

Judaism and the Holocaust

The Holocaust and Jewish Theology

It is with a great deal of trepidation that one approaches the task of writing on the Holocaust. There is no way to be sufficiently sensitive to the incomprehensible suffering that it entailed. Yet one cannot examine the role of Judaism in salvation history without addressing it, nor can one understand current thinking in Jewish theology without giving explicit consideration to the effects the tragedy of the Holocaust have had on that theology.

The intention in examining some of the effects that the Holocaust has had on Jewish theology is not to criticize—it is rather to defend the true Jewish ideal, the genuine Jewish conception of and faith in God, against contrary views that have emerged in response to the trauma and tragedy. It is only logical that a disaster of such proportions should occasion a deep reexamination of the fundamental theological tenets of Judaism and present an unprecedentedly great challenge to that faith. Yet should the end result be the destruction of the true Jewish theology, which sustained the Jews in their relationship to God for over 4,000 years, it would, in the words of one Jewish scholar, “destroy Judaism and give Hitler the posthumous

victory we all wish to deny him”.¹ It is in that spirit, in the defense of the nobility of Judaism and its true conception of the goodness and greatness of God, that this exploration is undertaken.

The Jewish understanding of the relationship between God and man, and more particularly between God and the Jews, is fundamentally based on the teaching of the Old Testament. The Old Testament, in many places, explicitly makes it clear that

1. God is all-good, all-loving, and all-powerful;
2. the Jews are the “chosen people”, the special favorites of God;
3. the good will be rewarded in this life; evil people will be punished for their deeds in this life.

The only one of these three axioms with which Christianity would differ is the last. Yet it is logical that the Christian view of reward/punishment in this life, as opposed to in the afterlife, should differ from the Jewish view. For the very nature of man’s reward and punishment changed with the coming of the Messiah (Jesus). Before Jesus came, the gates of heaven were closed to all mankind, even the righteous; there was thus no reward of heaven for them (yet), and they were held in a “limbo”, known as the “limbo of the fathers”, or as the “bosom of Abraham”, awaiting the coming of the Messiah to enable them to enter heaven proper. This Jesus did, the day after the crucifixion and before the Resurrection, when He descended to the dead. It is not surprising that Jewish revelation, that is pre-Jesus revelation, should

¹ Dr. Michael Wyschogrod, quoted by Isaac C. Rottenberg, *Jewish Christians in an Age of Christian-Jewish Dialogue* (published by family and friends of the author, 1995), p. 20.

not know of the rewards of heaven, because pre-Jesus there were no such rewards! The revelation of what happens to the dead now that the “gates of heaven” have been opened by Christ’s death and descent to the dead is intrinsically a Christian revelation to which Judaism is not privy. And it is not only a question of revelation, of what the ancient Jews *knew*—the underlying workings of God may actually have been different at that time. It seems reasonable to suppose that during the time when the gates of heaven were still closed, God exercised His justice differently and *did* punish sin and reward virtue during the lifetime of the individual.²

Since before Jesus the fullness of the afterlife was as yet unavailable to man, so too was any detailed knowledge about it. There are only a few hints about it in pre-Christian Jewish revelation. Among the clearest are those in Daniel and in Second Maccabees. They contain a vague promise, but no detail about what is to come:

At that time . . . many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever (Daniel 12:2–3).

He also took up a collection . . . and sent it to Jerusalem to provide for a sin offering. In doing this he acted very well and honorably, taking account of the resurrection. For . . . he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness. . . . Therefore he

² This is not to imply that suffering was always a punishment from God, as the story of Job powerfully illustrates.

made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin (2 Maccabees 12: 43-45).

Even in the absence of detailed knowledge, faithful Jews held an unwavering confidence in the ultimate reward (2 Maccabees 7:1-23):

It happened also that seven brothers and their mother were arrested and were being compelled by the king, under torture with whips and cords, to partake of unlawful swine's flesh. One of them, acting as their spokesman, said, "What do you intend to ask and learn from us? For we are ready to die rather than transgress the laws of our fathers." The king fell into a rage, and gave orders that pans and caldrons be heated. These were heated immediately, and he commanded that the tongue of their spokesman be cut out and that they scalp him and cut off his hands and feet, while the rest of the brothers and the mother looked on. When he was utterly helpless, the king ordered them to take him to the fire, still breathing, and to fry him in a pan. The smoke from the pan spread widely, but the brothers and their mother encouraged one another to die nobly, saying, "The Lord God is watching over us and in truth has compassion on us. . . ."

After the first brother had died in this way, they brought forward the second for their sport. They tore off the skin of his head with the hair, and asked him, "Will you eat rather than have your body punished limb by limb?" He replied in the language of his fathers, and said to them, "No." Therefore he in turn underwent tortures as the first brother had done. And when he was at his last breath, he said, "You accursed wretch, you dismiss us from this present life, but the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life, because we have died for his laws."

After him, the third was the victim of their sport. When it was demanded, he quickly put out his tongue and courageously stretched forth his hands, and said nobly, "I got these from Heaven, and because of his laws I disdain them, and from him I hope to get them back again." As a result the king himself and those with him were astonished at the young man's spirit, for he regarded his sufferings as nothing. When he too had died, they maltreated and tortured the fourth in the same way. And when he was near death, he said, "One cannot but choose to die at the hands of men and to cherish the hope that God gives of being raised again by him. But for you there will be no resurrection to life!"

The passage then relates the similar deaths of the fifth and sixth sons and closes with a description of the mother:

The mother was especially admirable and worthy of honorable memory. Though she saw her seven sons perish within a single day, she bore it with good courage because of her hope in the Lord. She encouraged each of them in the language of their fathers. Filled with a noble spirit, she fired her woman's reasoning with a man's courage, and said to them, "I do not know how you came into being in my womb. It was not I who gave you life and breath, nor I who set in order the elements within each of you. Therefore the Creator of the world, who shaped the beginning of man and devised the origin of all things, will in his mercy give life and breath back to you again, since you now forget yourselves for the sake of his laws."

In contrast to the scarcity of references to the afterlife, God's promises to reward virtuous behavior in *this* life run throughout the Old Testament. Leviticus 26 gives a full exposition

of this theology; the *Shm'a*, the central prayer of Judaism, provides it in a summary form:

If you will earnestly heed the commandments which I have you this day, to love the Lord your God, and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul, then I will favor your land with rain at the proper season—rain in autumn and rain in spring—so that you will have an ample harvest of grain and wine and oil. I will assure grass in the fields for your cattle. You will eat to contentment.

Take care lest you be tempted to forsake God and turn to false gods and worship them. For then the wrath of the Lord will be directed against you. He will close up the heavens and there will be no rain; the earth will not yield her produce. You will soon disappear from the good land which the Lord is giving you.

