

Theology of Prayer after Auschwitz: Elie Wiesel and Johann Baptist Metz in Conversation



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Journal of Interreligious Studies
July 2024, Issue 42, 7-25
ISSN 2380-8187
www.irstudies.org

Abstract

The political theology of Johann Baptist Metz was a clarion call for theologians to foreground the social and political dimensions of Christian life. To this day, Metz is remembered as a key figure in the transition from an idealist to a post-idealist Christian theology that prizes history as the medium of hope. This essay offers an additional reason in support of Metz's relevance, namely, that his theology can offer a rich response to Elie Wiesel's charge that there can be no theology either "after" or "about" Auschwitz. I argue that Wiesel does in fact bequeath to us a vision for the future of theology after Auschwitz, and further, that Metz provides a form of Christian theology that fits the criteria offered by Wiesel. More specifically, Metz shows that prayer does not avoid raising questions about suffering to God; rather, prayer remembers the dead, demands accountability for wrongdoing from those who stand before God in prayer, serves as a means of resisting apathy, and gives agency to the dead.

Keywords

Johann Baptist Metz, Elie Wiesel, Holocaust, Shoah, prayer, theology, theodicy

The political theology of Johann Baptist Metz was a clarion call for theologians to foreground the social and political dimensions of Christian life. To this day, Metz, a German Catholic priest and theologian of the 20th century, is remembered as a key figure in the transition from an idealist to a post-idealist Christian theology that prizes history as the medium of hope. His work continues to inspire theological projects that explore the mystical and political nature of being a follower of Christ. This essay offers an additional illustration of Metz's relevance, namely, as a theologian who can offer a robust response to Elie Wiesel's charge that theology cannot go on after the Holocaust. I argue that Wiesel does in fact offer a roadmap for the future of theology after the Shoah, and, further, that Metz provides a style of theology that fits the criteria outlined by Elie Wiesel.

I begin my argument by summarizing the contributions of existing scholarship on the Metz-Wiesel comparison. I note that they neither sufficiently attend to Wiesel's critical remarks

about the future of theology nor conceive of Metz as a respondent to these remarks. Following those observations, I outline the challenges Wiesel identifies to the future task of theological endeavors. Subsequently, I explain how Metz's critique of the Enlightenment and theology of prayer echoes many of Wiesel's concerns and reinforces the moral demands the Romanian-Jewish thinker places upon those who live after the Holocaust. By way of brief preview, I argue that Metz can supplement Wiesel's account of the Holocaust's historical origins with his examination of the vices engendered by the Enlightenment. Additionally, his retrieval of a biblically informed posture of prayer, inspired by the prayers of Jews in Auschwitz, honors Wiesel's insistence on remembering the victims and gives voice to troubling questions about the meaning of suffering. Metz also shows how prayer is not only a means of mourning and questioning God, but is also a way to counter apathy, acknowledge personal guilt, become an authentic human "subject," and give agency to the dead. While I delve to some extent into the question of how Metz receives and revises his own Christian theological tradition, I predominantly focus on how his theology fits Wiesel's criteria for theology after Auschwitz.

This article is not the first to take note of the complementarity between Metz's and Wiesel's thought. Michon Marie Matthiesen, in her article in *Religion & Literature*, notes how the two authors share the view that when individuals remember the suffering of others, those who remember can become authentic subjects and find the motivation to fight future injustices.¹ Interestingly, Matthiesen argues that Wiesel's post-Holocaust literary legacy concretizes Metz's vision for a theology after Auschwitz. Matthiesen points to Wiesel's narrative memorials, which do not let readers forget the names of the dead, as a way to "give substance" to Metz's theology of remembering.² She also argues that, "the interrogative nature of Wiesel's narratives,"³ characterized by torrents of questions about suffering, the self, and God, can move listeners to interrogate theological explanations of suffering that have not been sufficiently tested. This praxis of questioning performs the critical examination that Metz thought Christian theology needed to undergo in order to move it away from being a religion "with an excess of answers and a corresponding lack of agonized questions."⁴ Finally, Matthiesen praises Wiesel's narratives of suffering for pushing listeners beyond apathy and despair and towards solidarity, a key step in the formation of an alternative subjectivity for Metz.⁵

Matthiesen's sharp comparison of the two authors can nevertheless be expanded in a few directions. I will offer a discussion of Metz and Wiesel based, not precisely on their anthropological visions, but rather specifically on their expectations for a new approach to theology. Proceeding in this way will enable me to bring out a new dimension in the comparison between these authors, namely, the fact that any agreement between them should strike us as surprising. One should be surprised because Wiesel places numerous constraints on post-Auschwitz theology and even at points calls theology "after" and "about" Auschwitz impossible, points which Matthiesen does not note. These remarks place any convergences between Metz and Wiesel in a new and remarkable light.

¹ Michon Marie Matthiesen, "Complementary Reflections of Theological Anthropology in Johann Metz and Elie Wiesel," *Religion & Literature* 18, no. 2 (Summer 1986): 47–63.

² Matthiesen, "Complementary Reflections," 51.

³ Matthiesen, "Contemporary Reflections," 56.

⁴ Matthiesen, "Contemporary Reflections," 56, citing Johann Baptist Metz, *The Emergent Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 23.

⁵ Matthiesen, "Contemporary Reflections," 60.

Additionally, Matthiesen relates Wiesel to Metz as one literary writer instantiating the distinctive vision of a theologian. Yet, given the fact that Wiesel has his own expectations for theological discourse in the wake of the Holocaust, as we will examine shortly, we can also configure these authors in another way, namely, Metz as a possible instantiator of Wiesel's theological vision. Although themes of memory and solidarity feature prominently in my own comparison, they appear in the context of Metz's responding to Wiesel's work, rather than the other direction. While Matthiesen concludes that Metz would applaud Wiesel's work, one can still ask, would Wiesel approve of Metz's project? This is the question I will answer.

Similarly, in 1999 two scholars, Ekkehard Schuster and Reinhold Boschert-Kimmig, conducted interviews separately with Wiesel and Metz. The interviewers also emphasized a trajectory shared by the two authors, insofar as both embraced their respective faiths intensely in their youths, only to have the Holocaust deeply trouble them and provoke them to understand their faith anew. In this work, *Hope against Hope*, both speak about a wide range of topics: Metz on the church, the development of post-idealist theology, teachers such as Rahner, memory; Wiesel on hope, his teachers, the experience of Auschwitz, and wrestling with God, among other topics. While this book provides several useful insights regarding Wiesel's and Metz's perspectives on the task of theology, it still does not bring out the tension between Wiesel's challenge to theology and Metz's proposal for a post-Auschwitz theology. Therefore, another look at these authors in conversation with one another is due.

