

# SCHOLAR'S CORNER

Recently I have been told that I was arrogant for thinking that something was unfair that God is believed to have done or is believed will do in the future. How dare I, a mere human, criticize God?

In my Old Testament course this spring, I brought up the fact that many Jews and Christians over the centuries have been troubled by the seeming injustice of God punishing Pharaoh when the text says that God hardened his heart. How can it be right to make someone do something and then punish them for it? (In several places in Exodus, Pharaoh is said to have hardened his own heart; Exodus also describes God as hardening Pharaoh's heart.)

The other issue I raised was the seeming immorality of God commanding the Israelites to kill every man, woman, and child of the Canaanites—something we nowadays call genocide and consider a great crime.

Quite appropriately a student quoted to me a number of biblical passages, prominent among them Romans 9:14-21, where Paul argues that God is not unjust and that we are in no position to call God unjust.

Then I received a letter in response concerning my May column that said it was arrogant of me to say that it seems "cruel and unjust" for God to exclude people from heaven "for not believing in His Son."

I sure don't want to be guilty of the sin of pride, but I don't agree that it is the sin of pride to have the reaction, "Hey, that isn't fair!" when something strikes us as unfair.

Is it arrogance when confronted with the kidnapping, rape, torture and murder of a young girl to respond, "That isn't right! She was done a terrible wrong. She didn't deserve to have this happen to her. No one deserves to be treated that way."

Is it arrogance when confronted with an earthquake that kills thousands or even hundreds of thousands of people to respond, "What a tragedy! What an injustice! What did all those people do to deserve this?"

Is it wrong to have compassion or pity for the women and children who through much of human history were enslaved when their cities were conquered and all the men (their husbands and fathers) were killed?

I think not. The sense of unfairness is not one of humanity's baser traits. It is no sin to be repelled by injustice.

The problem comes when God is said to have been "behind" the seeming injustice, when the killing is said to have been God's will. Normally we condemn mass murder and the enslaving women and children. But when the Bible presents such things as Divine punishments, many religious people feel constrained to say they must have been O.K. since the Bible says they were God's will.

I don't believe it is wrong to be repelled and outraged at injustice. Nor is it arrogant to have the response, "Hey, God, that's not fair!"

There is precedence in the Bible for complaining about injustice. In Genesis 18:16-33, when God tells Abraham his plans to destroy all the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham tries to persuade God not to go through with it because of the injustice of innocent people being killed along with the guilty. Abraham says, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth [that is, God] do what is just?" (Gen. 18:25). Here Abraham dared to question the morality of God's plan, yet nowhere in the Bible is Abraham criticized for this.

There are many examples in the Psalms of complaining instead of just accepting things as God's will: "Why, O LORD, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" (Ps. 10:1), "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" (Ps. 13:1). Habakkuk complains, "Why do you look on the treacherous, and are silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they?" (Hab. 1:13) Jeremiah complains, "Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive?" (Jer. 21:1) It has remained part of Jewish spirituality even to today that it is alright to complain to God about things and to demand that God fix things.

Many things happen in life that strike us as unfair. If whatever seems wrong or unfair cannot be changed, we will eventually have to accept it, even if we still don't like it.

The way I read the Book of Job, the answer Job finally gets to his complaint that he doesn't deserve his suffering is, "Sorry, Job. You are never going to get an answer. You are never going to understand why. The universe doesn't owe you an explanation, and you are just going to have to accept never getting an explanation for the way things happen."

Yes, ultimately we must accept what is (though not human crimes), whether we like it or not. We must bow our heads before infinity. But does that mean that we cannot be honest about how we feel when we think something has happened that is unjust? Should we stifle all feelings of shock and revulsion and all thought that a great wrong has been done if that is how it appears to us?

Abraham's example tells us otherwise.

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