God, the Bible, and Evil after the Holocaust

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Evil is a central problem in the Bible. The biblical God is a God who acts in history. God makes promises, specifically the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants, that commit God to act historically. When these covenants fail and the community is overwhelmed by evil they must and do grapple with certain questions. Why did evil happen to us? Where does evil come from? Why are human beings the way they are? Where is God when evil triumphs? Why is God silent? Is God unjust? The writers of the Bible wrestle with these questions. We struggle with them as well. But the questions are obviously not limited to modern or even postmodern thought. When catastrophic evil occurred, biblical folks asked the hard questions and came up with certain responses. These responses sometimes worked and sometimes did not. By “worked” I mean that most of the community could embrace the response. The response seemed to respond well to the reality of

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evil at the time. The biblical responses to evil were tentative by nature. They each had advantages and disadvantages. They were each intended to be honest about the evil event that had occurred and also to affirm the reality of God in the midst of that event. The biblical writers had seen the darkness and they were not afraid to face it.

This is our task as well. After the holocaust, the darkest of darknesses, how do we speak of God in the midst of such absurd evil without appearing to be absurd ourselves? As a watershed event for Christians the holocaust raises two important and vital questions: “Where was God, and where were we?” How was it possible that a God who has compassion and love for the creation could watch such mass extermination of God’s people and not be moved to act? How was it possible that in the middle of so many Christians in the heart of Europe the Nazis could murder over six million Jews and so many millions of others without very much being said by the Christian churches? What went wrong? Where was God? Where was the Christ? Where were the Christians? If we dare to go back and look at what happened we may be compelled to ask, “What happened to our Christ, our creeds, our doctrines, our hymns, and all our attempts to proclaim the gospel of God when they had to pass through Auschwitz?” To not look and to not ask the questions is willful and fearful evasion of the truth. To face the question is a rightfully frightening act of courage that should compel those who call themselves followers of Jesus.

In this article I will define the biblical understanding of evil. Then I will examine a variety of biblical responses to evil. After this I will suggest that the holocaust is an unprecedented evil event that calls into question all previous biblical responses. Finally I will offer an alternative biblical approach to the question of God and evil after Auschwitz.

I. THE REALITY OF EVIL

Evil is real. Every human being has the capacity to do evil. The unprecedented incarnation of evil in the holocaust has made this very clear. What is not clear is how to speak of God after the mass extermination of six million Jews. To speak of the holocaust is not to deny the madness of all the other atrocities that have occurred in history. But the Nazi holocaust evokes a distinct question for Christians. How is it that our tradition of anti-Judaism could be so easily coopted by the Nazis, and where were we when it came time to stand up against the Nazi evil? That said, the holocaust remains an unprecedented eruption of evil that has captured our imagination in ways that other events should have but did not. The holocaust captures our imagination because we cannot imagine it. The holocaust is an event which provides a frightening challenge for Christians and their scriptures. How shall we speak of God after the events of 50 years ago so that the reality of evil, the reality of human nature, and the reality of God are all taken seriously?
II. DEFINING EVIL

What do we mean by the word “evil”? There are many definitions. Evil is absurd suffering. Evil is suffering without any apparent meaning. Evil is the human being acting as if there were no moral limits or boundaries. Evil is disobedience of God. Evil is the human being acting as if he or she were God. All these statements are reflective of biblical attempts to describe evil. When the writers of the Bible experienced evil they consciously and sometimes unconsciously provided responses which spoke of God’s active presence in the midst of such events. They strove mightily to speak of God’s order in the midst of human chaos.

There are many such responses. The following are a sample.

III. BIBLICAL RESPONSES TO EVIL

1. Free will defense. Evil happens because people have free will and commit sin. They disobey God. They act as if they are God.

2. The enemy or the enemies. Evil happens because an enemy or enemies has attacked Israel or an individual. The enemy can be a human being who is evil or a metaphysical force such as Satan, the devil, or demons. In any event God is pictured as encountering the evil force and defeating it. In the New Testament Jesus’ death and resurrection are pictured as in some way having defeated the ultimate power of evil.

3. The future. Evil is real and it has destroyed God’s people, but a time is coming very soon when God will come and destroy evil. God will send a Messiah to destroy evil, return Israel to her land, and create peace and justice on the earth. Jesus will soon return and destroy the power of evil, finishing what was begun in the cross/resurrection event. The destruction of evil will happen at the end of time. The destruction of evil will happen in a final battle between the cosmic forces of good and evil.