In presenting Metz's theology of prayer as a response to Wiesel, I seek to remain sensitive to the challenges of post-Shoah Christian theology, ranging from a devaluation of the Hebrew Scriptures to a neglect of the realities of contemporary Jewish life and self-understandings.⁶ Rather than casting Metz as a Christian theologian who proves Wiesel wrong, or completes what Wiesel could only begin, I intend to present Metz as a Christian theologian who shares and responds to the concerns of a Jewish thinker, beginning with the way he justifies his own prayer in the wake of the Holocaust on the basis of the prayers Jews offered, "in the hell of Auschwitz."⁷ The need for compassionate Jewish-Christian dialogue about the Holocaust and the pre-existing scholarship on Metz's and Wiesel's complementarity encourages me to humbly offer my construal of their compatibility.⁸

Wiesel's Challenge to Theology after Auschwitz

Elie Wiesel is known as one of the foremost chroniclers of the experience of the Holocaust, a writer who, through his work, was able to convey something of the horrifying, heart-rending experience of the concentration camps. As Graham Walker writes in the Introduction to *Elie*

⁶ See Marianne Moyaert, "Comparative Theology After the Shoah: Risks, Pivots, and Opportunities of Comparing Traditions," in *How to Do Comparative Theology*, ed. Francis X. Clooney and Klaus von Stosch (Fordham University Press, 2017). See also, Emma O'Donnell Polyakov, "A Smothering Embrace? Hermeneutical Issues in Catholic Discourse about Jews and Judaism," *Harvard Theological Review*, 2023, 1–20.

⁷ Johann Baptist Metz and Karl Rahner, *The Courage to Pray* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 9.

⁸ See Peter Admirand, "The Future of Post-Shoah Christology: Three Challenges and Three Hopes," *Religions* 12 (2021): 407.

Wiesel: A Challenge to Theology, “Largely through the prophetic voice of Elie Wiesel the Holocaust has come to mean the murder of six million Jews by the Nazis, carefully planned and meticulously carried out.”⁹ In an interview with Cardinal John O’Connor in 1990, Wiesel distinguishes his own witness to the Holocaust from that of figures such as Viktor Frankl, the author of *Man’s Search for Meaning*, and Fr. Maximilian Kolbe, who is remembered for volunteering to die in place of another man. Wiesel is not trying to assuage anyone with the thought that Jewish victims could have inner peace amidst oppressive circumstances.¹⁰ He is rather modeling a form of faithfulness that still raises to God the question, “why suffering?” with anger and anguish.

Wiesel, who died in 2016, was a prolific writer, authoring over 40 books and numerous articles and public addresses. Critical interest in his writing remains high, with evidence including the recent publications of biographies and commentaries on his fiction.¹¹ Given the size of his corpus, this article attempts to focus only on those works in which he speaks explicitly about the nature of theology after Auschwitz, since this is a key concern of Johann Metz.

Before delving into Wiesel’s views on theology, a brief biography is in order. Wiesel was born in 1928 in the village of Sighet in Transylvania near the Ukrainian border. In 1944, he was sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where he and his father were separated from his mother and sisters. In time, Wiesel and his father were transferred to Buchenwald; but there, Wiesel witnessed his father die from starvation. Wiesel remained at Buchenwald until the Americans liberated the camp near the end of the war. After the war, Wiesel moved to France and studied philosophy and literature at the Sorbonne from 1948 to 1951.¹²

In 1956, Wiesel’s first draft of his death camp experience was published under the title, *Un di Velt Hot Geshvign* (*And the World Remained Silent*). In 1960, the same work, in edited form, was published in English under the title, *Night*. As Graham Walker, Jr. asserts, “The writing of *Night* was the beginning of Wiesel’s invitation to us as readers into his life. In this sense, it is the beginning point when Wiesel invites us to join him as fellow pilgrims.”¹³ From then until his death, Wiesel implored his audiences never to forget the Holocaust or its victims—both as a way to honor the last wish of those who died, and so that those who live after them find the strength to prevent such a massacre from ever happening again. As he said at a Remembrance Day observance in 1984, “Nothing should be compared to the Holocaust, but everything must be related to it. Because of what we have endured then we must try to help victims everywhere today.”¹⁴

⁹ Graham Walker, Jr., *Elie Wiesel: A Challenge to Theology* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1988), 1.

¹⁰ John J. O’Connor and Elie Wiesel, *A Journey of Faith: A Dialogue Between Elie Wiesel and His Eminence John Cardinal O’Connor: Based on and Expanded from the WNBC-TV Broadcast* (New York: Donald I. Fine, Inc., 1990), 4–6.

¹¹ Alan L. Berger, *Elie Wiesel: Humanist Messenger for Peace* (New York: Routledge, 2021); Victoria Nesfield and Philip Smith, eds., *The Struggle for Understanding: Elie Wiesel’s Literary Works* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2019).

¹² Walker, Jr., *Elie Wiesel: A Challenge to Theology*, 3; Ekkehard Schuster and Reinhold Boschert-Kimmig, *Hope Against Hope: Johann Baptist Metz and Elie Wiesel Speak Out on the Holocaust*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 59–60.

¹³ Walker, Jr., *Elie Wiesel: A Challenge to Theology*, 5.

¹⁴ Elie Wiesel, *Against Silence: The Voice and Vision of Elie Wiesel*, ed. Irving Abrahamson, vol. III, (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), 193. In other places he repeats his point that memory demands solidarity. In a statement at the meeting of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council in 1980, Wiesel said, “From the Holocaust we have learned that

To understand Wiesel's challenge to theology, one first must understand the challenge Wiesel believes faces anyone speaking about the Holocaust. Wiesel envisions the Holocaust as a phenomenon distinct from all other phenomena. He writes, "Auschwitz is something else, always something else. It is a universe outside the universe, a creation that exists parallel to creation. Auschwitz lies on the other side of life and on the other side of death."¹⁵ As a result, language is inert to convey its reality. In *From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences*, he writes,

Formerly, thoughts became experiences and experiences became words, but today this process is interrupted. Today we must admit that certain experiences defy language. Speech is no longer the logical result. And all the discourse on the "lessons" of Auschwitz and the "message" of Treblinka—lessons about ethics and politics, messages to do with theology—have nothing to do with the experience of Night.¹⁶

By "night," Wiesel refers to the experience of Holocaust imprisonment. Those who do try to speak about the event risk committing a "desanctification of the Holocaust."¹⁷ Recounting a visit to Birkenau with other survivors, he writes, "I stood alongside the former inmates of Birkenau and Auschwitz, at the place where we had lost our families, and I did not know what to say. There was nothing to say."¹⁸ Words are unable either to convey the magnitude of the evil or capture the pain and anguish of the Holocaust victims.¹⁹ Even prayer seems to fall silent. As Wiesel writes, "There is no prayer in any good for such places. Only the victims had the right, and perhaps the strength, to pray. But there was no one to hear them."²⁰

Despite the inability to speak, Wiesel argues that the survivor has an imperative to speak about it, to denounce it and future injustices. In an essay titled "Why I Write?," Wiesel ponders the possibility of conveying any of this reality. He asks, "Could the reader be brought to the other side? I knew the answer had to be No, and yet I also knew that No had to become Yes. This was the wish, the last will of the dead. One had to shatter the wall encasing the darkest truth, and give it a name. One had to force man to look."²¹

And yet, this process of speaking, and thereby not forgetting the catastrophic event, is challenging. "The problem," Wiesel writes, "is that the essential will never be said or understood...it's not because I don't speak that you won't understand me; it's because you won't understand me that I don't speak."²² There is a deep rift between those who endured the agony and those who did not.

we are responsible for one another. We are responsible for the past and for the future as well." See *Against Silence*, 171.

