



THE BEREA PAGE

“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11

Reflections

“Isaiah does not appear to have been entertained by the worship service in which he experienced his vision of God [Isa. 6], and, at least in the short run, it does not seem to have made him feel better about himself or his neighbors. ‘Woe is me! I am undone, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips . . .’ (Isa. 6.5) is not an expression of positive feelings that are supposed to be engendered by the modern ‘praise service.’”

~ J. J. M. Roberts, “Contemporary Worship in the Light of Isaiah’s Ancient Critique,” *Worship and the Hebrew Bible: Essays in Honour of John T. Willis*, ed. M. Patrick Graham, et. al. (Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 275

“Trouble should always be treated as a call to consider one’s ways. But trouble is not necessarily a sign of being off track at all: for as the Bible declares in general that ‘many are the afflictions of the righteous’ (Psalm 34:19), so it teaches in particular that following God’s guidance regularly leads to upsets and distresses which one would otherwise have escaped.” ~ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (InterVarsity Press, 1973), 217-218

Hard Questions: It’s Okay to Ask

David Anguish

She was an unassuming wife and mother who was always present and attentive, but, in my experience, had never vocalized any thoughts about what she heard. Generally, our exchanges after a lesson had been of the “Hello, it’s good to see you” type.

One Sunday evening, I preached a sermon from Job, focusing particular attention on his lament in chapter 3 and audacious complaints in chapters 9–10, 12–13. Working from those texts meant that I had gone beyond “Sunday school Job,” a telling that can come across as a “he had trouble, but ultimately lived happily ever after” tale. I had emphasized that Job both acknowledged God’s transcendence and said, in effect, “God, if I could, I would take you to court. But since you’re the Judge, how fair would it be? If only I could find an impartial arbiter (מוֹכֵיִת, *môkîh*)—a heavenly umpire—who would decide between us” (Job 9.32–33; cf. 13.3, 10, 15; heavenly umpire imagery from Hartley 1988, 181; Andersen 1976, 151).

Afterward, as the woman exited, she said, quietly, “I appreciated that. I’m glad to hear it’s okay to ask those kinds of questions.” Then she moved on.

From her comment, it’s not a stretch to infer that her church experience—if not some things she had heard said at church—had made clear to her that there are some questions, especially about the ways of God, that we are not ever supposed to ask. It’s also not hard to discern that she had been wrestling with some of those questions for a while.

From observations and conversations with others, I’m confident she is not the only one to have been impressed with the understanding that it’s not “okay to ask those kinds of questions.” Some dare to broach them anyway, tentatively at least; others don’t want to risk doing that, but do ask them quietly, even as they hope they might one day be heard.

We do well to learn from, and encourage one another to mimic, the practices of people we meet and whose words we read in Scripture. I’ve already mentioned Job, but the Bible’s candor

“In this exciting time [first three centuries AD] Christianity was considered, and really seems to have been, a dangerous development that challenged what were then accepted notions of religion, piety, identity, and behavior. Indeed, in that ancient Roman setting, Christianity was perceived by many as irreligious, impious, and unacceptable, a threat to social order.” ~ Larry W. Hurtado, *Destroyer of the gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Baylor University Press, 2016), xii

“Your life and mine have greatness—if not in accomplishment, at least in potential. And God has granted that we live during that era of the world’s history heaviest with gospel potential. Let us not trifle, as worldlings do. They’re living for the weekend; we’re living for the End. Let us seek the Lord’s anointing on our lives. Let us seek it now.”
~ Raymond C. Ortlund, Jr., *When God Comes to Church: A Biblical Model for Revival Today* (Baker Books, 2000), 100

“The book of Job is an enigma answering another enigma. The enigma it answers is life’s deepest problem, the problem of evil, of suffering, of injustice in a world supposedly ruled by a just God. This God, however, is not a hard, bright, brittle, little formula but a mystery. He is the God of whom Rabbi Abraham Heschel said, ‘God is not nice. God is not an uncle. God is an earthquake.’” ~ Peter Kreeft, *Three Philosophies of Life* (Ignatius Press, 1989), 61

and presentation of hard questions are not limited to that wisdom writing. Think of Habakkuk, Romans, 2 Corinthians, Hebrews, 1 Peter, James, and Revelation—just some of Scripture’s passages that give attention to coping with trials, suffering, and evil.

Think in particular of Ecclesiastes, the Hebrew philosophical treatise on the futility (הֶבֶל, *hebal*, 38 times) of the secularist outlook (“under the sun,” 28 times in ESV) that is comparable to the worldview that is widely held today (Eaton 1983, 56). Among the Preacher’s candid observations are multiple statements about the world’s evils and injustices (e.g., Eccl 3.16; 4.1; 8.14; 9.1–6, 11; 10.1).

But it’s not just the secular minded who asked hard questions. Think of the faithful servants who wrote the Psalms. One introductory article enumerates seven psalm types, including: hymns or songs of praise; songs of thanksgiving; royal psalms; songs of Zion; liturgies; and wisdom and Torah psalms (Limburg 1992, 531–534; cf. Tucker 2008, 581–585). None of those comprise the largest type, however. Scholars are not united on the exact number but do agree that just over a third of the Psalter’s 150 poems are laments (Limburg enumerates 54 laments: 43 individual and 11 communal). In faith, those servants ask God bold, at times impertinent, questions. They complain about their circumstances. They wonder what God is (or isn’t) doing. They ask why!! They cry out, asking God if he hears and, if so, why he doesn’t do something. They include some of the most honest and raw expressions of emotion in all of literature, not just Scripture.

That Scripture says so much about suffering and evil and the questions about God and the world posed by those realities confirms that it is, in fact, “okay to ask those kinds of questions.” Indeed, if we learn anything from our spiritual forbears, it is that our faith may be adversely affected if we don’t.

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