

A READER

AN OUTLINE OF A LECTURE/DISCUSSION SERIES
AND A COLLECTION OF MATERIALS ON THE TOPIC

ARGUING WITH GOD

**Examples from the Psalms
and a very brief look at the Book of JOB**

Prepared for the
LUTHERAN SUMMER ASSEMBLY AT LAKESIDE
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Two Sessions: (1) 10:00-11:00 (2) 11:00-12:00

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WITH NOTES AND COMMENTS

Please, bring all mistakes and suggestions for improvements to my attention.

MONDAY, JULY 5, 1999

A WORD OF CAUTION

This is not a series of presentations, meditations and discussions for people who “know everything,” who are “set in their ways,” who “have made up their minds,” and who are not willing to be honest, raise questions and expose themselves to new, and even threatening, ideas.

This look at the “Arguing with God” tradition in the Bible is for persons who are willing to think, who have an open mind and heart, who have been hurt and abused (in various ways), who are seriously troubled with many questions about life, the Bible, religion, Christianity, etc. ...

My hope is that our meditations and discussions will bring some perspective to our troubled hearts and minds. I can not promise you any solutions or that you will feel better after these studies.

But, I do promise you that you will be intellectually and spiritually challenged and, probably, even fed in ways which are not under my or your control, but, belongs to you and your relationship with God.

Welcome to this journey.

INTRODUCTION

ARGUING WITH GOD ACCORDING TO THE BIBLE A LAW-SUIT AGAINST GOD

Really? Is that possible?

Yes.

Why is it possible? It is possible because, according to the biblical story, an oppressed, mixed group of people in Egypt (there is no such thing as a “Jewish” race), believed that the god *YaHWeH* (*EL*), which means either (1) “(El) is present” or (2) “(El) causes to be,” liberated them from the gods of Egypt and bonded this group to this new god, the biblical God, who then made a “covenant” with this group at Sinai (some say that this happened in the 12th century before Jesus).

Then this group of people established the kingdoms of Israel and Judea. When the Judeans returned from Exile in Babylonia (in the sixth century B.C.E. = Before the Common Era) these people slowly began to be called “Judeans” (this is a geographical term like “Chicagoans”) and then, later, they were called “Jews.”

In the first century of the Common Era (= C.E.) some “Jews” became disciples, followers of a certain Jesus of Nazareth. A mixture of “Jews” and also “non-Jews” or Gentiles, were soon called “Christians.” These “Christians” believed that they too had become part of the “People of God” because of the life, work, death and resurrection of Jesus “Christ.”

According to Apostle Paul, in Romans 11:17f., Gentile Christians are like *wild* olive branches “engrafted” on the *cultivated* olive tree (i.e., the People of God). The same idea is expressed, with a slightly different metaphor, in the Gospel according to John, in John 10:7f., which refers to Jesus as “the Door, the Entrance,” to the heart of God for anyone who lives according to the attitude which God has for all humans. Jesus is *transparent* of the will and hopes and wishes of God for all humans and so can any human (religious or non-religious) who is willing to accept a life living according to the “Christ-Spirit.”

The English word “Christ” comes from the Greek word “chrisma,” which means “oil” and has to do with cosmetics. “Christ” is a weak attempt at translating the Hebrew sentence “Messiah of the Lord” into Greek culture. The Greeks and Romans did not hope for a “Christ.”

In the Hebrew culture people, like kings, prophets, and priests, were installed, inaugurated into their office of power and responsibility (as representatives of God) in a ritual in which “oil” was poured or applied to the head. A king then was called the “Anointed of the LORD.” The Hebrew term is *מְשִׁיחַ הַיהוָה*, *měšīāḥ yhw̄h*. *Yhw̄h* is the abbreviated form of the sentence *יהוה יל*, *yhw̄h ̄l*, which was explained above and means either (1) “(El) is present” or (2) “(El) causes to be.” The Hebrew word *yhw̄h*, pronounced *yahweh*, is a verb in the imperfect and comes from the verb *hwh* or *hyh*, which means something like “to be.” The noun *̄l* (which means “El, god, deity”) was dropped off like the “el” from “Mi-cha-El,” and we get “Micha.” Of course, everyone knows what “Beth-El” means, namely, “House/Temple of El/God.” “El” was the chief god of the Canaanites.