¹⁵ Elie Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences* (New York: Summit Books, 1990), 165–66.

¹⁶ Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory*, 34.

¹⁷ Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory*, 169.

¹⁸ Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory*, 116–17.

¹⁹ Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory*, 116–17; see also 14–15.

²⁰ Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory*, 117.

²¹ Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory*, 15.

²² Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory*, 144.

All this generates a challenge for those trying to speak about God. Wiesel concedes that those who try to understand and write about the Holocaust, theologically or otherwise, do so with good intentions.²³ Still, the impotence of language is hard to overcome. In the testimony he delivered at the trial of Klaus Barbie, known as the “Butcher of Lyon,” Wiesel said, “In its scope, its ontological aspect, and its eschatological ambitions, this tragedy defies and exceeds all answers. If anyone claims to have found an answer, it can only be a false one... One cannot understand Auschwitz either without God or with God.”²⁴ The year before, in his speech upon receiving the Nobel Prize in 1986, he said, “there are no plausible answers to what we have endured. There are no theological answers, there are no psychological answers, there are no literary answers. The only conceivable answer is a *moral* answer. This means there must be a moral element in whatever we do.”²⁵

Several years later, at the turn of the century, in an interview, Wiesel spoke at length about the future of theology after the Holocaust. At one point, he puts it simply,

There can be no theology after Auschwitz, and no theology whatsoever about Auschwitz. For whatever we do we are lost; whatsoever we say is inadequate. One can never understand the event with God; one cannot understand the event without God. Theology? The logos of God? Who am I to explain God? Some people try. I think that they fail. Nonetheless, it is their right to attempt it. After Auschwitz everything is an attempt.²⁶

And yet, despite rejecting the hope of understanding the event, Wiesel admits that in every one of his books, he keeps asking God for understanding.²⁷ He implies that there is some way to proceed, but how? It is in answering this question that Wiesel’s distinction between theology and prayer emerges. “Sometimes,” he writes, “all we can do is to weep or to pray, to close our eyes in silent prayer. Any commentary, any interpretation, and especially any explanation, is doomed in advance to fail.”²⁸ With this comment, Wiesel distinguishes between mourning and praying, on the one hand, and interpretations and explanations, on the other, which he believes many people would trust to provide the necessary answers and resolutions to the catastrophe. Thus, there emerges a distinction between prayer and theological explanation. To further elaborate on the difference between praying and explaining, Wiesel says,

I do not believe that we can talk about God; we can only—as Kafka said—talk to God. It depends on who is talking. What I try to do is speak to God. Even when I speak against God, I speak to God. And even if I am angry at God, I try to show God my anger. But even that is a profession, not a denial of God.²⁹

²³ Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory*, 116.

²⁴ Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory*, 183.

²⁵ Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory*, 249.

²⁶ Schuster and Boschert-Kimmig, *Hope Against Hope*, 93.

²⁷ Schuster and Boschert-Kimmig, *Hope Against Hope*, 93–94.

²⁸ Schuster and Boschert-Kimmig, *Hope Against Hope*, 76.

²⁹ Schuster and Boschert-Kimmig, *Hope Against Hope*, 91.

Wiesel's contrast between "talking about God" and "talking to God" reinforces his distinction between academic theology and prayer. Further, Wiesel acknowledges a dynamic in which prayer includes some measure of protest against God.

Despite the power of the Holocaust to render commentators and believers mute alike, Wiesel nevertheless commends Job as a model of faith in such a time. He admires that Job, who lost nearly everything in his life, still found the strength to build his life again and not to reject the creation God had entrusted to him.³⁰ When he asks whether Job ever lost his faith, Wiesel writes, "If so, he rediscovered it within his rebellion. He demonstrated that faith is essentially a rebellion, and that hope is possible beyond despair, but not without ignoring despair."³¹ As will become clear in later examination of Wiesel's other writings, this rebellion can be understood not as a rejection of God but rather a rebellion against one's destitution accompanied by questions to God asking to know the reason behind the misfortune. Wiesel also says Job illustrates that, "hope is possible beyond despair, but not without ignoring despair." The source of Job's hope was his memory, says Wiesel. He concludes that the same must be true for those living now. Ending his meditation on Job, Wiesel writes, "Because I remember, I despair. Because I remember, I have a duty to reject despair."³² For Wiesel, there is a paradoxical tension in remembering that he is willing to let stand, not hastening to resolve or make it any more comfortable.

Wiesel admits in the interview that he "deliberately [uses] paradoxical language when it comes to the question of faith after the event" because, despite all the horror, the need to believe remains.³³ He says that "the paradox in this is that despite everything and in defiance of everything we must have faith. Even if we find no faith we must raise it up in the hope that one day we will understand why, and that one day we will be able to give a reason for believing."³⁴ Recall earlier that Wiesel claims, "one cannot understand Auschwitz either without God or with God."³⁵ At other times, Wiesel rejects the possibility that there can be any novels about Auschwitz, but then admits that in every book and novel he writes, he is asking God to answer the question, "why the death camps?"³⁶

Though Wiesel protests answers intended to explain or assuage the horror of Auschwitz, insisting on the ineffability of the event, he did speak and write extensively so that both the victims would not be forgotten and future catastrophes could be avoided. All of this suggests that some form of dialogue and questioning can and must be undertaken after Auschwitz. All of this, I argue, provides an opening for respectfully discerning how to go forward in speaking about God and suffering. What criteria does Wiesel offer? I argue that he offers the following vision: a theology after the Holocaust should (1) be conducted in a manner that attends to the experiences of those who endured it and honors their imperative and priority to speak about it, (2) not avoid troubling questions about God's permission of suffering, (3) give space to a form of faithfulness that does not exclude lamentations directed towards God, and (4) recognize the tension to be

³⁰ Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory*, 248.

³¹ Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory*, 248.

³² Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory*, 248.

³³ Schuster and Boschert-Kimmig, *Hope Against Hope*, 95.

³⁴ Schuster and Boschert-Kimmig, *Hope Against Hope*, 95.

³⁵ Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory*, 183.

³⁶ Schuster and Boschert-Kimmig, *Hope Against Hope*, 76, 93–94.

held between despair and rejecting despair. At this point, we can raise the question: are there theologians whose work is characterized by this vision?

