

Key concepts



Richard Rubenstein ('death of God'): it is impossible to believe in the God of the Abrahamic covenant after the events of the Holocaust (Shoah). God had 'died' in creating the world by retracting himself into a void to make space for existence. God is the Ultimate Nothing. Yet Rubenstein is not calling for atheism. Jews can still find spiritual vitality through traditional Jewish observances such as the symbolic nature of sacrifice and worship.

Elie Wiesel ('Trial of God'): Wiesel's theology has been described as a theology of protest. The erosion of his faith is evident in his novels through which he depicts a Godless world. Nevertheless, his opinion changes and there appears to be a call for a new start in which there is no longer anger towards God. God is put on trial and found to be guilty, and yet Wiesel doesn't turn to atheism.

Ignaz Maybaum ('suffering servant' & 'vicarious atonement'): the suffering of the six million Jews in the Holocaust was the suffering of God's faithful servant for the sake of humanity and the Holocaust was one of three major disasters (churban). The Remnant is compared to the redeemed at the Red Sea. They must change and become better Jews.

Eliezer Berkovitz ('the hiding of the divine face' & free will): he addresses the problem of God's absence from the faithful during the Holocaust by referring to Isaiah 45:15. God is absent due to the need for people to be able to develop as moral beings. This particular justification of evil is known as the free will defence.

Emil Fackenheim (614th commandment): he argues that God was present in the death camps, and that out of the ashes of Auschwitz was issued the 614th commandment: 'Jews are forbidden to hand Hitler posthumous victories.' They are commanded to survive as Jews, to remember the victims of the Holocaust, forbidden to despair of man and his world. He rejected the notion that the Holocaust was a punishment for sin and urges the Jewish people to continue to believe despite the magnitude of the events of the Holocaust.

Key quotes

'No man can really say that God is dead. How can we know that? Nevertheless, I am compelled to say that we live in the time of the "death of God."' (Rubenstein)

'I was the accuser, God the accused. My eyes were open and I was alone – terribly alone in a world without God and without man.' (Wiesel)

'We are the Remnant, and of this we must speak with the Halleluyah of the redeemed at the Red Sea.' (Maybaum)

'Truly you are a God who hides Himself, O God of Israel the Saviour.' (Isaiah 45:15)

'The hiding God is present; though man is unaware of him. He is present in the hiddenness.' (Berkovitz)

'You have abandoned the covenant? We shall not abandon it! You no longer want Jews to survive? We shall survive, as better, more faithful Jews! You have destroyed all grounds for hope? We shall obey the commandment to hope which you yourself have given.' (Fackenheim)



Key words

Holocaust
Remnant

Shoah

churban

Issues for analysis and evaluation

Key questions, arguments, and debates

The success of Holocaust theologies in addressing the challenges raised by the Holocaust.

Some might argue that to consider the success or failure of such an event is an artificial exercise. An argument could be made for viewing it as morally wrong to look for any justification for the Holocaust. However, it might be argued that a response to such a dreadful occurrence such as the Holocaust is imperative and dignified, no matter how weak.

Whether or not any Holocaust theology is legitimate.

Is the traditional concept of suffering as a result of disobedience to God adequate as an explanation for the Holocaust? Why has the Holocaust brought with it a different set of challenges for Jews? Is it ever legitimate to question God? It could be suggested that some of Holocaust theologians present arguments that are more legitimate than those of others. If Holocaust theology provides hope for the future then might it be argued that its legitimacy is enhanced?