Combining these three theological axioms one can see the difficulty that Jewish theology has faced in the light of the Holocaust. If God is all-powerful and all-good, if He especially loves the Jewish people, and if His rewards come in this life, then what can one make of the Holocaust? One of the three axioms has to go, and the most frequently chosen has been the first. Either God's goodness, or His power to affect human destiny, is denied.³

The second axiom is very rarely chosen. At the time of the Holocaust, the belief was sometimes expressed among orthodox Jews that the persecution was a punishment for

³ The problem was expressed by Graham B. Walker, Jr., in his *Elie Wiesel: A Challenge to Theology* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1988), as follows (p. 14): "How can God permit this? This question is one of the main internal struggles that Judaism faces after the Holocaust. This question challenges both the ability of God and the meaning of a covenant relationship in a post-Holocaust world."

the widespread apostasy of the Jewish people—including assimilation, the idolatry of Zionism, and the abandonment of Torah in favor of secularism or socialism.⁴ However, the Holocaust itself wiped out most of the very religious Jews and destroyed almost all of the communities that tried diligently to follow all of the Jewish laws governing daily life. Jewish culture today overwhelmingly represents precisely those strains of less observant Judaism; the Jews who have followed that path are hardly going to see it as being a violation of the Jewish covenant with God.

The third axiom is usually not challenged because Judaism today does not stress the rewards and punishment, or even the existence, of the afterlife. The entire issue of "life after death" is to a large extent avoided—perhaps as a result of the influence of the same "modernism" and "enlightenment rationality", which has influenced Christianity, or perhaps in an effort to further distinguish Judaism from Christian thinking. The theology of heaven and hell might have become so associated with Christianity that the entire area is seen as tainted and to be avoided, despite its extensive presence in the Talmud. The topic of "salvation" itself may have become unwelcome as a result of the role it has played in efforts to convert the Jews. Typical is the reaction of one of the characters in Elie Wiesel's novel *The Gates of the Forest*: "Stop thinking about our salvation and perhaps the cemeteries won't be so full of Jews."⁵

⁴ Gershon Greenberg, "Orthodox Theological Responses to Kristallnacht", paper presented to 18th Annual Scholar's Conference on the Church Struggle and the Holocaust, Washington, D.C., 1988, cited in Steven Jacobs, ed., *Contemporary Christian Responses to the Shoah* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1993), p. 47.

⁵ Elie Wiesel, *The Gates of the Forest* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p. 84.

The Talmudic teaching on the rewards of heaven and the pains of hell are well developed and graphic. Yet the same Talmudic sources that teach about heaven and hell hold to the necessity of strict ritual observance to gain the former and avoid the latter. It would be reasonable to suppose that as modern Judaism dismissed the need for strict ritual observance, it also moved away from the very concept of the reward and punishment that had been tied to it, much as many Catholics have ceased “believing” in hell as a result of dismissing the need to follow the traditional rules of moral behavior, particularly sexual behavior, that had always been associated with avoiding it.

Ironically, Maimonides taught that faith in the resurrection was itself a necessary condition for a Jew to “have a share in the world to come”.⁶ Yet the entire area is rarely mentioned in contemporary Judaism.

Since the second and the third axioms are rejected as candidates for revision to reconcile Jewish theology to the Holocaust, the first is chosen. In choosing the first axiom as the one that must go, either God’s goodness, or His faithfulness, or His presence in human affairs is denied. All three of these variations can be found in post-Holocaust Jewish theology. Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg⁷ is an example of giving up on God’s fundamental goodness (if his own words can

⁶ His thirteenth principle was “I believe with perfect faith that there will be a resurrection of the dead”; and he said that if a man gives up any of these fundamental principles he is an “atheist, an unbeliever”, has removed himself from the Jewish community, and loses his share in the world to come. Cf. Isadore Twersky, ed., *A Maimonides Reader* (New York: Behrman House, 1972), pp. 401–23.

⁷ Rabbi Hertzberg is the former president of the American Jewish Congress and the author of a number of best-selling books on Judaism. He is one of the foremost Rabbis of the United States.

be taken at face value). In his memoirs he recounts: “I was aware then, in 1948, that I could never return to the Orthodox faith in God. I would not forgive Him for the Holocaust, and I would not absolve Him by agreeing that the death camps had existed in a realm that he could not control.”⁸

For an example of one who gives up on God’s faithfulness to His covenant with the Jews, one can turn to Elie Wiesel: “I believe during the Holocaust the covenant was broken.”⁹ And the third variation, deciding that for all intents and purposes God does not exist, is represented by Jewish theologian Richard Rubenstein: “God really died at Auschwitz. . . . [N]othing in human choice, decision, value or meaning can any longer have vertical reference to transcendent standards. We are alone in a silent, unfeeling cosmos. . . . Though most of us will refrain from antisocial behavior, we do so because of fear of ourselves and others rather than fear of God. . . . Ultimately, as with all things, it will pass away, for omnipotent Nothingness is Lord of All Creation.”¹⁰

Rubenstein came to this conclusion out of a conscious awareness of the bind that the “three axioms” placed him in: “If I believe in God as the omnipotent author of the historical drama and Israel as His chosen people, I had to accept [the] conclusion that it was God’s will that Hitler committed

⁸ From his memoirs, *A Jew in America* (San Francisco: Harper, 2002), excerpted in *New Jersey Jewish Standard*, June 8, 2001, p. 7.

⁹ Elie Wiesel, cited in Harry James Cargas, *Harry James Cargas in Conversation with Elie Wiesel* (New York: Paulist, 1976), pp. 56–57. Also, “For the very first time in our history, this very covenant was broken. That is why the Holocaust has terrifying theological implications” (Elie Wiesel, “Jewish Values in the Post-Holocaust Future”, *Judaism* 16 [1967], p. 282).

¹⁰ Richard Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), pp. 224–25.

six million Jews to slaughter. I could not possibly believe in such a God nor could I believe in Israel as the chosen people of God after Auschwitz.”¹¹

Rubenstein did not *entirely* abandon belief in God; rather, he “replaces the biblical God of history with a God of nature. . . . The God of the land, fertility, and the cycles of life replaces the God of history for Rubenstein.”¹²

This is ironic because this is precisely the paganism that the Jewish people were enjoined *not* to follow, time after time, in the Old Testament, under pain of death. To add insult to injury, he turns this nature-worship into the “real” meaning of the Jewish Messiah: “Messianism’s real meaning is the proclamation of the end of history and the return to nature and nature’s cyclical repetitiveness. . . . The deliberate turning of the people of the religion of history to the religion of nature is a moment of *kairos*¹³. . . earth’s fruitfulness, its vicissitudes, and its engendering power will once again become the central spiritual realities of Jewish life. . . .”¹⁴

Does this rejection of the “biblical” God and of the Jews as a chosen people mean that, for Rubenstein, there is no reason for the Jewish people to continue as a distinct community? By no means, rather, “It is precisely the ultimate hopelessness and gratuity of our human situation which calls forth our strongest need for religious community. If all we have is one another, then assuredly we need one another more than ever.”¹⁵

¹¹ Ibid., p. 46.

¹² Walker, *Challenge to Theology*, p. 17.

¹³ Greek term used to mean, roughly, “due season” or “appropriate time”.

¹⁴ Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, pp. 135–36.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 131–42; 227–43.

So rather than withdrawing from the Jewish community, Rubenstein clings to it all the more firmly, defining Judaism in terms of his denial of God and neo-paganism and centering its meaning entirely on man rather than on God, thus spreading his apostasy. With these three examples of the abandonment of belief in God’s goodness and power by leading figures in contemporary Jewish theology, it is not hard to see the difficulties resulting from the turn taken by post-Holocaust Judaism.