Christian Responses to Wiesel

Despite the Wieselian challenges facing future theologians who are grappling with the thought of speaking about the Holocaust, some of them have attempted to identify Christian voices that answer the call Wiesel makes not to forget the Holocaust. In his book, *Elie Wiesel: A Challenge to Theology*, Graham Walker, Jr. identifies a historical figure whom he believes “expresses a possible Christian response to the writings and life of Elie Wiesel.”³⁷ Fr. Bernhard Lichtenberg was a German Roman Catholic priest living in Berlin in 1938. When he saw the destruction of Jewish property and sacred places in the city during the fateful event of Kristallnacht, he began to pray publicly, “on behalf of the Jews and the poor concentration camp prisoners.”³⁸ He continued to pray publicly from November 1938 until October 23, 1941, when he was arrested. When he was brought to trial on May 22, 1942, he was found guilty of many charges, but primarily for his refusal to cease his public petitions. He eventually died in prison while waiting to be deported to the Dachau concentration camp.

Walker writes that “Father Lichtenberg’s prayer forms a paradigm for the beginning of Christian theology in the wake of Elie Wiesel’s testimony.” Fr. Lichtenberg’s approach was “distinctively narrative,” insofar as he was, “concerned with characters, with names, with subjects in history.” He also focused his prayer on the suffering of Jews and did not generalize this concern to wider categories of human trauma. Additionally, Walker observes that he “recognized the power of words,” that is, that speaking out loud was a threat to the Nazis. This was a protest against the general drift of letting past sins simply be forgotten and fade into silence. Finally, Fr. Lichtenberg had the strength to pray even if few joined him, because he knew God was a listening audience.³⁹

Walker’s identification of Fr. Lichtenberg as a model of Christian theology in the wake of Elie Wiesel lends credence to my own proposal to name Metz as, with Lichtenberg, another model of Wieselian Christian theology. As mentioned, despite the challenges Wiesel identifies when speaking about the Holocaust, there are other factors that make such speech imperative: the need to remember so that the victors do not kill a second time and the need to shed apathy and take steps to prevent future atrocities.⁴⁰ It is here, then, that it becomes fitting to examine Metz’s proposed theology in light of the difficulties Wiesel says exist in speaking about the Holocaust. Through this examination I will begin to build my case that Metz’s theology, specifically his theology of prayer, represents a viable form of theology after Auschwitz that

³⁷ Walker, *A Challenge to Theology*, 112.

³⁸ Walker, *A Challenge to Theology*, 112, quoting Emil L. Fackenheim, *To Mend the World: Foundations of Post-Holocaust Thought* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), 289. There, the passage is still quoted, with a footnote to an original essay by Fr. Lichtenberg: Bernhard Lichtenberg, “Lasset Uns Nun Beten Für Die Juden,” in *Das Dritte Reich Und Die Juden: Dokumente Und Aufsätze*, ed. Leon Poliakov and Josef Wulf, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Verlags GMBH, 1955), 432–37.

³⁹ Walker, *A Challenge to Theology*, 113.

⁴⁰ Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory*, 187.

would earn Wiesel's approval. I begin with a brief overview highlighting some key features of Metz's legacy and serving as an entry to a comparison with Wiesel.

Johann Baptist Metz

Metz is perhaps most remembered for formulating a form of political theology that aimed to be a "practical" fundamental theology. One of the key aims of this distinctive intervention was to resist the "privatizing tendencies inherent in the prevailing transcendental and existential theologies of the day," which Metz encountered in conceptions of the human person abstracted from concrete historical experience.⁴¹ His own goal was to bring people to see that history, including their social and political world, is the medium for Christian hope. In this way, Metz's theology took on a "practical" character.⁴² According to Metz, the Enlightenment promised human freedom through the phenomenon of emancipation, understood as the, "self-liberation of human groups and classes" from subservience, social oppression, and the condition of being underprivileged.⁴³ Yet, this solely inner-historical, self-fulfilling account of emancipation only offered a withered notion of future freedom to human beings that, as Steven Rodenborn writes, had trained people to "[locate] every hope and expectation for the future in the promises of policy engineering from the political left or right."⁴⁴ Additionally, the Enlightenment had warped individuals' perception of history to be one of an uninterrupted unfolding of progress. Such a notion of history could not permit remembrance of past suffering, since doing so would mar this envisioned trajectory.⁴⁵ As a result, the reality of such suffering was ignored and individuals were unable to respond with action, much less sympathize, with victims. A lack of sensitivity to suffering exacerbated the crisis of hope.⁴⁶

All of the above, Rodenborn notes, "moved Metz to argue that if Christian theology seeks to validate and contribute to an unfolding history of human freedom, it must first locate the theological resources needed to maintain a sensitivity to the horrifying reality of a history ever marked by suffering."⁴⁷ While initially hoping to offer a theoretical, critical correlation between the Enlightenment notion of emancipation and the Christian notion of redemption, Metz later realized, with the help of Frankfurt School interlocutors, that only "a practical apologetics in which human history is the essential medium by which hope is realized" could stir the modern individual out of his slumber.⁴⁸ Through deeper engagement with Marx, Metz began to appreciate how historical and social conditions shaped a person's desire for freedom. Marx observed that "[it] is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social

⁴¹ Steven M. Rodenborn, *Hope in Action: Subversive Eschatology in the Theology of Edward Schillebeeckx and Johann Baptist Metz* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 205, 247.

⁴² Rodenborn, *Hope in Action*, 205. See also Gaspar Martinez, *Confronting the Mystery of God: Political, Liberation, and Public Theologies* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 79 for the double sense of the church's "political" character.

⁴³ Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2007), 115–16.

⁴⁴ Metz, *Faith*, 240.

⁴⁵ Metz, *Faith*, 21, 240–41.

⁴⁶ Metz, *Faith*, 201.

⁴⁷ Metz, *Faith*, 201.

⁴⁸ Metz, *Faith*, 239–40, 247, 249–50. Hope for "critical resonance" was over, and Metz thought theological resources capable of "irritating and disrupting" were needed (*Faith*, 250).

existence that determines their consciousness.”⁴⁹ Rodenborn writes, “It was precisely this insight, advanced by Marx and further clarified in the writings of later critical theorists, that would draw Metz’s attention more acutely to the social and political conditioning of the modern interest in freedom and corresponding hope for the future.”⁵⁰ With this awareness that historical conditions shape a person’s capacity to desire freedom and hope, Metz was moved to offer a *practical* fundamental theology that emphasized how human history is in fact the medium by which hope is realized.⁵¹ Only with this kind of intervention, Rodenborn notes, did Metz think that a true message of hope could “be confessed, be heard, and begin to transform a world so profoundly marked by suffering and tragedy.”⁵²

Accordingly, Metz turned to three particular categories that he believed “would establish the historical conditions that make possible an alternate subjectivity in which a hope for all people might withstand the evolutionary pressures of the day.”⁵³ These three anthropological categories were memory, narrative, and the praxis of solidarity. Moreover, as we will explore more fully soon, Metz theorized prayer as a practice that employs all three of these categories. As we will see with our exploration of the Israelite-biblical paradigm shortly, a mysticism of suffering unto God remembers the stories of past suffering, begs God for answers, and moves those who pray to hope and action.