4. God’s fault. Evil happens because God has been negligent and has not acted like God. God has not come to the aid of his people as he had promised to do. God has broken the covenants, but Israel refuses to give up on God and as an act of faith questions and accuses God of wrongdoing. In the face of evil it is clear that God remains silent. If we take God seriously, the only honest, responsible, and faithful thing to do is to question and accuse God of indifference, thereby calling upon God to act responsibly and faithfully.

5. The hidden plan. The role of God in the face of evil is unclear to human eyes. Evil appears not to make sense. But it does make sense to God. God has a plan and purpose that will ultimately make sense of all the evil that has occurred. The assumption behind this response is that God’s ways are not human ways. Evil and suffering appear to be arbitrary and senselessly destructive but in some hidden and mysterious way they are part of the plan and purpose of God. God mysteriously uses these events to carry out the divine purpose. While humans are appropriately
puzzled and dismayed by evil they should continue to trust in God despite what happens. Those who doubt God or do not trust God because they see evil need to realize that God is God and they are not.

6. Teacher/positive effect. Suffering and evil are real but not necessarily bad. God uses and sometimes causes these events to happen in order to teach us something important. Such suffering or evil may be a test of faith. It may be a needed discipline. It may teach us the need to trust God. It may cause us to rely on and appreciate God's grace. It makes us realize that God is God and we are not. In short, suffering and evil teach us a lesson.

7. Love of God. Evil and suffering are real. They are destructive. God will not stop them from happening. But regardless of what catastrophes occur, "nothing shall separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus." God's existence does not make the world a less dangerous place. God's people should not expect that suffering and evil will not happen. God's people are assured that when evil happens they are accompanied by God's presence and love. The believer is assured that regardless of what evil is encountered nothing can or will separate the believer from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

8. Mystery. Evil is real. The question of where God is in the midst of evil is a mystery. Whether or not the evil event is part of God's plan remains inscrutable. There is no rational explanation. God is God and can/will arbitrarily do what God wants to do.

9. The cross. The redemptive result of the death and resurrection of Jesus reveals that in the midst of evil God is a hidden presence at work to do what God can do to redeem the event. Where God appears to be most absent God is most present. God is at work in the opposite way from what people expect.

10. The torah. Evil is the result of not doing the torah or following God's will. Those who do torah or follow God's will be blessed. Those who do not will be cursed. Retribution will either occur in this life or the next.

None of these responses is inherently false. They all have their place. All occur in the Bible in some form or other. In the face of evil each response has advantages and disadvantages. Throughout Jewish and Christian history each response has been used at one time or another to respond to the presence of evil. Variations and combinations of these responses continue to be used in popular religious parlance.

But in the face of the holocaust each response is left wanting. They just do not work very well. In the presence of burning children the inadequacy of each response is painfully evident. The Bible for all its wisdom could not and did not imagine a holocaust of the technological dimensions and efficient proportion experienced fifty years ago.

IV. BIBLICAL RESPONSES AND THE HOLOCAUST

The problem with the biblical responses to evil is not in what they say. What they say may or may not be convincing. It will depend on how effective the argu-
ment is and who the listener happens to be. The real reason the responses do not work is that they do not do anything. In the face of the extreme evil of the Holocaust, explanations and rationalizations in defense of God or the human being, no matter how well intentioned, must be seen as beside the point. The responses do not work because they do not stop the children from being burned. In the presence of burning children what one says theologically is finally beside the point. In the presence of the burning children the real question is, “What shall we do?”

V. THE PROBLEM OF CHRISTIAN DOING

It may be true that the primary question for Christians after the Holocaust is not “Where was God?” but, more to the point, “Where were we?” This question is not asked in order to elicit still more Christian guilt about the Holocaust. Rather the question asks about the connection between believing and doing. The question avoids works righteousness because it is a question asked of Christians who already trust that they live and breathe by the grace of God in Jesus Christ. The question, “Where were we?” assumes that “we” were supposed to be somewhere and we did not get there. The question asks about the silence and absence of a community that was expected and expected itself to act.

A number of years ago I had the good fortune to meet a member of the confessing church. The confessing church was that group of Christians in Germany who refused to support Hitler and proclaimed that they could worship only one Lord, Jesus Christ. Many of the members of this small group of Christians were murdered by the Nazis. But others survived, and I asked the one I met many questions. He spoke about figures I only knew from books, Bonhoeffer and Niemöller and many others. I was impressed. Then I asked him why the confessing church had never spoken up against what had been happening to the Jews. This rather loquacious older man became silent. Then, with tears in his eyes, he told me, “We did not know they were human.” I was incredulous. “How could you not know it?” He explained that the first time he ever met a Jew was when the Nazis sent him to prison. There he met a Jewish man who offered him a piece of bread. He said, "When he gave me the bread, I looked in his eyes, and only then did I realize that this Jew was human." I remain haunted by this man’s confession. He did not do anything because he did not know they were human.