There is a tragic irony in this, for the heart of being a Jew is fidelity to God and faith in His goodness. Remember that Judaism itself was founded on Abraham’s fidelity to God and trust in His goodness in the face of what appeared to be the most unjust and cruel act of God imaginable—His requirement that he sacrifice his son Isaac. Contrast Abraham’s attitude with this “post-Holocaust” one, that because something horribly unjust and cruel has happened, God must not be good or must not intervene in human affairs.

Having been founded on the basis of Abraham passing this test, it would be tragic if Judaism were to fail this similar test 4,000 years later. It is not as though all of the Jews who went through the Holocaust lost their faith in God’s goodness. Wiesel himself concedes that rather than his theological response to the Holocaust being universal, “many Jews kept their faith or even strengthened it.”¹⁶ According to Jewish Holocaust theologian Irving Rosenbaum, it tended to be the more observant Jews who received the grace to sustain their faith despite the suffering: “Jews who observed the rites and rituals of tradition were ‘able to face life with dignity, death with serenity—and sometimes ecstasy.’”¹⁷ According

¹⁶ Wiesel, cited in in Cargas, *Conversation with Elie Wiesel*, pp. 56–57.

¹⁷ Irving Rosenbaum, *The Holocaust and Halacha* (New York: KTAV Publications, 1976), p. 8, quoted in Walker, *Elie Wiesel*, p. 49.

to Jewish scholar and Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, many even went to their deaths with a profession of faith on their lips (a profession of faith that Christians might even consider to be christological, given that “Christ” is simply the Greek for “Messiah”): “I believe with a full heart in the coming of the Messiah, and even though he may tarry I will still wait for him’, many Jews sang while walking to the gas chambers.”¹⁸

A beautiful example of Jewish faith surviving the Holocaust is provided in the autobiography of Mel Mermelstein, a seventeen-year-old Jew who survived Auschwitz. Having just found out from a stranger that all his sisters and parents had perished:

I moved toward the gate where my uncle was waiting for me. Shocked and with tears in my eyes, I sat down upon the grass and covered my face with my hands. My uncle placed his hand upon my head and said, “God wanted it to be so, and His judgment is holy.” Slowly I lifted my head, incredulous at the words he just uttered.

“I know . . . I know, Moishеле. Listen, before you ask, before you question, repeat after me: ‘*Boruch dayen emess.*’” I repeated the words that meant “Blessed is the Righteous Judge.” The traditional Words on learning of a death seemed harshly inappropriate. But even as I said them, a softening set in.

“Do you want me to bless God for this unbearable pain? Do you want me to call ‘just’ this hideous unrighteousness?” I don’t recall the words I used, but my sense of being put-upon remains with me. To believe that God was anywhere to be found at Auschwitz was too much.

¹⁸ Readers will remember this from Chapter 4 as one of Maimonides’ Thirteen Principles of Faith.

“Moishеле, Moishеле, please . . .” My uncle was crying now. “Your questions are just, but you’re not the first to ask them. ‘As we bless God for the good, so must we bless Him for the evil.’ Those are the words of the Talmud. They’re words beyond understanding, but if we cannot say them, we cannot hope. Bitterness, yes . . . but hopelessness, no. The Jewish way is to bless and to hope, and to bless and to hope, until hope and blessing surmount the pain and even the bitterness, and the living learn how to go on.”

My uncle continued saying, “God is righteous. God is good. It’s people who sometimes forget; who let evil rule them; who lose the sense of the image of God with themselves and become beasts of prey.”

“Maybe we should translate the prayers,” he said. “‘Blessed is the God who will judge righteously.’ He does not forget. Sometimes it seems as if He needs time to assimilate everything He has seen, and to react to it and give recompense. But you’ll see it, Moishеле, you’re young enough. You’ll see. *He does not forget!*”¹⁹

Should the tragedy of the Holocaust serve to alienate the Jews from their trust in and worship of God, that might be a tragedy as great as the deaths themselves. Some Jewish theologians have used the Holocaust to question traditional Jewish views of God; for instance, Rabbi Irving Greenberg’s claim that traditional views of God the Redeemer must be abandoned “in the presence of the burning children”. Others have recognized the danger of succumbing to this temptation; as Michael Wyschogrod warns in his response to Greenberg’s statement, “Inserted at the heart of Judaism as a revelational event comparable to Sinai, the Holocaust will

¹⁹ Mel Mermelstein, *By Bread Alone: The Story of A-4685*, Auschwitz Study Foundation (Los Angeles: Crescent Publications, 1979), pp. 239–40.

necessarily destroy Judaism and give Hitler the posthumous victory we all wish to deny him".²⁰

After all, it was the Jews who, through Abraham, taught all of mankind what it means to trust God. As the Letter to the Hebrews puts it:

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. . . . By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore. . . .

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your descendants be named." He considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead; hence, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.

By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau. By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph. . . . By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his burial. By faith Moses, when he was born, was hid for three months by his parents. . . . By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleet-

²⁰Rottenberg, *Jewish Christians*, p. 20.

ing pleasures of sin. He considered abuse suffered for the Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he looked to the reward. By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king; for he endured as seeing him who is invisible. By faith he kept the Passover and sprinkled the blood, so that the Destroyer of the first-born might not touch them.

By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as if on dry land; but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. . . . And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, received promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. . . .

And all these, though well attested by their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect (Hebrews 11:8-40).

The paradigm for man's correct response in the face of apparent injustice on the part of God is provided in the story of Job. Job, not without apparent justification, accuses God of injustice and finally elicits a response from Him. God does not respond by explaining why He did what He did (although the reason appears in the initial narration in Job 1-2), or by assuring Job that he would be fully recompensed (although he was in Job 42); rather, God's reply was (to paraphrase the majestic poetry of Job 40-41), "Where were you when I made the world? I don't remember seeing you there. Who are you to think you know better than Me, to put yourself in judgment over Me?" Not without significance,

God's speech ends with a description of a terrible, huge reptilian monster that breathes fire and has a heart "as hard as stone" (Job 41:24), who, in the final line, is called the "king over all the children of pride" (Job 41:34). The reference is unmistakable—men who presume to judge God are children of pride, and their king is the devil himself.

The Holocaust presents a horribly difficult trial for Jewish theology. When Christians are faced with great persecution and suffering, they are theologically better equipped to deal with them, since Jesus Himself was faced with the same apparent contradiction between God's goodness and sovereignty and the exorbitant demands of suffering He places on His faithful servants. Martyrdom is a continuing presence in Christianity, beginning at Jesus' birth with the capricious cruelty of the slaughter of the innocents, continuing through the incomprehensibly painful Passion and death of the Son of God Himself, and followed by periods of martyrdom through our own day. For good reason it is said that "the blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church." Sometimes Christians pass the test, sometimes they fail, but in either case they have the advantage of the theology of suffering that St. Edith Stein called "the science of the cross", and the supreme example of the Passion.

The theology of suffering contained in Christianity can contribute a great deal to the understanding of God's providence in allowing the Holocaust to happen. One can say that Christianity not only has a theology of suffering, but that Christianity *is* a theology of suffering. After all, Christian theology revolves around the fact that when God became man He did so primarily in order to undergo suffering; the central act of redemption for all of mankind was the torture and death of the God-man on the Cross. From the very earliest days of Christianity, when Jesus' first disciples were

still living, the redemptive value of the Cross was understood as being further extended by the suffering of His followers. As St. Paul wrote: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church" (Colossians 1:24).