Among the many Jewish groups in the time of Jesus there were a few who hoped for a good, just, ethical, great, wonderful government. The next new king, an “Anointed of the LORD,” who would inaugurate a time of peace, no wars, no tears, the return of all refugees, enough bread for all, a good job, nice home, no more sickness, etc.

Some saw in Jesus this new king. Because Jesus did not actually do all of the things that were hoped for and required of a “Messiah” they began to believe that Jesus would return and then actually do all the things which are required of a Messiah, an “Anointed of the LORD.” Furthermore, they began to believe that anyone who actually does what is expected of a Messiah is actualizing the spirit of the Messiah and therefore is a Messiah. Anyone who actualizes the “Spirit,” the “Holy Spirit,” the “Christ-Spirit,” therefore is a “Christ.” So, others, and then they themselves, called themselves “Christians,” that is those who actualize in daily life the “Christ” Spirit, the Holy Spirit, that is the hopes and dreams God has for all humans.

An excellent recent article may help to, quickly, understand the idea of “covenant.”

- Shanks, Hershel,
 “God as Divine Kinsman: What Covenant Meant in Ancient Israel,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 25.4 (July/August 1999) 32-33, 60.
 In this article H. Shanks reviews the book by Frank Moore Cross, *From Epic to Canon*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1998.

So, if I understand myself “bonded,” “covenanted,” to God then not only I, but also God has certain obligations. It is not too difficult to understand then that I can feel that God has abandoned me and has not kept the covenant.

So, based on the “covenant” I, or the whole group of believers, can begin to “argue” with God and, actually, speak up for my, our, rights in the relationship with God and cast our prayers into the form of a law-suit. This is what happened in, at least, 50 of the 150 Psalms and then, especially, in the Book of Job.

Let’s look at

THE LAW-COURT PATTERN OF PRAYER

A quick and easy way to introduce ourselves to this topic is to look at excerpts from the book by

- Laytner, Anson,
Arguing with God: A Jewish Tradition. Northvale, New Jersey & London: Jason Aronson Inc., 1990, xiii-xxii and 3-38, 249-257.

Great. Now we could take a little closer look at the topic “covenant” in the Bible.

COVENANT

The best overview over this topic can now be found in the article by

- Mendenhall, G. E. and Gary A Hereion,
 “Covenant,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary* I (1992) 1179-1202.

This article is based on an earlier article
 Mendenhall, G. E.,

“Covenant,” *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* I (1962) 714-723.

I typed out a quick overview of this article:

- Michel, W. L.,
 “Covenant,” ... an overview of Mendenhall’s article in *IDB* I (1962) 714-723.

Let us have a quick look at this overview.

Now we can understand why the people of God used the “covenant” idea also as a basis for their questions to God?

Where is your support and protection? Where is your help against our enemies? How come we are starving of lack of food and water? I have always been good and loyal, so how come I am suffering from injustice and sickness? Why do you murder my children? Why do you take away my property, my health, my dignity and honor? Why? Why do you behave like an abusive father?

According to the “covenanted” people these are, obviously, reasonable questions? The people soon discovered that not all suffering has to do with disobedience to God.

By the way, if you want to read a couple of excellent books on the Biblical God, you may want to turn to the following:

- Armstrong, Karen, *A History of God: The 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*. New York: Ballentine Books, 1994 (1993). ... a brief look at the *development* of thinking and experiencing the ONE “God.”
- Miles, Jack, *God: A Biography*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995. ... think of “God” in the Bible as a literary character. What a character! Constantly changing, from Creator and Warrior, to Liberator, to jilted lover, ... to the “Ancient of Days.” The study of this book is a deeply spiritual journey.

SUFFERING

So, why then does God bring about suffering and pain upon the people?

How many views of suffering are there in the Bible?

N. Habel counted about 6 or 7 in the Book of Job alone:

- Habel, N. C.,
Job. Knox Preaching Guides. Atlanta: John Knox, 1981, 5-6.

The question of the justice or injustice in the behavior of God has been a disturbing topic ever since biblical times, since Abraham and Moses, and it has not stopped troubling believing people ever since.

There is an immense literature on this topic.

One recent book is, especially, forthright and very helpful:

- Blumenthal, David R.,
Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993.

I want to share the beginning of the book and pages xi-xxv and 3-54 with you.

These are my copies which I share with you in order to try to convince you that you should buy the book and read it very carefully.

