God After Auschwitz, by Zachary Braiterman

reviewed by Eleanor Smith in the March 15, 2000 issue

Zachary Braiterman challenges a well-subscribed theory about the delay in the expression of post-Holocaust thought and the onset of dialogue. Often understood as a kind of post-traumatic stress response, the near quarter-century of silence is due more to "discursive factors" than the "psychologism" of shock, Braiterman proposes. In other words, rather than speculate on the emotional state of the community and its thinkers, we should realize that until the 1960s and '70s, there was no broader framework of ideas to which those thinkers (who were not necessarily themselves survivors) might have referred. Once images of the war began to emerge through memoir, film, poetry, art and literature, only then did the conversation have graphic and common points of departure.

Braiterman primarily explores the phenomena of theodicy and antitheodicy (a neologism of the author). Theodicy, he says, is "any attempt to justify, explain, or find acceptable meaning to the relationship that subsists between God (or some other form of ultimate reality), evil, and suffering." Theodicy, which constitutes the dominant tonal approach of the Hebrew Bible and the Midrash (commentary literature), is manifest in a range of religious responses to suffering, including "the denial of evil as a real phenomenon; dualism; just deserts; deferred compensations; divine pedagogy; free will; vicarious atonement; appeals to mystery." Antitheodicy is the refusal to justify, explain or accept as somehow meaningful the relationship between God and suffering.

Braiterman cautions the reader not to confuse antitheodicy with atheism. "Rather than defend God or accept catastrophe, the authors of antitheodic statements justify human figures and reject suffering along with its (presumed) rewards" (the parenthetical insertion is mine). Though Braiterman's scholarship is fair and very measured, he sympathizes most with antitheodicy.

God After Auschwitz begins with a review of the four critical modern Jewish thinkers who, according to Braiterman, subscribe to a rather more traditional defense of God and the order imposed by traditional Jewish texts. They are Martin Buber, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Joseph Soloveitchik and Mordecai Kaplan. Part II explicates the more

antitheodic thought of three major post-Holocaust thinkers, including Richard Rubenstein, Emil Fackenheim and Eliezer Berkovitz.

One of Braiterman's central texts is the Book of Job and its various treatments by "the rabbis." He uses the Book of Job and its provocations as a barometer by which to measure the theodic content of different bodies of thought. In the process, he conducts a fascinating analysis of 42:6, Job's ostensible retraction of his vociferous God challenges. In this case (as in many others), the theological essence of the book pivots on the translation of a few Hebrew words.

In discussing the theodic enterprise, the defense of God and the unknowability of his ways, Braiterman refers to those who are the "defenders of a social order," or what sociologist Peter Berger calls "world maintenance." As a congregational rabbi, often called upon to explain or soothe the wounds of gross injustice, I found this book to be enormously useful in helping me reflect on the fine line between theodicy and antitheodicy.

For all the clarity of its thinking and analysis, Braiterman also respects the highly subjective and personal nature of theological truths. As Braiterman himself says, at the conclusion of the first chapter, "Perhaps after Auschwitz, to some degree or another, the act of loving God must remain unjustified."