The Second Vatican Council asserted that only Christianity can make sense out of the deeper mysteries of man's existence, certainly including that of suffering:

[O]nly in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. In fact . . . , Christ, the final Adam, *fully reveals man to himself* and makes his supreme calling clear. . . . Through Christ and in Christ, the riddles of sorrow and death grow meaningful.²¹

Pope John Paul II explicitly applied these words to the mystery of suffering. In discussing the passage, he wrote:

If these words refer to everything that concerns the mystery of man, they certainly refer in a very special way *to human suffering*. Precisely at this point the "revealing of man to himself and making his supreme vocation clear" is particularly *indispensable*.²²

Unfortunately, despite the wealth of this doctrine, some Christian theologians have fallen into the same trap; for instance, Catholic theologian John Shea:

Shea distinguishes between the "interventionist God" and the "intentionalist God." The former is the God who is naively and unreflectively believed to change the course

²¹ *Gaudium et spes*, no. 22, 1965.

²² John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering* (*Salvifici Doloris*), Feb. 11, 1984, no. 31.

of nature and history by directly but intermittently interrupting the workings of the world. This God is said to cure cancer, bring rain, and save people from accidents. After the Shoah, a Deity who could have rescued the six million and did not is hardly the God who would turn around a single person's lung cancer. Such a God seems to be totally without credibility. And, as we have intimated above, such a description of God may well be a misreading of much of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures.²³

Protestant theologian Paul van Buren writes:

Theology can shut its eyes and pretend that the Holocaust never happened. . . . But if there are prospects for serious theology, for a theology not hopelessly blind to matters that pertain to the heart of its task, then the time has come for a reconsideration of the whole theological and Christian enterprise of the most radical sort.²⁴

Such apostasy among Christians in response to the mystery of suffering is scandalous and tragic and does a disservice both to God and to the Jews themselves, who are entitled to as full an explanation of the mystery as Christianity has to offer.

Elie Wiesel

Elie Wiesel serves as an excellent illustration of the problem prevalent in contemporary, "post-Holocaust" Jewish theology. Sent to Auschwitz at the age of fifteen with his family, he saw his parents and a younger sister perish, but he sur-

²³Jacobs, *Contemporary Christian Responses*, pp. 287, 135.

²⁴Paul van Nuren, address to the American Academy of Religion, November 1, 1975, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 92.

vived until liberation about a year later. (Like Mel Mermelstein, Wiesel, too, was from a village in the Carpathian mountains.) He is perhaps the single most audible Jewish voice on the theological implications of the Holocaust, having written over fifteen books and hundreds of articles and essays. He was chairman of the President's Commission on the Holocaust, headed the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council, and received the Nobel Peace Prize. He claims to have been the first to apply the word "Holocaust" to the tragedy (and that when he did so, he was explicitly alluding to Abraham's "sacrifice" of Isaac!).²⁵

Yet consider the tragic abandonment of traditional Jewish theology evidenced in the following quotes of his:

There is no Jewish theology for a very simple reason: God wants man to be concerned with human things, not with godly things. . . . Jewish theology is human relations.²⁶

Only the Jew knows that he may oppose God as long as he does so in defense of His creation.²⁷

Jewish tradition allows man to say anything to God, provided it be on behalf of man. Man's inner liberation is God's justification.²⁸

This was the meaning of the holocaust; it implicated not only Abraham or his son, but their God as well.²⁹

²⁵Elie Wiesel, interview June 29, 1996, Sun Valley, Idaho, on American Academy of Achievement website www.achievement.org.

²⁶Lecture in 1974 at Stanford University, quoted in R. M. Brown, *Elie Wiesel: Messenger to All Humanity* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame Press, 1983), p. 140.

²⁷Elie Wiesel, *A Jew Today* (New York: Random House, 1978), p. 6.

²⁸Elie Wiesel, *Souls on Fire: Portraits and Legends of Hasidic Masters* (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 111.

²⁹Wiesel, *Gates*, p. 166.

In the endless engagement with God, we [the Jews] proved to Him that we were more patient than He, more compassionate, too.³⁰

Wiesel's theology is summed up in his essay on the story of Job:

I was offended by [Job's] surrender in the text. Job's resignation as man was an insult to man. He should not have given in so easily. He should have continued to protest. He should have said to God: "By accepting Your inequities, do I not become your accomplice?" . . . By repenting sins he did not commit, by justifying a sorrow he did not deserve, [Job] communicates to us that he did not believe in his own confessions; they were nothing but decoys. Job personified man's eternal quest for justice and truth—he did not choose resignation. Thus he did not suffer in vain; thanks to him, we know that *it is given to man to transform divine injustice into human justice and compassion*³¹ (emphasis added).

This theme—that man, not God, is the noble one—is at the heart of Wiesel's theology, and he repeats it over and over, in addresses:

[The Jewish survivors of the death camps] had every reason in the world to deny God, to deny anything sacred, to oppose all promises and abort all signs of hope; they had every reason in the world to become ferocious nihilists, anarchists, carriers of fear and nightmare. But what, in fact, did the Jewish survivors of the death camps do as soon as they were liberated? Believe it or not; they held

³⁰ Wiesel, *A Jew Today*, p. 147.

³¹ Elie Wiesel's essay "Job: Our Contemporary", in his *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends* (New York: Random House, 1976), pp. 234–35.

services. To give thanks to God? No, to defy him! To tell him, listen, as mere mortals, as members of the human society, we know we should seize weapons and use them in every place and in every way and never stop—because it is our right. But we are Jews and as such we renounce that right; we choose—yes, choose to remain human. And generous.³²

The theme reappears in his autobiographical account of Auschwitz (the following takes place during a celebration of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, in the concentration camp):

"What are You, my God," I thought angrily, "compared to this afflicted crowd, proclaiming to You their faith, their anger, their revolt? What does Your greatness mean, Lord of the universe, in the face of all this weakness, this decomposition, and this decay? Why do You still trouble their sick minds, their crippled bodies? . . ."

Why, but why should I bless Him? . . . Because He had had thousands of children burned in His pits? Because He kept six crematories working night and day, on Sundays and feast days? Because in His great might He had created Auschwitz, Birkenau, Buna, and so many factories of death? How could I say to Him: "Blessed art Thou, Eternal, Master of the Universe, Who chose us from among the races to be tortured day and night, to see our fathers, our mothers, our brothers, end in the crematory? Praised by Thy Holy Name, Thou Who hast chosen us to be butchered on Thine altar?"