The problem resides in the doing. Christian doing is not an act intended to impress God. Nor is it done to impress others. Christian doing has to do with the heart of the gospel. To be Christian is to trust in the gospel. The gospel is the good news that through Jesus Christ Christians can hope and trust that (1) at the heart of the universe there is one who is for us and not against us, (2) whether we live or die we belong to the Lord, and (3) the Christian has no option except to stand with those in pain. This is the gospel. It involves doing and trusting and trusting and doing. No sharp separation exists between the two. Trusting begets doing and doing begets trusting.
As I wrestled with what a Christian could say after the holocaust and in response to the question, “Where were we?” it dawned on me that there was yet another response to evil in the Bible which I had ignored. I was so busy finding explanations to defend God’s silence that I had ignored the obvious biblical response. The scripture speaks of resistance to evil. This response has the element of doing embedded in it. To believe in Christ is to resist evil, and to resist evil is to believe in Christ. The biblical response to evil goes like this.

Resistance. Evil is real, and human beings as followers of God should do all that they can to resist and oppose evil. Opposition to evil may be violent or non-violent. God is not a neutral God who loves everybody. God has enemies in the world. God and God’s followers are linked together doing what they can do to stop the craziness and the absurdity of evil.

VI. RESISTANCE TO EVIL

In the gospels, when Jesus sends out his disciples, he tells them to preach and resist the demons. Jesus himself wrestles with demons and evil throughout the scriptures. In fact, in no gospel when Jesus encounters a person who is sick or possessed by evil, does he try to explain to them why what has happened to them was justified. Jesus never defends God. Rather at every point Jesus does what he can do to stop the evil, to heal the person, to act against rather than explain away the suffering or evil.

Indeed from the very beginning of the Bible to the very end, God is portrayed as one who is out to train human beings to trust in God and to resist evil. From the story of the first murder in the Bible, Cain’s killing of Abel, to the giving of the Torah, to the words of the prophets, to the coming of Jesus, and to the Book of Revelation, God calls upon human beings to stand with God against evil. There is a pervasive theme in the Bible concerning God’s opposition to evil. Human beings as creatures and partners of God have the capacity to do both evil and good. Human beings are called upon at all points to resist evil. When they do this, they are seen as faithful to God. When they do not, they are seen as sinful. Resistance to evil is not an option. It is part and parcel of what it means to be a believer in God.

A number of examples of resistance to evil could be given from the Bible, but here is one that most people tend to overlook. In Mark 14 just prior to the killing of Jesus, a woman shows up and begins to anoint Jesus with oil. While his disciples object to the wasting of such valuable oil, Jesus declares that the woman should be left alone. He goes on to make a further declaration that wherever the gospel is preached in all the world it will be done in memory of this woman. In four gospels Jesus says such words about no other person. What is it that impresses Jesus about this woman? How can we preach the gospel in her name since we don’t know her name? Why did Jesus think that the disciples were wrong and the the woman was right? Jesus says, “Leave her alone. She did what she could do.” In the face of the tragic and senseless death of Jesus this woman did what she could do. She could not
stop the killing, but she did what she could do. The gospel is to be preached in her name because she trusted and she acted. She resisted evil by doing what she could do. When it is all said and done it may be fair to say that all of Holy Scripture from Torah to Jesus has only one real goal: to teach us and transform us that we might be and act as human beings, creatures of God. To act as one who belongs to God is to trust God and to resist evil.

VII. CHRISTIAN RESISTANCE AND THE HOLOCAUST

We do not have to wonder if resistance to evil works or not. We know that it does work. During the holocaust there were those few Christians who did what they could to resist the evil in their midst. Pastors, priests, nuns, and Christians of every ilk acted to resist. When asked why they did what they did almost to a person they denied doing anything heroic. Many asked, “What else could we do?”

Sometimes a particular story says more than the analytical statistics. A few years ago I took a group of college seniors to Minneapolis to meet holocaust survivors. As a part of the visit we listened to a Christian from Germany who during those years fifty years ago had hidden two little Jewish girls in his apartment in Berlin for two years. After his talk a student raised her hand and asked the man, “How is it that you felt this great affection for Jews, so great that you would risk your life to hide these two Jewish girls?” The man seemed taken aback and puzzled by the question. He said, “Well, I really don’t like Jews. They are pushy, opinionated, and too aggressive.” The students were shocked. The same student, now sounding quite confused, asked the man, “If you don’t like Jews why did you hide the two little Jewish girls?” Now the man looked quite confused. He answered, “What else could I do? I am a Christian and those two little girls were going to be killed. I had to do something.”

