



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

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“Hell Is Not for Eternity”

David Anguish

A review of Elie Wiesel. *Night*. New York: Bantam Books, 1960. 109 pp.

“Hell is not for eternity” is part of the welcome speech delivered by the Polish prisoner in charge of Elie Wiesel’s prison group upon arrival in Auschwitz (p. 38). If designed for encouragement—it is set in the context of the reassurance that the “gravest danger” of selection had been avoided and that the “only way to survive” was to develop comradeship—it is in fact the bitterest of irony, as is so much of Wiesel’s *Night*.

In his memoir dedicated to the memory of his parents and little sister, Wiesel chronicles his journey through the pit of the earthly hell of the Holocaust, an ordeal which attacked his humanity and murdered his God. In general, the story of those tragic events is now generally familiar due to the number of times it has been told in print and film. But Wiesel’s personal story adds significantly to the account, for his focus is on what is doubtless the greatest horror of the Holocaust, the death of a man’s soul.

His abrupt beginning and ending, coupled with the fact that the narrative seldom pauses—and then only for a moment here and there—pulls the reader into Wiesel’s eloquent account of his people’s “race toward death” (p. 8). He shows them living in the midst of a world war, yet going on with life as usual. He details the quicksand-like slide from casual disbelief of German motives and plans, which caused them to remain for capture when they could have fled, through the house arrest of the entire community, the seizure of their valuables, their quarantine in the ghettos of Sighet, the announcement of their deportation, the long, haunting train ride to the camps, the separation of the family, and finally the brutal forced labor and horrors which would continue until the end of the war in the spring of 1945 and which would see the death of everyone else in his family.

Incidents of physical brutality are part of his story, but, like the abrupt beginning and ending of the book, serve more as a backdrop to the larger point Wiesel wants to stress. It is the story of a journey of a boy who had once “believed profoundly” (p. 1) through the depths of despair and meaninglessness which extend beyond the loss of faith. The outcome is ironic. The book begins with Wiesel’s expectation as promised him at the age of twelve by Moshe, his teacher of life’s deeper things: “Man raises himself toward God by the questions he asks Him. This is the true dialogue. Man questions God and God answers. But we don’t understand his answers. We can’t understand them. Because they come from the depths of the soul, and they stay there until death. You will find the true answers, Eliezer, only within yourself” (pp. 2-3). Tragically, the answer which comes from

within Wiesel at the end of his ordeal is one of emptiness and rejection of the God he had once trusted so profoundly.

“Why did Wiesel write this book?” is a question open to different answers. The dedication to his family and the telling of the story itself show that it is a memoir. But to what end? To present a memorial to all Holocaust victims? To show how cruel humanity can be? To offer something which will keep such a thing from ever happening again? I suspect that all of these contributed to Wiesel’s purpose. There may also be something cathartic about the book, the realization of a need to vocalize the agonized despair brought on by the horror he lived. In this respect, the book is a printed version of the “cry of a wounded animal,” the simultaneous “death rattle” Wiesel describes near the end of the final train ride to Buchenwald, a ride which began with one hundred prisoners and ended with ninety corpses (pp.97-98).

But the book is also Wiesel’s statement that, when all is said and done, ultimately “true answers” about life are found “only within yourself” and those answers are filled with despair (p. 3). The chord which binds the book together is the journey from profound faith to dead soul. As a twelve-year-old, unaffected by the trials of life, Wiesel “believed profoundly,” studied daily, and prayed nightly over historical events of his people which would become more real in his own life than he could have ever imagined. (p. 3). As events push his family closer and closer to deportation and death, this staunch faith begins to erode. Wiesel still believes—he rises before dawn to pray on the day of deportation (p. 16)—but the solid confidence has begun to crumble. He sees his father weep for the first time. Weakness sets in at what is only the beginning of the journey. The people’s collective prayer to the “Lord of the Universe” to “take pity upon us in Thy great mercy” trails off, anticipating the tragic end that Wiesel will eventually reveal (p. 17). Faced with the stark realities of Auschwitz, the elders encourage retention of faith, but the youth are already believing it a doomed course (p. 29). Soon thereafter, as, for what Wiesel is sure is the first time “in the long history of the Jews, [the] people . . . recite the prayer for the dead [the Kaddish] for themselves,” uncertainty becomes revulsion. “Why should I bless His name? The Eternal, Lord of the Universe, the All-Powerful and Terrible, was silent. What had I to thank Him for” (p. 31)? After that, there are occasional glimmers of the faith of his youth, but the horrible reality makes it impossible for Wiesel to embrace it fully. If God is, why does he not at least release the sufferers from their misery (p. 63)? Are the crematories, “working night and day, on Sunday and feast days,” not evidence that the “Eternal Maker of the Universe” had in fact “chose[n] us from among the races to be tortured day and night, to see our fathers, our mothers, our brothers end in the crematory” (p. 64)? Wiesel’s faith was broken. “This day I had ceased to plead. I was no longer capable of lamentation. . . . I no longer accepted God’s silence. . . . In the depths of my heart, I felt a great void” (pp. 65-66). Nor was he alone in his despair. A rabbi, who “used to pray all the time” and who “would recite whole pages of the Talmud from memory” also surrendered: “And one day he said to me: ‘It’s the end. God is no longer with us’” (pp. 72-73). Another prisoner berates Wiesel for his optimism that the Russians will liberate them. Unlike God, he says, “Hitler . . . [is] the only one who’s kept his promises, all his promises, to the Jewish people” (p. 77).