This day I had ceased to plead. I was no longer capable of lamentation. On the contrary, I felt very strong. I was the accuser, God the accused. My eyes were open and I was alone—terribly alone in a world without God and

³² "To Remain Human in Face of Inhumanity", condensed version of an address by Elie Wiesel, in *The Jewish Digest*, September 1972, p. 42.

without man. Without love or mercy. I had ceased to be anything but ashes, yet I felt myself to be stronger than the Almighty, to whom my life had been tied for so long.³³

Wiesel also has this theme expressed by his fictional characters (in this case a Jewish wise man on the eve of Israel's Six Day War):

If this time again You desert Your people, if this time again You permit the slaughterer to murder Your children and besmirch their allegiance to the covenant, if this time You let Your promise become mockery, then know, O Master of all that breathes, know that You no longer deserve Your people's love and their passion to sanctify You, to justify You toward and against all, toward and against Yourself; . . . before dying I shall shout as no victim has ever shouted, and know that each of my tears and each of my shouts will tarnish your glory, each of my gestures will negate You and will negate me as You have negated me."³⁴

Not only is God portrayed as unfaithful and unjust, but at times far worse. Consider Wiesel's novel *The Accident*,³⁵ which revolves around Sarah, a twelve-year-old girl in a concentration camp (the following characterization is from R. M. Brown's laudatory *Elie Wiesel: Messenger to All Humanity*):

What is history for one who enters Sarah's world? "A source of malediction," in the hands of a God who "tortures twelve-year-old children" (pp. 96–97). What is the

³³ Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960), pp. 72–74.

³⁴ Elie Wiesel, *A Beggar in Jerusalem* (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 117.

³⁵ Elie Wiesel, *The Accident* (New York: Avon, 1970).

scene of our human activity? "The immense brothel we call the universe," whose doorkeeper is God (p. 98). Who is the God of such a world? After hearing Sarah's story, the narrator knows why God and death have been allied in human minds ("whoever sees God must die"). Savagely he writes, "Why should He want to kill a man who succeeded in seeing Him? Now everything became clear. God was ashamed. God likes to sleep with twelve-year-old girls. And doesn't want us to know" (p. 98). Conclusion: "Whoever listens to Sarah and doesn't change, whoever enters Sarah's world and doesn't invent new gods and new religions, deserves death and destruction (p. 96)."³⁶

Who is there to speak up for God, who would defend Him against such accusations? Wiesel gives the answer in his play *The Trial of God*, which is set in a small Ukrainian town in 1649 after a pogrom wiped out all but two of the town's Jews. A mock trial is held against God for allowing it to happen, but there is no one to play the defense attorney for God. Just then a stranger appears who steps forward to do so. In his defense of God, among other statements he says, "I'm His servant. He created the world and me without asking for my opinion; He may do with both whatever He wishes. Our task is to glorify Him, to praise Him, to love Him—in spite of ourselves."³⁷ Who does this mysterious stranger, who defends God with words worthy of Job or of St. Ignatius, turn out to be? None other than Satan himself. Thus, in the words of R. M. Brown (who discussed

³⁶ Brown, *Elie Wiesel*, p. 161.

³⁷ Elie Wiesel, *Trial of God* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), p. 157.

the play with Wiesel): “The play insists that arguments justifying God in the face of evil are not only inadequate, they are diabolical.”³⁸

Elie Wiesel’s “faith” is placed in humanity in general, and in the Jewish people in particular, instead of, if not actually in opposition to, God. This is reflected in the closing words of his essay “A Jew Today”: “We owe it to our past not to lose hope. . . . We must show our children that in spite of everything, we keep our faith—in ourselves and even in mankind, though mankind may not be worthy of such faith. We must persuade our children and theirs that three thousand years of history must not be permitted to end with an act of despair on our part. To despair now would be a blasphemy—a profanation.”³⁹ One must ask, is the “god” in whom Elie Wiesel places his faith the God of the Jewish people, or the Jewish people themselves?

Elie Wiesel presents this revolt against God as “Jewish theology”; yet contrast it to the words of the Prophet Isaiah (who certainly has at least as much claim to represent Jewish theology!):

Truly with you God is hidden, the God of Israel, the savior!
Those are put to shame and disgrace who vent their
anger against him. . . .
Before him in shame shall come all who vent their anger
against him (Isaiah 45:15–16, 24).⁴⁰

³⁸ Brown, *Elie Wiesel*, pp. 150–53. The identification of the mysterious stranger as Satan is made explicit at the very end of the play (*Trial of God*, p. 161).

³⁹ Wiesel, *A Jew Today*, p. 149

⁴⁰ *Christian Prayer: The Liturgy of the Hours* (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1976), pp. 638–39.

Or to the words of Psalm 100:

Know that he, the Lord, is God. . .
Go within his gates, giving thanks.
Enter his courts with songs of praise.
Give thanks to him and bless his name.
Indeed, how good is the Lord, eternal his merciful love.
He is faithful from age to age.⁴¹

The Christian response to Wiesel’s angst is presented by the Catholic writer François Mauriac in his foreword to Elie Wiesel’s autobiographical *Night*. In it he describes meeting with a young Elie Wiesel shortly after the end of the war. After Wiesel recounts the hanging of a young child in the camp, Mauriac thinks:

And I, who believe that God is love, what answer could I give my young questioner, whose dark eyes still held the reflection of that angelic sadness which had appeared one day upon the face of the hanged child? What did I say to him? Did I speak of that other Jew, his brother, who may have resembled him—the Crucified, whose Cross has conquered the world? Did I affirm that the stumbling block to his faith was the cornerstone of mine, and that the conformity between the Cross and the suffering of men was in my eyes the key to that impenetrable mystery whereon the faith of his childhood had perished? . . . We do not know the worth of one single drop of blood, one single tear. All is grace. If the Eternal is the Eternal, the last word for each one of us belongs to Him. This is what I should have told this Jewish child. But I could only embrace him, weeping.⁴²

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 640.

⁴² Wiesel, *Night*, pp. x–xi.

The Holocaust as Understood by Edith Stein

A vivid contrast to Elie Wiesel's response is provided by that of another Jewish (later Catholic) theologian, St. Edith Stein. As a brilliantly profound German philosopher, as an expert on St. John of the Cross and his theology of suffering, as a Carmelite nun and as a victim of Auschwitz, Edith Stein was in a unique position to understand the meaning of the Holocaust. More importantly, the illumination of our intellects to understand God's ways comes from the light of the Holy Spirit, which becomes more available as personal sanctity and prayer increase. Edith Stein stood out as unique in both her sanctity and her recollection in prayer, even as a Carmelite nun, and even (and especially) as a prisoner en route to certain death at Auschwitz.⁴³

From the beginning of the Nazi takeover of Germany in 1933, she saw what was happening to the Jews in the light of the Cross. During a holy hour at the Carmelite convent in Cologne, she had the following illumination:

I spoke with the Savior to tell him that I realized it was his Cross that was now being laid upon the Jewish people, that the few who understood this had the responsibility of carrying it in the name of all, and that I myself was willing to do this, if he would only show me how. I left the service with the inner conviction that I had been heard, but uncertain as ever as to what "carrying the Cross" would mean for me.⁴⁴

⁴³ See the many personal reminiscences, of both Jews and Christians who met her, in *Never Forget: Christian and Jewish Perspectives on Edith Stein*, Waltraud Herbstrith, ed. (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1998).

⁴⁴ Waltraud Herbstrith, *Edith Stein* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), p. 119.