Although not imprisoned in a camp himself, Metz recounts the profound experience of being a sixteen-year-old soldier who, one day, after returning to his troop from an errand, found all his fellow soldiers dead, leaving behind “only vacant faces.”⁵⁴ When offering his own biographical itinerary in *A Passion for God*, published in 1998, Metz describes his deep disappointment with the lack of attention that the academic world of theology had paid to the catastrophe of Auschwitz. He writes, “Again and again since [1968] I have asked myself why one sees and hears so little in our theology of such a catastrophe, or of the whole history of human suffering.”⁵⁵ He writes that a theology after Auschwitz must resurrect the neglected principle that “even the logos of Christian theology is formed not simply by subjectless and historyless ideas, but rather at its very roots by a remembrancing.”⁵⁶ No longer can theology act as though it had nothing to do with the concrete world and its turmoil.⁵⁷

Metz’s account of the origins of Auschwitz directly pertains to his critique of the Enlightenment. Gaspar Martinez notes that, “with Adorno and Horkheimer, Metz thinks that Nazism and Auschwitz are not historical events due to isolated or particular factors but the consequence of systemic factors stemming from an Enlightenment that had become self-destructive.”⁵⁸ Furthermore, Martinez explains that Metz, again with Adorno and Horkheimer,

⁴⁹ Karl Marx, Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. S.W. Ryazanskaya (London: Lawrence & Whishart, 1971), 20.

⁵⁰ Rodenborn, *Hope in Action*, 219.

⁵¹ Rodenborn, *Hope in Action*, 247.

⁵² Rodenborn, *Hope in Action*, 250.

⁵³ Rodenborn, *Hope in Action*, 252.

⁵⁴ Schuster and Boschert-Kimmig, *Hope against Hope*, 4.

⁵⁵ Johann Baptist Metz, *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, translated by J. Matthew Ashley (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1998), 3.

⁵⁶ Metz, *A Passion for God*, 26.

⁵⁷ Metz, *A Passion for God*, 25–26.

⁵⁸ Martinez, *Confronting the Mystery of God*, 84.

has a systematic explanation of the Holocaust, “that directly relates to his political theology: the lack of anamnestic anchoring leaves reason in the hands of all kinds of ideological manipulations.”⁵⁹

At this point, we can begin to draw comparisons between Metz’s and Wiesel’s contributions to an understanding of the Holocaust. The first point to observe is that Metz can expand upon Wiesel’s own origin story of the Holocaust with his account of the Enlightenment’s malformation. We can observe this in the following way. Wiesel offers a multi-faceted account of the origins of the Holocaust which examines its cosmic and historical roots. As mentioned before, he describes the Holocaust as “something else” and, “a creation parallel to creation,” in some sense, happening on a plane separate from that of reality. And yet, though he understands the Holocaust as an “interruption of history,” he does not believe that it happened outside of history and mentions many possible historical causes. When considering its roots, he cites Luther’s statements on the Jews.⁶⁰ In an interview in *National Jewish Monthly* (Nov 1973), he states that Auschwitz “did not come in a void but as a chain of events,” and points to anti-Jewish sentiment and action among Catholics.⁶¹ Yet in other places, he points out not explicit anti-Semitism, but other factors. In *Hope against Hope*, Wiesel points to “rationalism” as a root cause but does not explain further what he means by this.⁶² In two separate White House addresses, he also points to widespread “indifference” and “neutrality,” while elsewhere, he laments how easily divided people could be in the 1940’s, adhering closely to religious and demographic borders, lacking a strong sense of universal solidarity.⁶³

Some of Wiesel’s points echo Metz’s concern that the Enlightenment-formed subject suffers from an inability to sympathize and hence hope or take action. What Metz has done is trace these vices to Enlightenment conceptions of history and freedom. Wiesel, at least in the above instances, mentions these vices without offering extensive commentary on their development. However, Metz can provide to Wiesel an extended account of the origins of the “rationalism” and “indifference” that facilitated the Holocaust, which he can offer not only in his own voice but also in concert with the cultural critics of the Frankfurt school who also criticized the problems resulting from an evolutionary account of history.

Metz offers illuminating responses to other aspects of Wiesel’s work as well. Specifically, he proposes a theology of prayer that can enact the moral transformation Wiesel considers essential. Towards the beginning of *The Courage to Pray*, co-authored with Karl Rahner, Metz writes that “the only convincing” answer to the question, “why is it still possible to pray after Auschwitz?,” is that, “even in Auschwitz, in the hell of Auschwitz, they prayed.”⁶⁴ As Andrew Prevot notes, for Metz, “their prayers—the prayers precisely of *these* Jewish victims—now constitute, in his judgment, a permanently indispensable criterion of legitimacy for his *own* prayers, as well as those of his fellow Christians and theologians.”⁶⁵ This choice of criterion, the way Metz positions

⁵⁹ Martinez, *Confronting the Mystery of God*, 85.

⁶⁰ Schuster and Boschert-Kimmig, *Hope Against Hope*, 71.

⁶¹ Wiesel, *Against Silence*, vol. II, 76.

⁶² Schuster and Boschert-Kimmig, *Hope Against Hope*, 71.

⁶³ Schuster and Boschert-Kimmig, *Hope Against Hope*, 150, 157, 162; Wiesel, *Against Silence*, vol. II, 166 & 177.

⁶⁴ Metz and Rahner, *The Courage to Pray*, 9.

⁶⁵ Andrew Prevot, *Thinking Prayer: Theology and Spirituality amid the Crisis of Modernity* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 202.

his theology, I argue, skillfully navigates the various challenges and necessities Wiesel identifies when speaking about the Holocaust. It does so by attending to the experiences of the victims and acknowledging their primacy in speaking about the event. In *From the Kingdom of Memory*, Wiesel writes that to understand the horrors of the Holocaust, “one must only connect them with the phenomenon of Birkenau. The anger of the young, the weariness of their parents, their common religious and quasi-religious yearnings for absolutes, all these things are rooted here.”⁶⁶ By taking his lead from the prayers of the victims and their raw devastation, Metz respects Wiesel’s statement. We will see more precisely how Metz does this when we explore the Israelite-biblical paradigm shortly.

