

# The extent of god's fairness

[Environment](#), [Air](#)



In Annie Dillard's non-fiction narrative, *For the Time Being*, Dillard explores the question: Is God fair? A belief in God's fairness (or unfairness) is a cultural aspect with a strong impact on the narrative. This question is studied and explained from Dillard's viewpoint as compared to the Apostle Paul's and those of the Jewish teachers, the Baal Shem Tov and Rabbi Akiva. In one passage, found in the sub-chapter " Evil" on page thirty-one, Dillard presents the Jewish teacher, Rabbi Akiva, who proposes that God punishes good people throughout their lives but rewards them ' eternally in the world to come'. He believes that God rewards ' evil-doers' in their lives, but then in turn punishes them in their afterlives. Dillard prefaces this passage by stating that Rabbi Akiva taught a ' curious' solution to an ' ever-galling problem', or; why do bad things happen to good people? The diction Rabbi Akiva uses helps to see a direct contrast between the ' good' people suffering ' enormously' and the prosperous ' louses' that are living in the ' pink of health'. From the Jewish perspective, the Rabbi suggests that a profound belief in the afterlife is central to the belief in a just God. The subsequent passage on page eighty-five is also contained in the sub-chapter " Evil". In this, Dillard proclaims that she often ' reaches in vain' for the ' courage' to stand in the Christian church and shout: " That is a lie!" when she hears the pastor state " All your actions show your wisdom and love." Dillard follows this assertion by stating that the few things we know that God has done, are ' unambiguous' in ' wisdom and love' and that all events are not because of God, but because of ' blind chance' (87). This passage reveals Dillard's observation that the rich live prosperous lives while the poor are left to their own devices. She states that God is a ' do-nothing' and if he has

power he 'abuses' it. Dillard presents a viewpoint from the atheistic perspective that proposes what to others appear to be acts of God are merely random events or 'natural calamit[ies]'. Readers are now made to believe that God is unfair, they are also left to wonder if God exists, and if he has power, why he does not use it. Dillard continues by referencing the Apostle Paul, when he addresses the Christians in Rome; "In all things God works for the good of those who love him." This segment of the passage shows a contrast to Dillard's earlier disagreement. She then questions; "When was that?" This rhetorical response is used to further support her assertion that this statement is untrue. Dillard follows by saying, "In China, in Israel, in the Yemen, in the Ecuadorean Andes and the Amazon basin," she witnesses 'suffering.' Dillard creates an image that all over the earth there are places with people struggling to survive. She contrasts the rich who 'sit secure on their thrones,' and then 'send the hungry away empty.' Dillard uses imagery from 'the soup kitchen' to cause readers to picture a place which is meant to help and yet she sees 'suffering' within it. Dillard then gives readers a feeling of helplessness; "God is not on trial," she wrote, "We are not jurors but suppliants" (86) showing readers this is a situation we have no control over. Readers leave this passage perceiving God as incredibly unfair to most people but seeing that we are not here to question him. Next, Dillard interprets the viewpoint of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of modern Hasidism, who claims that God causes all evil events in the world, both moral and natural, and that we all suffer at the hands of Him. This passage, on pages 116 and 117 in the sub-chapter "Evil", contains an anecdote in which the Baal Shem Tov questions God's actions at a time

when Polish Christians were killing Jews, and later, when an epidemic was 'scourging' Poland. The Baal Shem Tov prays: " Let us fall into the hands of the Lord but let us not fall into the hands of man." The Baal Shem Tov is then shown requesting to 'cancel' his prayer. God in turn asks him; " Why do you wish to cancel?" " Now you want the Christian Poles instead of the epidemic?" (116). Dillard tells us the best the Baal Shem Tov can do is strike a bargain keeping the plague from his town. The Baal Shem Tov believed that God caused these 'moral' and 'natural' events to 'teach' or 'punish' us. This viewpoint, like Rabbi Akiva's, is from a Jewish perspective, but illustrates the differences within a religion. Dillard ends this passage by adding, " In 1976 an earthquake in Tangshan killed 750, 000 people. Before it quaked, many survivors reported, the earth shone with an incandescent light." Dillard suggests that we all 'suffer at the hands of God omnipotent,' affirming the belief that God is equally unfair to all. For the last example, Dillard's narrative quotes an unknown source for the purpose of causing readers to question the popular belief that God knows each of us individually. " Only some deeply grounded and fully paradoxical view of God can make sense of the notion that God knows and loves each 5. 9 billion of us." (134). This quote proposes an idea that God does not punish certain people over others due to actions, but that we are all at the mercy of God's (and life's) unfairness. The rejection of an idea that God is fair to all is further supported by the two passages containing opposing views on the topic from the Jewish religion. Not only does Dillard reference the Jewish religion but she states her own view. Much like the rest of her book, Dillard respects these views but still feels compelled to make her voice heard. These

passages are all contained in the sub-chapter, " Evil," which is cycled through the narrative seven times. The overall discussion on the fairness (or unfairness) of God connects to Dillard's motif of religion, and shows how Dillard compares and contrasts views within each. She creates doubt even within the Christian religion with the statement: " Do-nothing God." Dillard allows readers to decide on their own which perspective they agree with; which is another overall theme throughout the narrative. Even though no definite answer is shown, Dillard ends with an overall acceptance of: life is not fair, and neither is God.