She also saw a special relationship between what was happening to the Jewish people and their rejection of Jesus. On the day that she found out about the synagogue burnings she made the following comment (later printed in the monthly of the Benedictine abbey in Beuron, where Abbot Walzer was her spiritual director):

This is the shadow of the cross that falls upon my people!
Oh, if they would only realize! That is the fulfillment of
the curse which my people have called down upon
themselves!⁴⁵

Beyond the meaning that the Holocaust had for all Jews, she saw a special role for herself. By being both Jewish and Catholic, she identified fully both with the Jews by blood and with the Church by faith and thus was able in a unique way to bring the suffering of the Jews to the Cross of Christ. She felt it was particularly important for the few victims of the sacrifice who were aware of its meaning to carry this awareness for all:

I understood the Cross as the destiny of God's people, which was beginning to be apparent at the time (1933). I felt that those who understood the Cross of Christ should take it upon themselves on everybody's behalf. . . . Beneath the Cross I understood the destiny of God's people.⁴⁶

In this role she compared herself to Queen Esther, who also offered her life before the king to save her (the Jewish) people:

⁴⁵ Original quote taken from Benedictine monthly *Erbe und Auftrag*, published by the Archabbey of Beuron, cited by Herbstrith, *Never Forget*, p. 111.

⁴⁶ *Program for St. Edith Stein's Canonization* (Vatican, Oct. 11, 1998), p. 30 (retranslation).

I firmly believe that the Lord has accepted my life as an offering for all. It's important for me to keep Queen Esther in mind and remember how she was separated from her people just so that she could intercede for them before the king. I myself certainly am a poor and insignificant little Esther, but I take comfort from the fact that the King who has chosen me is infinitely kind and merciful.⁴⁷

Out of this awareness she made an offering of herself to God in her final testament, written in 1939:

I joyfully accept in advance the death God has appointed for me, in perfect submission to his most holy will. May the Lord accept my life and death for the honor and glory of his name, for the needs of his holy Church—especially for the preservation, sanctification, and final perfecting of our holy Order, and in particular for the Carmels of Cologne and Echt—for the Jewish people, that the Lord may be received by his own and his Kingdom come in glory, for the deliverance of Germany and peace throughout the world, and finally, for all my relatives living and dead and all whom God has given me; may none of them be lost.⁴⁸

This final testament was echoed in her last words, said to her sister Rosa⁴⁹ as they were led from their convent by the SS guards to be taken to Auschwitz, “Come, let us go for our people”.⁵⁰

Her intention, that “the Lord may be received by his own”, was repeated by Pope John Paul II during his canonization Mass for the new saint:

⁴⁷Herbstrith, *Edith Stein*, p. 162.

⁴⁸Ibid., pp. 168–69.

⁴⁹Rosa was living at the convent and acting as “Sister Portress”, but was not formally accepted into the community due to the political situation.

⁵⁰Herbstrith, *Edith Stein*, p. 180.

God of our fathers, you led the holy Martyr Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, Edith Stein, to a knowledge of your crucified Son and called her to follow his example in death. By her prayers, bring all to recognize their Savior in the Crucified Christ and through him, to arrive at the vision of your glory.⁵¹

Edith Stein's understanding of her own fate, as well as of the Holocaust, was based on her knowledge of *The Science of the Cross* (the title of her last book, written immediately prior to her arrest and deportation to Auschwitz). When she was seeking to enter the Carmelite Convent in Cologne she told the prioress that one of her reasons was “[h]uman activities cannot help us, but only the suffering of Christ. It is my desire to share in it.”⁵² Many of her writings reflect on the redemptive value of suffering, of the Cross:

By assuming human nature, Christ became capable of suffering and dying. His divine nature, which He has had from eternity, gave infinite value and a redeeming power to His suffering and death. Christ's suffering and death continues in His mystical Body and in each one of His members. Everyone has to suffer and die. And if he is a living member of the Body of Christ, then his death and suffering acquires redemptive power through the divine nature of the Head. In the light of the mystery of redemption, [this] is the ultimate *raison d'être*. Those who are joined to Christ, therefore, will unflinchingly persevere even in the dark night of subjectively feeling remote from and abandoned by God. . . . The way of the Son of God is

⁵¹*Canonization of Blessed Theresa Benedicta of the Cross Edith Stein* (Canonization booklet, Vatican, Oct. 11, 1998), p. 131. Theresa Benedicta of the Cross was the name Edith Stein took when she entered religious life.

⁵²*The Hebrew Catholic*, Assoc. of Hebrew Catholics, Ypsilanti, Mich., no. 70, May–June and Sept–Oct 1998, p. 18.

to get to the resurrection through suffering and the cross. Getting to resurrection glory with the Son of Man, through suffering and death, is also the way for each one of us and for all mankind.⁵³

She wrote to a fellow Carmelite:

One can only gain a *scientia crucis* (knowledge of the cross) if one has thoroughly experienced the cross. I have been convinced of this from the first moment onwards and have said with all my heart: '*Ave, Crux, Spes Unica*' ('Hail, Cross, our only hope').⁵⁴

Pope John Paul II, in his canonization homily, praised her understanding of the Cross:

The Cross of Christ! Ever blossoming, the tree the Cross continues to bear new fruits of salvation. This is why believers look with confidence to the Cross, drawing from its mystery of love the courage and strength to walk faithfully in the footsteps of the crucified and risen Christ. . . . Edith Stein is an eloquent example of this. . . . I am able to solemnly to present this eminent daughter of Israel and faithful daughter of the Church as a saint to the whole world. Let us give glory to God for what he has accomplished in Edith Stein.

Through the experience of the Cross, Edith Stein was able to open the way to a new encounter with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faith and the Cross proved inseparable to her. Having matured in the school of the Cross, she found the roots to which the tree of her own life was attached. She understood that it was very important for her to "be a

⁵³ Ibid., p. 22.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 19.

daughter of the chosen people and to belong to Christ not only spiritually, but also through her blood. . . ."

May the new saint be an example to us in our commitment to serve freedom, in our search for the truth. May her witness constantly strengthen the bridge of mutual understanding between Jews and Christians.

St. Theresa Benedicta of the Cross, pray for us! Amen.⁵⁵

To fully elaborate the meaning that St. Edith Stein saw in the Holocaust would require sharing in the depth of her understanding, which is impossible. However, it is clear that she saw in it an aspect of expiatory suffering, expiating for the Jews' rejection of Christ. She saw in it a redemptive value for the redemption of the whole world. She saw a specific link between her sacrifice and the special grace needed to bring about the conversion of the Jews. In that light, it may not be irrelevant that she perished with a train transport composed entirely of baptized Jews.⁵⁶

All of these aspects are very consonant with the idea that the Holocaust is related to the Second Coming to the return of Christ in glory. Grace is always "purchased" by suffering. Suffering and sacrifice is the coin that we here on earth have to offer up to God and receive grace in return. The greatest grace possible is the grace of Redemption, of salvation. The first coming of the Messiah was purchased by the prayers and the sufferings of twenty centuries of Jews, climaxing in the particularly odious and offensive "slaughter of the innocents" under Herod. We know that the Jews had a unique and central role to play in salvation in bringing about the first coming; is it possible, as St. Paul intimates in Romans, that they also have a central role to play in the Second

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 26.

⁵⁶ Herbstrith, *Edith Stein*, p. 187.