Recall Wiesel’s assertion that prayer and mourning is the only proper response to Auschwitz and that any commentary or explanation of Auschwitz is “doomed in advance to fail.”⁶⁷ In a similar vein, Metz protests a style of theology that does not give space for cries of anguish and seals every question of “why suffering?” with an answer. In the portion of *Hope against Hope* dedicated to Metz, the German theologian reaffirms this point in several statements. He states critically, “The older Christianity gets, the more ‘affirmative’ it seems to become, the less negative theology it seems to tolerate, the more it tries to save itself from the times by ‘closing itself off.’”⁶⁸ He identifies as “a pressing task for theology” to draw attention to the fact that theologians seem to want to avoid contending with the troubling theodicy questions. Metz expresses the need for a theology that does not move past horrors. He admits,

Not even theology has an answer to every question; it really is not just a game of question and answer. Rightly understood, theological answers are of the sort that the questions and the cry are never forgotten. There are questions for which there are no answers, but theology has a language, a language which turns the questions back toward God. This is at any rate how I understand the so-called theodicy question.⁶⁹

From this passage, in addition to the opposition to a wholly “affirmative” theology, we also see another category emerging in Metz’s thought, namely, a language internal to theology which lets the theodicy questions be heard. This, as we will explore now, is the language of *prayer*. With Wiesel, Metz also favors prayer that prizes questions about suffering as the key mode of speaking to God after Auschwitz. For his part, Metz says that the language of prayer is “far more willing to take risks than the logos of theology” because of prayer’s familiarity with “the painfully enigmatic character of human existence, of how problematic it is in view of God.” For Metz, this language of prayer is “by and large much more dramatic and rebellious than the balanced and measured language of theology when it speaks ‘about’ God” because it is “much more unyielding, much more able to resist,” and “not ready to” either “fit in” or “[look] for any consensus or approval among men and women.”⁷⁰

To be clear, Metz does not believe that in prayer Christians should voice their lament to God without any sense of hope. Christ’s resurrection and victory over death gives hope, but Metz finds it crucial to offer the reminder that the Easter resurrection is preceded by Holy Saturday

⁶⁶ Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory*, 116.

⁶⁷ Schuster and Boschert-Kimmig, *Hope Against Hope*, 76.

⁶⁸ Schuster and Boschert-Kimmig, *Hope Against Hope*, 46.

⁶⁹ Schuster and Boschert-Kimmig, *Hope Against Hope*, 44.

⁷⁰ Schuster and Boschert-Kimmig, *Hope Against Hope*, 43.

and Good Friday.⁷¹ “The story of a journey is integral to Christology,” argues Metz.⁷² In letting theodicy be central to prayer, Metz is able to reach the audience he wants to reach: “people who have no intact, undamaged images of hope, for those whose childhood dreams have fallen apart.” Their questions should not be treated “in the antechamber to ‘real’ theology,” not only because so many people are in this situation, but also because Good Friday, when Christ uttered his own cry of forsakenness, is part of the journey to Easter.⁷³ It is both by believing and doing theology under the aspect of the journey from Good Friday to Easter, in this tension of sorrow and hope, that the eschatological doctrines, such as Christ’s second coming, can be brought back to the heart of Christology.

Metz’s elaboration of a theology of prayer is vividly presented in his work, *A Passion for God*. Here, Metz identifies the prayers of Jews in Auschwitz as “the basis of Jewish-Christian ecumenism,” which also “has consequences for Christian theology and its treatment of the theodicy question.”⁷⁴ These consequences take the form of “a corrective to the prevailing theological approaches” that Metz issues for the sake of “[forcing] the contemporary theological treatment of the theodicy question back upon certain fundamental characteristics of the biblical experience of God and of discourse about God.”⁷⁵ The corrective is to retrieve repressed or forgotten elements in Christian theology,” which he encapsulates under the “Israelite-biblical paradigm.”⁷⁶ Metz says that this paradigm is crucial not only for Christian theology but also for the faith of Christians in general, who need to understand how to look at Auschwitz “with the eyes of faith.” This paradigm will enable them, in the spirit of the journey from Good Friday to Easter, both to be troubled by the cries of the victims and to hope.⁷⁷

This paradigm is composed of three elements that ought to be considered, not discrete elements, but rather as related dimensions of one posture of prayer. The first is the awareness of the “fundamental anamnestic structure of mind and spirit,” which Metz describes as “something original for thought and for the spirit [*Geist*].”⁷⁸ Metz specifies at one point that this as an epistemology of thought as memory, “as historical remembrancing.” This memory is narrative and historical, as contrasted with thought in terms of ahistorical abstractions. Yet, memory is not solely an epistemological category for Metz, but also a practical one. The original German, *geschichtliches Eingedenken*, indicates that remembering happens not only in the realm of thought but

⁷¹ Schuster and Boschert-Kimmig, *Hope Against Hope*, 45–46.

⁷² Schuster and Boschert-Kimmig, *Hope Against Hope*, 46.

⁷³ Schuster and Boschert-Kimmig, *Hope Against Hope*, 45.

⁷⁴ Metz, *A Passion for God*, 63.

⁷⁵ Metz, *A Passion for God*, 63.

⁷⁶ Metz, *A Passion for God*, 63. It should be noted that Metz intentionally characterizes his corrective as exhibiting a “one-sidedness,” one that knows that it emphasizes the weaker elements of a pre-existing phenomenon and argues for the contrary view, without pausing to account for any weaknesses of that view. I highlight this point to note that Metz is aware that he is vigorously arguing for a retrieval of certain forgotten elements of the Christian tradition, and while not unaware of criticisms of his retrieval, he will not address them. That said, as later authors, we can address them. One prominent one we should note is that Metz sometimes speaks as though there is one unified “biblical experience of God” and “biblical experience of discourse about God.” At a later point he contrasts a “neo-Pagan way of thinking” from “biblical thinking” in terms of a covenant of love and justice (70). Yet the witness of historical and critical biblical studies will note the challenge of speaking of one, univocal, “biblical” perspective on any topic in the Hebrew Bible and/or New Testament. Aware of this shortcoming, we can still recognize that Metz is retrieving aspects of the style of prayer found among the Hebrew Bible authors.

⁷⁷ Metz, *A Passion for God*, 63, 71.