Those of you who feel that you have an argument with God, those of you who feel that it is, actually, God who is abusing you (through human beings) then, PLEASE, buy the book and read and study it carefully.

Find a few like minded people and go through the book together. If you like, find a responsive and knowledgeable person or teacher to guide you through the book.

UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES ACCEPT EASY OR PHONY ANSWERS ... unless, of course, you are satisfied with a superficial and phony life.

Probe into the questions until there is some light ... maybe. But, it is also OK to live with the darkness of unresolved questions.

It is no great comfort to know that many people before us have wrestled with terrifying questions. Actually, it might even deepen our anger, frustration and fury.

On the other hand, our forebears, in the biblical faith, have left us some mind and gut wrenching poems and psalms to travel with us in our own pain and agony. These poems can be used by us in order to help us express our own pain.

THE PROPHETS

How did the prophets of Israel and Judah feel about their relationship with God. All of them were not too happy about being “called” by God to deliver God’s message to the people. All of them suffered because of the truth of the Word from God.

One prophet, in particular, told us how much he suffered because of God. In Jeremiah 20:7 we read that Jeremiah felt that he had been, at first, *seduced*, and then *raped* by God.

If you want to read one book on the Prophets then, I recommend the following:

- Heschel, Abraham J.,
The Prophets. Harper Torchbooks. New York, Evanston, and London: Harper & Row, 1969 (1962).

I want to share with you pages 112-115. Please, read what he has to say about Jeremiah 20& very carefully.

PSALMS

Now, let us turn to the Psalms in the Bible.

I enclose a basic bibliography on the Psalms ... if you would like to have a look at some of the articles and books which are available.

- Michel, W. L.,
“Bibliography: Psalms and An Introduction to Hebrew Poetry.” Chicago: LSTC, 1997 (1994).

One book, which is, particularly, helpful is the following:

- Sabourin, Leopold, S.J.,
The Psalms: Their Origin and Meaning. New, Enlarged, Updated Edition. New York: Alba House, 1974 (Society of St. Paul, 2187 Victory Blvd., Staten Island, New York 10314).

I am afraid, though that this book is, probably, out of print. So, you will have to get a copy from a library or from some other place.

One reason why I include these few pages from this book is the content on pages 443-445 which contains a list of the various forms of the psalms and explains the differences in the Catholic and Protestant Bibles concerning the Numerical Order of the Psalms.

Which are the psalms in which our forbears in the biblical faith argued with God? Well, here is a list:

A LIST OF THE LAMENTS IN THE PSALMS

LAMENTS OF THE INDIVIDUAL

Psalm 5, 6, 7, 13, 17, 22, 25, 26, 28, 31, 35, 36, 38,, 39, 42, 43, 51, 54, 55, 56, 57, 59, 61, 63, 64, 69, 70, 71, 86, 88, 102, 109, 120, 130, 140, 141, 142, 143.

LAMENTS OF THE COMMUNITY

Psalm 12, 4, 58, 60, 70, 77, 79, 80, 82, 83, 85, 90, 94, 106, 108, 123, 126, 137.

As an introduction to our meditations on arguing with an abusive god I suggest that we pray a few verses from Ps 51.

PSALM 51:12(10)-19(17)

- Michel, W. L.,
“Psalm 51:12(10)-19(17). Masoretic Text, Transliteration and Translation.” Chicago: LSTC, 1998 (1978).

By the way “Masoretic” refers to the text which the “Masorettes” handed down to us. The Hebrew word “masar” means “to hand down, transmit,” etc. The Masorettes tried to “fossilize,” i.e., standardize the various traditions of the biblical text during the later part of the first millennium of the Common Era.

Only since the 10th, well, actually, 12th century do we have the basic Hebrew text which became the basis for the various translations of the Bible. Imagine that!

Tuesday, JULY 6, 1999

- Michel, W. L.,
“Psalm **88**:1-19(18). Chicago: LSTC, 1998.
-

Wednesday, July 7, 1999

- Michel, W. L.,
“Psalm **44**:1-27(1-26). Chicago: LSTC, 1998.
- You may also want to read the excerpt from Blumenthal on Ps. 44
- Blumenthal, David R.,
Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993, 85-110
-

Thursday, July 8, 1999

- Michel, W. L.,
“Psalm **109**:1-31. Chicago: LSTC, 1998.
- You may also want to read the excerpt from Blumenthal on Ps. 109
- Blumenthal, David R.,
Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993, 111-156
-

Friday, July 9, 1999

- Michel, W. L.,
“Psalm **27**:1-14. Chicago: LSTC, 1998
- You may also want to read the excerpt from Blumenthal on Ps. 27.
- Blumenthal, David R.,
Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993, 157-189.
-

NOW COMES A WARNING:

The following may be very disturbing for many persons. Blumenthal is a psychologist and a counselor of persons who have experienced very abusive relationships. He also counsels survivors of the Holocaust.