Figure 5-1: Edith Stein as a young woman

Coming? And if so, and if suffering is the coin that brings heaven to earth, could the special, particular, and extreme suffering that was imposed on them in the Holocaust be part of that role? There is a symmetry in the idea that the final return of the Messiah, the Second Coming, would be preceded once again by a slaughter of the innocents, centered on the Jews.⁵⁷

Another way to think of this is to consider the curse laid on Adam and Eve, and on all mankind, as a result of the sin in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:16): “[I]n pain you shall bring forth children”. As a result of original sin, birth must always be preceded by pain. Natural, individual birth is preceded by natural, individual pain—one of the most acute pains that naturally occurs. The Second Coming is the “birth” of the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:1–2):

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

Just as the birth of an individual is preceded by acute suffering, so was the birth of the first coming (in the slaughter of the innocents), and so must be the birth of the Second Coming, the “New Jerusalem”. The Jewish people were called on to bear a disproportionate share of the suffering that preceded the first coming; perhaps they are also called upon to

⁵⁷ When the Second Coming will occur has been the subject of speculation throughout the two thousand years of the Church, most of it wrong. Here and throughout this book any speculations on the timing of the Second Coming should not be mistaken for Church teaching.

bear a disproportionate share of the pains of giving birth to the Second Coming.

The special grace of conversion, too, is always associated with suffering. Edith Stein offered her life, in part, for the grace of conversion for the Jewish people. St. Paul makes clear that the Second Coming will be preceded by the large-scale conversion of the Jews (in Romans 11); the sacrifice of Edith Stein, and through her act of oblation, the sacrifice of the other Jews, too, might be associated with the grace for that very special period of conversion that will prepare the way for the Second Coming.

Even without considering the spiritual aspects, even in a worldly sense there is a deep relationship between the formation of the State of Israel and the Holocaust. It is hard to imagine how the new state would have come into existence were it not for the tragedy. And the return of the Jews to Israel, and the reestablishment of their nation there, is consistently seen in the Old Testament as immediately preceding the coming of the Messiah in glory—an event that in the Christian understanding is in fact the Second Coming.

This possibility that the Holocaust is a harbinger of the Second Coming is given additional weight by private revelations⁵⁸ granted to another recently canonized saint, St. Faustina of Poland. In revelations received by St. Faustina during the period 1936–1938, Jesus implied that the Second Coming was not far off:

⁵⁸ Although the Church does not attest to the veracity of private revelations, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: “Guided by the magisterium of the Church, the *sensus fidelium* knows how to discern and welcome in these revelations whatever constitutes an authentic call of Christ or his saints to the Church” (no. 67).

You will prepare the world for My final coming.⁵⁹

You have to . . . prepare the world for the Second Coming of Him who will come, not as a merciful Savior, but as a just Judge. Oh, how terrible is that day. Determined is the day of justice, the day of divine wrath. The angels tremble before it. Speak to souls about this great mercy while it is still the time for mercy. [words of the Blessed Virgin Mary to St. Faustina]⁶⁰

Speak to the world about My mercy; let all mankind recognize my unfathomable mercy. It is a sign for the end times; after it will come the day of justice. While there is still time, let them have recourse to the fount of My mercy.⁶¹

Jesus also said that Poland would play a key role in preparing the way for it:

From her [Poland] will come forth the spark that will prepare the world for My final coming.⁶²

The “spark” to which Jesus here refers is often thought to be the current Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, or perhaps the revelation of Divine Mercy itself. Yet is it not possible that, in another way, the spark could be the suffering and sacrifice of Auschwitz—the offering of the Holocaust—purchasing the grace of the Second Coming?

⁵⁹ Sister M. Faustina Kowalska, *Divine Mercy in My Soul: The Diary of Sister M. Faustina Kowalska* (Stockbridge, Mass.: Marian Press 1987), p. 190, no. 429.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 264, no. 635.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 333, no. 848.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 612, no. 1732.

“Holocaust” or “Shoah”?

As mentioned, the term “holocaust” was first applied by Elie Wiesel to the Nazi extermination of Europe’s Jews. When he did so, he was making explicit reference to Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac, recounted in Genesis. According to Wiesel:

Take the word “Holocaust.” I am among the first, if not the first to use it in that context. By accident. I was working on an essay, a biblical commentary, and I wrote about the sacrifice, the binding of Isaac, by his father Abraham. In the Bible, there is a Hebrew word “*ola*”, which means burned offering. I thought the word “holocaust” was good: fire and so on. . . . The word had so many implications that I felt it was good.⁶³

Yet now the term has fallen into disfavor among the Jews. As Dr. Ernst Ehrlich, the European director of the Jewish organization B’nai Brith, wrote:

Holocaust or Shoah? A discussion is taking place with good reason over which of these two terms should be applied to the mass murder of the Jews. Apparently Elie Wiesel first introduced the expression “Holocaust” (Hebrew “*ola*”, i.e., burnt offering) into our usage, but he later moved away from it and now uses the term “Shoah”. This word appears in Isaiah 47:11 and means “disaster”.

Genesis 22, the story of how Isaac is not sacrificed, is the most emphatic polemic against any form of human sacrifice: God does not want it, cannot want it!

⁶³ Elie Wiesel, interview June 29, 1996, Sun Valley, Idaho, on American Academy of Achievement website www.achievement.org.

[Connecting] this mass murder with the Biblical expression for “sacrifice” . . . exonerate[s] people of that time from their responsibility.

By the way, it is characteristic that in the passage from Isaiah from which the word “shoah” is taken, the concept of disaster as expiation is rejected (Isaiah 47:11). . . .

At long last, one ought to stop attributing to the murdered Jews religious concepts that are not in accord with Judaism. That way does not honor their memory, but tries instead to introduce a creeping missionary theology, as if this horrible murder might have had meaning after all, and what’s more, a meaning derived from Christian theology.⁶⁴

It is worth considering this quote in some detail, because it contains a number of current fallacies. The assertion that Genesis 22 is a polemic against any form of human sacrifice is contradicted by the fact that rather than being condemned, Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac was portrayed as the purest virtue on Abraham’s part, entirely pleasing to God so much so that it merited an eternal blessing for his seed. Although God intervened and saved Isaac, at no time is it suggested in the biblical account that there was in any way anything wrong in what Abraham did.⁶⁵ And at least during the Middle Ages, Judaism saw Abraham’s near sacrifice of Isaac as having a universal salvific value strongly reminiscent of the Christian understanding of Christ’s sacrifice, as is reflected in one of the foremost Rabbinic writings of the

⁶⁴ Ernst Ludwig Ehrlich, “The Jews Did Not Want to Bring Burnt Offerings”, first published in *Christ in der Gegenwart* 1988, cited in Herbstrith, *Never Forget*, pp. 129, 130.