⁷⁸ Metz, *A Passion for God*, 64.

also in that of action. Here we see Metz's ambition to offer a *practical* theology come to light. Metz suggests that precisely this kind of remembrancing is lacking in contemporary Europe and European Christianity, but that it is proper to Christian thought and action because it is rooted in "biblical traditions" rather than "late-Greek thought regarding being and identity."⁷⁹

The second trait of the paradigm is Israel's poverty of spirit, which Metz characterizes as an acute awareness of suffering. He describes it as "a particular sort of defenselessness, of poverty, in a certain sense Israel's incapacity successfully to distance itself from the contradictions, the terrors and chasms of life."⁸⁰ In the face of tremendous pain and suffering, Israel, in Metz's view, "showed little talent for forgetting, and at the same time little talent for spontaneous idealistic ways of dealing with disillusionment and disappointment."⁸¹ While seemingly disadvantageous, the lack of such talents expresses precisely the poverty of spirit that is integral to Israel's faithfulness to God: Israel would bring its questions about suffering back to Yahweh and to no other god or myth.⁸²

Closely related to this intense awareness of suffering, the third component of this paradigm is a language of prayer, which Metz calls a "mysticism of suffering unto God." Such mysticism can be found in Israel's prayer traditions exemplified by passages from the Psalms, Job, Lamentations, and the prophetic books.⁸³ Generally, this way of praying exudes the pain of suffering, avoids exaggerated affirmations of consolations, and accepts fear, mourning, and pain rather than repressing them. New Testament examples of this mysticism of suffering include Jesus' cry of abandonment in Matthew's and Mark's Gospels, which itself is an echo of Psalm 22.⁸⁴ These biblical stories, Metz argues, preclude us from expecting God to be "a consolation that gives us the satisfaction of being consoled;" such expectation would amount to a serious misunderstanding of the nature of consolation itself. For Metz, God gives himself as a consolation, but he does not grant immediate gratification, because, strictly speaking, God has promised no other consolation than God. As Metz puts it, "to ask God for God, is finally what Jesus has to say to his disciples about prayer (Lk 11:1–13, esp. vv. 11, 13)," and so no biblical narrative can support one's retreat to "a mythical realm of tensionless harmony and questionless reconciliation with ourselves."⁸⁵ Nor does a mysticism that expresses the anguish of pain and the sense of abandonment entail disbelief in God's power and capacity to deliver humans from suffering, as both Israel and Jesus have expressed faithfulness and trust in God by directing their questions and cries to God and being satisfied with no smaller comforts.

At this point in *A Passion for God*, Metz even mentions one of Wiesel's narratives approvingly. Wiesel asked a sexton of Sighet, "why do you pray to God when you know that no one can understand his answers?" The sexton replied, "so that he might give me the power to ask

⁷⁹ Metz, *A Passion for God*, 64–65.

⁸⁰ Metz, *A Passion for God*, 65.

⁸¹ Metz, *A Passion for God*, 66.

⁸² Metz, *A Passion for God*, 66. While it would be helpful for readers' understanding to offer scriptural examples at this point, Metz does not do so.

⁸³ Metz, *A Passion for God*, 66. Metz only mentions these books by name but does not cite particular passages as examples.

⁸⁴ Metz, *A Passion for God*, 67. It is important to note that the experiences of Job, Jesus, and others are contained in narratives, from which we later distill theory.

⁸⁵ Metz, *A Passion for God*, 68.

the right questions.”⁸⁶ Metz sees this as an illustration of Israel’s and Jesus’ mysticism of suffering unto God.

Ultimately, Metz sees the Israelite-biblical paradigm culminating in a return to a long-forgotten conception of theology, that is, theodicy *as* theology.⁸⁷ This conception of theology, as Matthew Ashley describes it, “should never see its goal as ‘solving’ the question of suffering, but rather as sheltering it and clearing a space for it to irritate us, and thereby to move us to hope, to remembering the great deeds of God, to resistance, to action.”⁸⁸ Crucially, we should note that Metz’s “theology versus prayer” distinction has been dissolved. Before, “theology” was associated with the “official language” of theology at the time, which envisioned a subject abstracted from history and failed to appreciate history’s mediation of hope. However, at this point, Metz’s recommendation to center theodicy in theological exploration makes the nature of prayer—rooted in a biblical mysticism of suffering unto God—and the nature of theology one and the same: both raise questions about suffering to God and both draw on memory to find hope and motivation for future solidary action.

What we see is that Metz’s vision of prayer fits many of the criteria Wiesel has for theology after Auschwitz. Recall Wiesel’s criteria: a theology after the Holocaust should (1) be conducted in a manner that attends to the experiences of those who endured it and honors their imperative and priority to speak about it, (2) not avoid troubling questions about God’s permission of suffering, (3) give space to a form of faithfulness that does not exclude lamentations directed towards God, and (4) recognize the tension to be held between despair and rejecting despair. Metz’s vision of prayer answers these criteria. (1a) He takes seriously the historical fact of the victims’ prayers and sees in their witness a prompt to undertake the corrective exercise of retrieving the Israelite-biblical paradigm. (2a) The paradigm’s poverty of spirit and mysticism of suffering does not avoid troubling questions but brings them precisely to God. Herein lies Metz’s “mysticism of open eyes,” which coincides perfectly with Wiesel’s command that one has to speak about the Holocaust because, “one had to force man to look.”⁸⁹ (3a) Furthermore, we see that Metz describes Israel’s capacity for God, its faithfulness, as its manner of bringing its sorrows to God alone. (4a) Finally, by attempting to renew Christology so that Christians never think of Easter Sunday without Good Friday, Metz echoes the tension Wiesel also believes exists between hope and despair. As Wiesel observed in his reflection on Job as a model of faith, “Because I remember, I despair. Because I remember, I have a duty to reject despair.”⁹⁰ Hence, from the correlations between Wiesel’s criteria for theology and Metz’s theology of prayer, we can appreciate that the German theologian shows us a way to continue to speak about and be in relationship with God after Auschwitz.

⁸⁶ Metz, *A Passion for God*, 67; originally cited from Elie Wiesel, *The Night Trilogy* (New York: Noonday Press, 1988), 15.

⁸⁷ Towards the beginning of *A Passion for God*, Metz writes, “As I became conscious of the situation after Auschwitz, the God-question forced itself on me in its strangest, most ancient and most controversial form, as the theodicy question; not in its existential but, to a certain degree, in its political garb: discourse about God as the cry for the salvation of others, of those who suffer unjustly, of the victims and the vanquished in our history” (ibid., 18).

⁸⁸ James Matthew Ashley, *Interruptions: Mysticism, Politics, and Theology in the Work of Johann Baptist Metz* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 18.

⁸⁹ Martinez, *Confronting the Mystery of God*, 79. Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory*, 15.

⁹⁰ Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory*, 248.

Yet, it is not just that the style of prayer Metz articulates may have found approval by Wiesel. Connecting the Israelite-biblical paradigm more explicitly to Metz's aforementioned critique of the Enlightenment helps one to see how Metz provides a vision of prayer which can interrelate Wiesel's moral imperatives. When Wiesel speaks about memory, the objects of memories are predominantly the lives of the dead. Additionally, Wiesel speaks about prayer primarily as a means of mourning and raising one's questions and anger to God. I argue that Metz can offer a multi-faceted notion of prayer which shows how prayer can accomplish many of the tasks of moral reformation that Wiesel considers necessary.

