jewish tradition of protest against God? First, the tradition invites Christians to express creatively anger and frustration toward God in the midst of suffering. Instead of theologizing and philosophizing in order to defend a God of love in a world of suffering, this Jewish tradition summons Christians into a spirituality of protest against God in which individuals and communities can honestly confront God with suffering.[56] In fact, this Jewish spirituality of protest against God developed a serious suspicion of theologians and theodicy. In Elie Wiesel's *Trial of God*, it is God's defense attorney (Sam), who proves to be Satan, while the character Berish, who confronts God with his anger, can be honored as a spiritual descendant of the "champion prosecuting attorney" Rabbi Levi Yitzhak.

In his introduction to Wiesel's *Trial of God*, Robert McAfee Brown explains how he also sees the Jewish tradition of protest against God as an invitation for Christians "to confront God…sometimes in anger… to question God, to challenge God, to demand an accounting from God." [57] The tradition invites Christians to let go of taboos around anger and concerns that God might be threatened or offended by our raw honesty. This spirituality of confronting God honestly with anger is part of what Walter Brueggemann calls "genuine covenant interaction," which does not diminish God but rather takes God seriously.[58] Such honest confrontation can also open Christians up to new vistas of intimacy with the divine. In his foreword to Pierre Wolff's book *May I Hate God?*, Henri Nouwen writes,

> The anger and hatred which separate us from God can become the doorway to greater intimacy with him. We have been so victimized by religious and secular taboos against anger and hatred that these emotions usually evoke only shame and guilt. Seldom, if ever, are they expressed in a creative way…[I]t is clear that only by expressing our anger and hatred directly to God will we come to know the fullness of both his love

[56] The deified Torah allowed the Jewish people to develop a spiritualty in response to suffering, as opposed to a theological or philosophical system intended to defend God. According to Jon D. Levenson, when the Jewish people confront "undeserved evil" the tendency "is not to explain it away but to call upon God to blast it away." Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), xvii.

[57] Robert McAfee Brown, Introduction to *The Trial of God (as it was held on February 25, 1649, in Shamgorod)* (New York: Schocken, 1995), xvi.

[58] Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 102, 111. Robert McAfee Brown, Introduction to *The Trial of God (as it was held on February 25, 1649, in Shamgorod)* (New York: Schocken, 1995), xvi.

and freedom.[59]

The tradition invites Christians to see that God's "love and freedom" is big enough to allow finite humans to challenge God, put him on trial, judge him and even blame him for the world's suffering.

as guilty for all of the suffering. I know that you will never understand the reason for this suffering, but I will enter into your limited judicial system and let you blame me, and even kill me and bury me.

At the Cross, Jesus receives human anger and accusation because he prefers authenticity and

"The tradition invites readers to see the trial of Jesus in the Gospels as a Jewish story or midrash in which God allows humanity to place him on trial and lash out all of their anger and vitriol upon him."

Second, the Jewish motif in which God is put on trial and judged according to the ethical standards of the Torah can shed new light on the Gospels, especially the trial narratives.[60] The tradition invites readers to see the trial of Jesus in the Gospels as a Jewish story or midrash in which God allows humanity to place him on trial and lash out all of their anger and vitriol upon him.[61] However, instead of reacting with retributive violence,[62] God in Christ responds to our anger, accusation and protest with a deep pastoral understanding, essentially saying to us, *I allow you to put me on trial for all the evil in the world and for all the evil that you have experienced in your life. I allow you to blame me and convict me*

"genuine covenant interaction" to denial and repression and impotent theological platitudes. And he receives human anger not to affirm or encourage it but to transform it through his forgiveness, as expressed and embodied in the Resurrection.[63] Christ, as the Logos incarnate, acts as the divine mediator, but not in order to make human protest obsolete; rather, to let us open the floodgates of our protest against him who receives it all with love and forgiveness. The Jewish tradition of protest against God sheds this new light on the Cross, summoning Christians into a spirituality of fearless prayer which welcomes our whole selves, including our anger, vitriol and even violence; a

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[59] Henri Nouwen, *May I Hate God?* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1979), 2.

[60] Regarding the Fourth Gospel, Harvey and Lincoln have argued that the persistent trial motif throughout the text pushes the reader to put Christ on trial and reach a verdict. Andrew T. Lincoln, *Truth on Trial: The Lawsuit Motif in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 2000), A. E. Harvey, *Jesus on Trial: A Study in the Fourth Gospel* (London: SPCK, 1976).

[61] It is beyond the scope of this essay to argue the ways in which the Gospels may function as Jewish midrash, as Boyarin does in "The Intertextual Birth of the Logos: The Prologue to John as a Jewish Midrash" in *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University Pennsylvania, 2004), 89-111.

[62] Christ's revelation of divine non-violence and forgiveness invites the Christian reader to interpret the portrayals of a violent God in the Hebrew Scriptures in a new light, not as a Marcionite but as one who considers the possibility and likelihood that such portrayals may be little more than human projections of humanity's own violence. See J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent God* (Grand Rapids MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2013). Also see James G. Williams, *Bible, Violence and the Sacred: Liberation from the Myth of Sacred Violence* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).

[63] Roman Catholic theologian James Alison argues, "The resurrection is forgiveness" in *Knowing Jesus* (Springfield IL: Templegate, 1994), 16.

spirituality in which we fear nothing except the transformation that will occur through Christ's acceptance and forgiveness; a spirituality that invites us to, in the words of the author of Hebrews, "approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb 4:16).

With this perspective, we can see that God's response to the age-old question of suffering is not to offer us theological justifications and defenses to help satiate our finite minds. Would we ever be satisfied, anyway? Rather, God responds to the question of suffering by offering himself to us as the object of blame, as one upon whom we can lash out our anger and frustration. God does this not necessarily because he *is* the object of blame but because he knows that our finite and frustrated selves seek outlets for honest protest and discharge. In light of the Jewish tradition of protest against God, the Gospels suggest that God in Christ receives our question of suffering, along with all of the malice and resentment with which the question might be laced, and responds with open arms, even if that means the open arms of the Cross.

Finally, Elie Wiesel tells the story of a group of Jews in Auschwitz who put God on trial for their horrific suffering. After much argument, the rabbi pronounced the verdict: God is guilty and worthy of death. However, after blaming God for their suffering, the rabbi looked up and said, "The trial is over. Now, it is time for evening prayer."[64] In light of both the Gospels and the Jewish tradition of protest against God, the story suggests that putting God on trial and blaming Him for all the suffering in our lives is in fact a form of honest prayer in itself, a form of prayer that God may actually appreciate and indeed a form of prayer that God invites Christians to imitate and practice as well.

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About the author

Daniel London is an Episcopal priest and Ph.D. candidate in Christian Spirituality at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley CA. He is completing his dissertation, in which he demonstrates how the Fourth Gospel can be used as a resource for praying the question of suffering, by using mimetic theory as a critical lens. He has presented papers at academic conferences across the country, including the American Academy of Religion, the Society of Biblical Literature and the Colloquium on Violence and Religion. He received his Master of Arts in Theology at Fuller Theological Seminary, where he concentrated on Jewish Wisdom Literature and Christian Mysticism. He teaches courses on ethics, spirituality and world religions in Berkeley and around the Bay Area. He has also published in Anglican Theological Review *and* Compass: A Review of Topical Theology.

[64] The story is retold by Robert McAfee Brown in his Introduction to Elie Wiesel, *The Trial of God*, vii.