⁶⁵ Several other Old Testament passages, notably Leviticus 27:28–29 and Judges 11:30–40, also fall short of unequivocally condemning human sacrifice.

thirteenth century, the *Torat Habayit*.⁶⁶ The question posed was: “How can the sins of the Jewish people be taken away, since the means given in the law of Moses require Temple sacrifices, which became impossible since the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70?” The response given by Solomon ben Abraham Adret⁶⁷, one of the greatest Rabbinic authorities of the Middle Ages, was that since the prescribed ritual means no longer existed “for pushing away of the *Tuma* [spiritual impurity] . . . in the divine presence of our Lord on Mount Moriah, Isaac our forefather was bound to be offered as an unblemished offering and to atone for all our sins”.⁶⁸

Nevertheless it is not surprising that Dr. Ehrlich asserts that God never wants human sacrifice in any form, not even in the form of accepting a martyrdom imposed on one by others. For the parting of the ways between Judaism and Christianity came about precisely around this issue—whether Jesus could, in fact, have been the Messiah, given that He ended up as that sort of a “human sacrifice”. The entire theology of Christianity revolves around the role of sacrifice. Pre-Jesus Judaism (that is, the Judaism described in the Old Testament and observed until the destruction of the Temple) revolved around sacrifice, around animal sacrifice, performed by the ritual priesthood in the Temple. Animal sacrifice, the shedding of blood, was necessary in every instance to atone for sin—for individual sin and for corporate sin on the part of the Jewish people as a whole. In a symbolic way human sacrifice, too, was represented in the animal sacrifice to be presented in the Temple upon the birth of a first-born son (Numbers 18:15–16). That sacrifice was in fact a ransom

⁶⁶ Rabbi Solomon ben Abraham Adret, *Torat Habayit*.

⁶⁷ He was born 1235 in Barcelona and died 1310.

⁶⁸ Adret, *Torat Habayit*.

paid to “buy back” the son. As Pope John Paul II described the presentation of the infant Jesus in the Temple, “[Jesus] submitted to the destiny of every first-born male child of his people: according to the Law of the Lord he had to be ‘ransomed’ with a sacrifice, 40 days after his birth (cf. Ex 13,2.12; Lv 12, 1–8)”.⁶⁹

The Letter to the Hebrews expounds on the role that blood sacrifice played in Judaism, and the way that the “human” sacrifice of Jesus fulfilled it (Hebrews 9:1–26, condensed):

Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly sanctuary. Behind the second curtain stood a tent called the Holy of Holies, . . . into [which] only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood which he offers for himself and for the errors of the people. . . .

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to

⁶⁹ Homily from Vigil Mass for the Feast of the Presentation, February 1, 2003, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, English ed., Feb. 5, 2003, p. 1, commenting on Luke 2:22–23: “And when the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him [Jesus] up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, ‘Every male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord’) and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord, ‘a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.’”

serve the living God. Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred which redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant. . . .

[E]ven the first covenant was not ratified without blood. For when every commandment of the law had been declared by Moses to all the people, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, saying, "This is the blood of the covenant which God commanded you." And in the same way he sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship. Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins. Thus it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ has entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the Holy Place yearly with blood not his own; for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself . . . we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Whoever the author of the Letter to the Hebrews was (the traditional attribution to St. Paul has been heavily contested), he was certainly a well-trained and knowledgeable "Temple" Jew, writing to other Jews of his day. Therefore the theology that he presents, that "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins", must be an accurate portrayal

of the Jewish theology of its day. The extension from the blood sacrifice of animals to that of Jesus is, of course, a "Christian" one, but one that lies at the very heart of Christian theology from its very beginnings in Judaism.

Dr. Ehrlich also asserts that connecting this mass murder with the biblical expression for "sacrifice" exonerates people of that time from their responsibility. Yet in the Gospel account of Jesus' death it is clear that although His death was a willing sacrifice:

[Jesus said] "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death . . . and kill him; and after three days he will rise" (Mark 10:33-34).

It in no way lessened the guilt of those responsible for His death:

"For the Son of man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born" (Mark 14:21).

In fact, this is the only case in the New Testament in which Jesus identifies someone as damned, for that is the only circumstance under which, in the long run, it would be better for him not to have been born.

Dr. Ehrlich claims that the passage in Isaiah from which the word "*shoah*" is taken rejects the concept of disaster as expiation. Let us look at the entire passage (the word "*shoah*", "disaster", appears in verse 11), and see if this is so (Isaiah 47:1-3,6-11,15):

¹ Come down and sit in the dust, O virgin daughter of Babylon; sit on the ground without a throne, O daughter

of the Chaldeans! For you shall no more be called tender and delicate.

² Take the millstones and grind meal, put off your veil, strip off your robe, uncover your legs, pass through the rivers.

³ Your nakedness shall be uncovered, and your shame shall be seen. I will take vengeance, and I will spare no man. . . .

⁶ I was angry with my people . . . I gave them into your hand, you showed them no mercy. . . .

⁷ You said, "I shall be mistress for ever," so that you did not lay these things to heart or remember their end.

⁸ Now therefore hear this, you lover of pleasures, who sit securely, who say in your heart, "I am, and there is no one besides me; I shall not sit as a widow or know the loss of children":

⁹ These two things shall come to you in a moment, in one day; the loss of children and widowhood shall come upon you in full measure, in spite of your many sorceries and the great power of your enchantments.

¹⁰ You felt secure in your wickedness, you said, "No one sees me"; your wisdom and your knowledge led you astray, and you said in your heart, "I am, and there is no one besides me."

¹¹ But evil shall come upon you, for which you cannot atone; disaster [Hebrew: "*shoah*"] shall fall upon you, which you will not be able to expiate; and ruin shall come on you suddenly, of which you know nothing. . . .

¹⁵ [T]here is no one to save you.

Contemporary Jews have chosen the word "*shoah*" rather than "holocaust" to move away from the idea that the Holocaust was a deliberate act of God, either a sacrifice that He wanted or, even more unthinkably, a punishment visited upon the Jewish people. However, in so doing, instead of identifying the Jewish victims with Isaac, one of the three great founding saints and patriarchs of Judaism (remember God Himself is identified in Judaism as the "God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob"), who because of his very chosenness was to be sacrificed, they are identified with the emblem of all that is most displeasing to God in the Old Testament, with the infamous "whore of Babylon". For, according to Dr. Ehrlich, the term "*shoah*" is drawn from this story of God's vengeful judgment and punishment on the whore of Babylon for her wantonness (v. 3), her merciless cruelty (v. 6), her arrogant pride (vv. 7-8, 10), and her sorcery (v. 9). The reason there is no atonement in the "*shoah*" that overtakes her is not that suffering cannot atone for sin, but rather that the culprit here is beyond redemption! This hardly seems to be doing a service to the memory of the victims of the tragedy.

Finally, let us return to the last paragraph in the quote from Dr. Ehrlich:

[S]top attributing to the murdered Jews religious concepts that are not in accord with Judaism . . . as if this horrible murder might have had meaning after all, and what's more, a meaning derived from Christian theology.

If the Holocaust did have a role in Divine Providence, that role is not dependent on "religious concepts" being "attribut[ed] to the murdered Jews". God is not dependent on our understanding for something to have meaning in His eyes; even less is the meaning that He finds in something dependent on the meaning that we attribute to it. It is the

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role of theology, whether Christian or Jewish, to understand God, not to define Him as though He does not exist outside of our interpretation of Him. If “Christian theology” finds a meaning in the Holocaust that “Jewish theology” does not, that is because it has a different understanding about how God works through human events, about the role of suffering and death, about the economy of salvation and the unfolding of salvation history, and about who Jesus was, not because the source of the meaning itself comes from the theology. The meaning can come only from God; theology contributes only the ability to understand that meaning.