To be a Christian is to resist evil. Before the holocaust, but certainly after it, to do what one can do to resist evil is no longer an option. Having said this does not imply that resisting evil is not without its problems and questions. Are we always able to discern clearly what is evil and what is not? By talking about ourselves as resisters to evil do we not put ourselves in the place of God? When is it appropriate to be violent in the course of resistance to evil? What does it mean to speak of resisting evil as being at the heart of the gospel? What is the relationship between faith and works? These are only a few of the questions that may occur to readers. While these questions are all pertinent and should be discussed after the holocaust, such concerns are of a secondary nature. Agonizing about the practical and theological dimensions of resisting evil are important, but more often than not they function as a form of evasion. The fact is those who agonize tend not to act. And those who act do not agonize. This was true of those who resisted the Nazis and it is true today.

VIII. CO-RESISTORS WITH GOD

What does it practically mean that we are called to resist evil? How would a pastor speak about this at the parish level? Being co-resistors with God may ring
true theologically, but how does it play in the pew? Let me conclude by making some practical suggestions. I am convinced that after the holocaust Christian churches must do more than feel guilty about what happened fifty years ago. We must ask ourselves, “What went wrong?” What can we learn from those few Christians who did resist and did what they could to put a stop to evil?

1. Christians can be trained to recognize evil. Whenever human beings propose or act in such a way as to go beyond moral limits or boundaries set by God we are encountering evil. From the holocaust we understand that evil does not always look evil. It is deceptive and seductive. What is evil always promises that if we cross this or that particular moral boundary we will be really happy. Evil seduces us into believing that it is fine to cross the limit because the limit should never have been there in the first place. Wisdom and knowledge and power and happiness will be given to the one who steps across the moral limits. Let us remember that when Hitler came to power he appeared quite attractive as he held out the apple of a restored and prospering Germany. Many people would later claim that they bit into that apple innocently only to discover later that it was a mask for evil. As people in Germany were trained to do evil, people can also be trained to do good.

In sermons, in confirmation, in prayers, in all sorts of ways we can teach people to take evil seriously and learn to recognize the signs of its presence. During the holocaust there was a French town named Le Chambon-sur-Lignon. Despite the fact that the town was occupied by Hitler’s troops the town became an underground network for saving Jewish refugees, particularly children. What is unique is that the underground was not organized. The rescuers did not know what their neighbors were doing. Yet, during the course of the war these Christians were able to save 5000 people, 3500 of them Jewish. More important for our discussion, the town was led by their pastor Andre Trocme. This pastor of a small, out-of-the-way Protestant (Huguenot) church trained his people to resist. How? He told them the gospel stories about the man bleeding by the side of the road. He told them about the ones who passed by, the onlookers and the indifferent. And then he told them about the one who stopped to help. This was what it meant to be a Christian. The stories he told have been translated in a book entitled Angels and Donkeys (Good Books Press, 1998). These are stories he told his congregation for years. When it came time to act, these people did not agonize. If they could do it, it can be done. They were sinners who lived by the grace of God, but when it came time they did what they could do. After all, what else could they do?

2. Classes can be offered in the parish dealing with the holocaust and the role of the Christian churches. More time can be given to studying New Testament texts that have a particular anti-Jewish flavor. More study needs to occur on the role of Christian tradition and anti-Judaism. The point of such study is not to make people feel guilty, though it may at times be appropriate. The point is to teach people to detect evil within and outside themselves and to resist it. Evil can exist within any human tradition, even a religious one.
3. Biblical texts that deal with the character and nature of evil, but are ignored by the pericope series, can be preached and taught. This will require pastors that have the courage not to run away from difficult texts, but it can be done.

4. Parishes can provide congregational dialogues to discuss how individual members ought to detect and respond to evil. Such discussion is vital so that what we do and when we do it results from listening to the options open to the community. Conversation and dialogue with other members of the church will inform our action and may keep us from rationalizing a misguided resistance toward a self-created enemy.

There are many other ways to learn about the centrality of resistance to evil at the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ. After the holocaust, “no statement, theological or otherwise, should be made which could not be made in the presence of burning children” (Irving Greenberg). The biblical responses to evil that seek to explain and defend risk sounding like Job’s comforters. In our time teaching people the art of resistance to evil may be what it means for the Christian churches to respond to the holocaust with integrity. From the beginning of the Bible to the end we believers in God are linked inextricably to a God who struggles to resist evil. Let us do what we can do. Such doing is the very word of God in our midst.