One of the persons he counseled was Beth.

He urged her to write her responses to Ps. 27. Please, read and listen with an open heart and mind and with empathy what Beth has to say. I am very sure, that you know, that Beth is not alone in her outcry.

Remember, Jesus cried out to God on the cross. Witnesses reported that he prayed Ps. 22. Remember also the prayer, which some disciple thought that Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane.

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- “Beth’s Psalm,” in Blumenthal, David R., *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 227-232.
-

Now, to a very brief look at the Book of Job.

THE BOOK OF JOB

Of course, the Book of Job deserves a full study in its own right. I know, that it is totally unfair to the Book of Job to treat it only in passing, but, in this context I will, quickly discuss my view of the message of the Book of Job (after more than three decades of intensive study).

- Michel, W. L.,
“The Structure and Major Problems in the Book of Job.” Chicago, LSTC, 1996 (1970)
- Michel, W. L.,
“Translation of Job 3:1-26 (with Hebrew Text and JPS 1917 translation), from my book: *Job in the Light of Northwest Semitic*. Volume I. Prologue and First Cycle of Speeches--Job 1:1-14:22. *Biblica et Orientalia*, 42. Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1987. Distributed in the USA by Loyola University Press. 3441 N. Ashland Ave. Chicago, Illinois 60657.

The following is an article which summarizes my views on the meaning of the Book of Job. The article is not, as yet, published. I want to work on it a little more.

- Michel, W. L.,
“Did Job Or God Repent? Ellipsis, Janus Parallelism and the Message of the Book of Job.” Chicago: LSTC 1997.
-

IN THE LIGHT OF THE FORGOING STUDIES AND MEDITATIONS IT IS, PROBABLY, HEALTHY FOR ALL OF US TO TAKE ANY PSALM AND RESPOND TO IT WITH OUR OWN WORDS IN WHATEVER SITUATION WE MAY FIND OURSELVES, JUST LIKE BETH DID. DO NOT BE SHY, DO NOT THINK THAT GOD DOES NOT WANT TO HEAR YOUR THOUGHTS -- NO MATTER HOW WONDERFUL, NO MATTER HOW HORRIBLE ...

By the way, you may want to know a little bit about me. So, I include some information:

• INFORMATION ABOUT WALTER L. MICHEL

ACADEMIC CREDENTIALS:

M.Div (equiv. 1959), Univ. of Vienna. M.A. (1967), Ph.D. (1970), Univ. of Wisconsin-Madison. FURTHER STUDIES: Univ. of Heidelberg (1956/57. Work with G.von Rad), Yale Univ. (1972. Work with M. Pope), Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome (1979. Work with M. Dahood), Loyola Univ., Chicago (1980. M. Dahood)

PROFESSIONAL CAREER:

Teacher of Religion (*Religionslehrer* in public schools in Vienna, Austria (1957-1959). ORDAINED by the United Lutheran Church in America (Jan. 15, 1961). Parish Pastor (Dixon, Illinois, 1960-1962). Campus Pastor (Univ. of Wisconsin-Madison, 1962-1966). Professor of Old Testament (LSTC, 1972-present)

MAJOR PUBLICATION:

Job In the Light of Northwest Semitic. Volume I. Prologue and First Cycle of Speeches Job 1:1 - 14:22.
Biblica et Orientalia (Sacra Scriptura Antiquitatibus Orientalibus Illustrata) - 42. Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1987. XVII, 436 pages.

PERSONAL:

Married to Gundega I. Reinfelds (1964). Gundega earned a Ph.D. in Physical Chemistry and is a professor at a college in Chicago. She is a native Latvia and engaged in Latvian concerns. We have two children, a girl (b. 1970) and a boy (b. 1971). The children speak three *native* languages: Latvian (mother's language), German (father's language) and English (the country's language).