Wiesel is left then with only the Night.

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in the camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.

Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever.

Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never (p. 32).

Left with only the Night, Wiesel is condemned to exist, but not to live. After his liberation, he looks at himself in a mirror for the first time since leaving the ghetto more than a year before. His emptiness was complete: "From the depths of the mirror, a corpse gazed back at me. The look in his eyes, as they stared into mine, has never left me" (p. 109).

Several years ago, while teaching a class on 1 Peter, a book which cannot be studied without giving attention to suffering, I made mention of the fact that the problem of evil is the favored argument of many atheists. A sister whom I assume had the best of intentions responded, "Well, then, I'd say they don't have much of an argument." I was repulsed, less I think with the fact that she had been blessed with a life and faith which apparently had not needed to wrestle with such questions than with the implications of her comment for ministry. How different would Jesus' ministry have been if he had not been empathetic enough to touch those like the centurion with the sick servant (Luke 7), like Jairus whose daughter was dying, like the woman with a twelve-year-old hemorrhage who wanted only to touch his garment (Luke 8), and like the sisters of Lazarus who were disappointed that Jesus had arrived too late to save their brother (John 11)? The logic of the problem of evil can be answered with careful definitions and cogent responses. Those answers give us substantive truth to provide a framework for a faith that must be lived in the crucible of an often harsh world. But arguments go only so far. The ache, the void, the feeling of despair and meaninglessness can only be answered by a heart that has been schooled to understand how evil and despair can strip away even the most determined resolve.

That fact is at the heart of the reason Wiesel's story is one with which every believer—certainly every one who would seek to comfort others in times of trial—ought to be wrestle. There is a sense in which it is impossible to empathize, or even to sympathize, with Wiesel's story. How, in a time and culture of ease and luxury unlike anything Wiesel would have experienced even before his ordeal, let alone during it, can one even attempt to enter his suffering?

But, any attempt to do so is worth the effort if we can therefore begin to understand the agony, the doubts, and the emptiness which many in our world battle on a daily basis. It is worth the trouble if we can draw on the experience of Wiesel and his people as the grip of the Germans closed ever more tightly around them to know something of the feelings of sufferers we meet who cannot comprehend their own gradual slide through suffering toward despair. It is worth the struggle if we can begin to understand the kind of brutality that would lead one do anything, and turn on anyone, to survive just one more day. It is worth the discomfort if, by experiencing it, we can begin to feel what it is like to feel really alone, to know the value of the touch of just one person who believes in the inherent dignity and value of a single human life. It is worth the time and horror we feel as we read of man's grossest inhumanity to man if by reading it we can understand how one can desperately want to cling to faith even as he voices the angriest lament toward the God he once unquestioningly adored.

In his Foreword to *Night*, Francois Mauriac tells how Wiesel, as a young Tel Aviv journalist, came to interview him and how in the course of that interview his horrible story came to light. He tells how "the God of love, of gentleness, of comfort . . . [had] vanished forevermore beneath the gaze of this child" (p. ix). How this child, stripped of his dignity and humanity by the horrors he had seen

and experienced, could not bring himself to bow before God, but was compelled to “defy a divinity who was blind and deaf” (p. x). And he wonders what he, who believes that God is love, could have given “to his 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” in that hell on earth. He wonders what difference if any, it would have made to tell him of Christ, “the Crucified, whose Cross has conquered the world,” and whose solidarity with suffering men on that Cross was “the key to that impenetrable mystery whereon the faith of his childhood had perished” (p. x). But such words would not come. He “could only embrace him, weeping” (p. xi).

In a Preface written for the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *Night*, Robert McAfee Brown speaks of those who would try to persuade the world that the Holocaust never occurred and charges them with “committing the greatest indignity human beings can inflict on one another: telling people who have suffered excruciating pain and loss that their pain and loss were illusions” (pp. v-vi). It occurs to me to ask whether the words Mauriac wondered if he should have spoken might not contribute to that indignity if they are spoken by well intentioned Christians who are not sensitive to the kind of unimaginable pain Wiesel and others have endured. We live in a time and place of prosperity and luxury, where words about Jesus and his cross often trip lightly from tongues of men and women who check their smartphones* while seated comfortably on padded pews. It’s all too easy in such circumstances to come to believe that our lives are typical, and to believe that merely speaking of the Cross will suffice. Simply striving to enter the world of Wiesel’s horrible experience, grasping but a bit of the sense of meaninglessness and despair he expects to endure forever, just might help us understand that there are yet men and women who need us to embrace them, weeping, before we attempt to tell them the story of Jesus and his cross, to help them understand that their private hells need not be for eternity. If we can embrace just one person this way, the effort to enter Wiesel’s suffering will serve us well.

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* The term “smartphones” is a change from the original draft of this review, written several years before that term became widely used. When writing in 2001, the term I used was “Palm Pilots.”