

Taking God to court

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [December 16, 1998](#) issue

In *Joseph and His Brothers*, Thomas Mann tells of an exchange between Jacob, who has just seen what he believes is proof of his son's death, and his servant Eliezer. The passage reminds me of two friends who were complaining about God.

"Yes, I acknowledge him, that terrible God," said one friend in a muted voice full of pent-up anger. "But God is my enemy. He refuses to do what even the worst of friends would gladly do. A small miracle to alleviate my pain and remove my humiliation would cost the Mighty One nothing. But he is deaf to my prayers. I'll fight him to keep my dignity, even if I lose my life."

"I despise God, that self-obsessed Lord of Lords," said the other friend, trying to shake loose of the One to whom she was still clinging, even in her anger. "On Friday evenings, God would just sit there in heavenly glory, soaking in all the praise that my mother and her fellow believers showered on him in church, while back at home my uncle was molesting me."

I understood perfectly well the rage of my friends; I sensed it welling up within me too. The dissonance between the belief in a mighty and loving God and the experience of unnecessary and unremedied suffering is too shrill to the soul's ear not to demand a resolution. In the absence of harmony, rage and rebellion reign. What my friends wanted from me, a theologian, was an acknowledgment of their pain and rebellion. And I gave it.

There would be no need for theology, however, if its task were merely to empathize with what people feel and to echo what they say about God. Rogerian therapy, say, would suffice. Theology's purpose is to help people speak *rightly* about God. After I expressed my genuine sympathy, I therefore added a "but." I gently challenged not their experiences but their claims about God's indifference and self-obsession. Predictably, my friends rebelled against my correction with even greater force than they had rebelled against God. I found myself cast in the image of Eliezer, the defender of God in Mann's story.

Eliezer warns the bereaved Jacob, who is accusing God of bad faith, not to sin. Jacob is aware of the danger. He is willing to monitor his lips; he lets them say only that what the Lord does is well done. He insists, however, that his heart has the right to "grumble against the unacceptable" and to accuse God of the "savage design" of taking his son. When Eliezer objects that Jacob is dragging "down the majesty of God against all warrant," Jacob sets him straight, drawing upon theological wisdom learned in the depths of suffering:

Thresh not words, old man, they are but empty straw. Espouse my cause, and not God's; for He is overgreat and laugheth at thy concern, while I am but a storehouse of wailing.

For a person who believes in God the Creator and Redeemer, Jacob's demand is audacious. How could one affirm God's supreme wisdom and goodness while accusing God of being in the wrong? How could one worship God while arguing a case against God? Those who honor God shy away from complaints against God, for it seems that a god who can be justly accused ought not to be worshiped. Yet it is precisely proper piety that demands complaint when the innocent suffer. Consider Jacob's concluding words to Eliezer:

Ah, thou God's-defender, thou wilt receive thy reward and be counted high in His sight for that thou hast stood up for Him and shrewdly praised His deeds, He being God! But I tell thee He will fall upon thee! For thou wilt praise Him falsely, deceiving Him as one deceiveth a man, and wilt secretly flatter Him. Thou hypocrite, He will have none of this way of serving His cause . . . when what He had done to me shrieketh to heaven . . . But I speak to Him otherwise, and even so am nearer to Him than thou.

Calling "right" what is manifestly wrong, just to be on God's side, is no way to speak rightly of God. Precisely because God is loving, truthful and just, God will not put up with deceitful justifications of the unjustifiable.

From one angle, the Book of Job is all about the question of what it means to speak rightly of God in the face of innocent suffering. Did the friends who defended God speak rightly, or did Job, who wanted to take God to court? The book ends with a censure of one of Job's friends: "For you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has" (42:7).

Certainly, to argue with God, to complain against God, to hurl accusations against God is not all one ought to say about God. Jacob knew that, and said as much when he warned Eliezer that God would fall upon him for dishonesty. Jacob "grumbles" and Job wants to take God to court precisely because they believe in the ultimate triumph of God's justice in the world. To speak rightly about God in the world of innocent suffering *requires* argument, complaint and accusation. Their absence would not only entail the hypocrisy of false reverence instead of true worship, as Jacob argued. It would also entail the hopelessness of merely putting up with suffering instead of seeking to overcome it.

Was I wrong to attempt to correct my friends' speech about God? The content of what I said was right, but not the timing. A "but" needed to be added to their complaints. But they needed to make their own journeys through the complaints to "the God beyond God" to whom they were, consciously or unconsciously, appealing.