As just observed, in *A Passion for God*, Metz speaks explicitly about the roots of this remembrance, poverty, and mysticism in connection with biblical traditions. However, in an earlier work, his landmark *Faith in History & Society*, one finds reference to these concepts as part of Israel's history of faith, this time with greater connection to his Enlightenment critique. Recall, Metz believes it is imperative to move past the false Enlightenment notions of identity and freedom built on the principle of exchange, and of history as unimpeded progress. In doing so, individuals can move towards true understandings of their subjecthood, that is, their identity. In *Faith*, Metz writes:

The histories of faith found in the Old Testament and New Testament are not added on to a humanity that has already been constituted as subjects, superimposed as some sort of superstructure or ceremonial accessory. Rather, they are histories of the dramatic constitution of human beings as subjects—precisely through their relationship to God.⁹¹

In *Passion*, Metz has outlined several key dimensions of the history of Israel's life of faith: remembrancing, poverty of spirit, and a mysticism of suffering unto God. Now, one can see that Metz is arguing that these are the practices, these practices of prayer, which constitute individuals as subjects authentically. Metz affirms this precisely when he says that Israel's "relationship with God does not become the expression of a slavish subjection...[r]ather, it compels them over and again to be subjects in the face of that which most radically threatens that way of being." Metz would argue that Israel was threatened into a false identity and non-subjecthood by the myths of comfort proffered by the promises of foreign cultures or gods, which would lead them to stray from being God's chosen people. In his own time, Metz found the promise of an "identity that is structured by having and by possessing" as the false identity needing to be resisted at that time.⁹²

As Metz elaborates on prayer as a way for people not only to mourn but also to admit their guilt, he illustrates its power in greater fullness. In *Faith*, he says that "prayer compels the one who prays to remain a subject and not to defer one's responsibility when confronted with one's own guilt. It demands that the one who prays remains a subject in the face of one's enemies, in the face of the fear of losing one's name, one's identity, one's very self."⁹³ Andrew Prevot notes that for Metz, the subject constituted in prayer materializes "precisely through the ownership that it takes for its actions and the openness with which it encounters even the possibly

⁹¹ Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 70.

⁹² Metz, *Faith*, 71.

⁹³ Metz, *Faith*, 71.

hostile other.”⁹⁴ Thus, Metz unites prayer with recognition of responsibility and articulates a standard of human subjectivity that requires sensitivity to, and solidarity with, others.

What can now be appreciated is that Metz can offer to Wiesel an expanded conception of the power of prayer which includes the self-transformation Wiesel says is so necessary for people living in the late 20th century. While Wiesel does not link prayer to responsibility, he does insist on the importance both for recognizing responsibility and overcoming insensitivity to others’ suffering.⁹⁵ For Metz, prayer requires admission of guilt. Additionally, Metz hopes that prayer will ward off the deleterious effects of the Enlightenment, which include the tyranny of an exchange mentality and subsequent insensitivity to the suffering of others. Metz and Wiesel concur in their assessments that a loss of awareness of, and sympathy for, victims of suffering, coupled with a focus on maximizing one’s own comforts, has drained contemporary society of key virtues such as friendship, community, spontaneity, and thankfulness.⁹⁶ Wiesel also states in *Hope against Hope* that, after Auschwitz, not enough people are living up to the “ideal of humanity,” to the kindness and sensitivity that ought to characterize their behavior.⁹⁷ With the identification of prayer as a memorative therapy for the self-centeredness of the Enlightenment subject, Metz has located a solution to a variety of concerns he and Wiesel share.

Metz, in collaboration with Karl Rahner, shows how prayer can in fact give the dead agency. This latter point is eminently clear in *The Courage to Pray*, a book co-authored by Metz and Karl Rahner. Though Rahner wrote the last chapter on cultivating solidarity with the dead, he notes that his reflections here are especially congenial with Metz’s thought. Imagining that someone asks about the purpose of cultivating this solidarity, Rahner asks, “Must it serve a purpose in order to be meaningful and necessary? This is surely what humanity should be about.” He goes on to argue that through this solidarity, the dead can strengthen the living. By affirming the reality of the dead, we the living are better able to “face God and eternity.” The dead withdraw the living from the exaggerated anxieties of the world and “enable us to face the events of our lives with a calmness which makes it possible for us to pray.”⁹⁸ The effect of his remarks, offered in union with Metz, is to endow the dead with wisdom and agency.

What is coming into the picture is the multivalence of Metz’s notion of prayer: not only does it express mourning and ask God for answers to suffering, as Wiesel envisions the practice of prayer to do. It also does not let those who pray escape responsibility for wrongdoing. This can eventually move them into a truer perception of themselves. Moreover, it is a form of resistance to apathy and a means of empowering the dead. The moral imperatives Wiesel places upon those who live in the wake of Auschwitz are unified in Metz’s vision of prayer. Additionally, Metz has identified a means of bringing about the moral transformation Wiesel says is so crucial for society.

⁹⁴ Prevot, *Thinking Prayer*, 185–86.

⁹⁵ Schuster and Boschert-Kimmig, *Hope against Hope*, 86, 99–100.

⁹⁶ Matthiesen, “Narrative of Suffering: Complementary Reflections of Theological Anthropology in Johann Metz and Elie Wiesel,” 50.

⁹⁷ Schuster and Boschert-Kimmig, *Hope Against Hope*, 80–81.

⁹⁸ Metz and Rahner, *The Courage to Pray*, 86.

Criticisms and Responses

At this point, a potential tension between the two authors should be noted. As a Christian, Metz emphasizes that the Christian faith fundamentally remembers the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ.⁹⁹ This memory of Christ is linked to the lives of the oppressed because, as a “dangerous and liberating” memory, it promises “a future for the hopeless, the shattered and oppressed.”¹⁰⁰ Wiesel, as a Jew, would neither have this central set of memories at the core of faith, nor recognize the church as the institution that serves the purpose of witnessing to this dangerous memory in the world.¹⁰¹ Christian would expect Christ’s resurrection to introduce something new and radical to the practices of prayer and hope already fostered by the promises of God to Israel, generating a rift between Metz’s and Wiesel’s styles of prayer and theology.

And yet, at times, scholars have wondered whether Metz has properly accounted for the distinctiveness of Christianity. Andrew Prevot observes that, “in order to correct an excess in the opposite direction, Metz may risk aligning Christianity so closely with Judaism that Christianity’s own distinctiveness begins to be underemphasized.”¹⁰² Prevot points to the fact that it is hard to distinguish between the positions of Metz and the Jewish poet Nelly Sachs when they speak of the “unsettling closeness” of God to those in distress. Though Metz identifies such closeness not only in “the prayer tradition of Israel,” but also in Jesus’s prayer on the cross, Prevot notes that, since “the latter is intelligible only in the context of the former, this difference proves less momentous than one might expect.”¹⁰³ Additionally, one could observe that in *A Passion for God*, Metz does not seem to distinguish significantly between the mysticisms found in Job, Psalms, Lamentations, and Jesus on the cross, even as he calls Jesus’ cry of abandonment on the cross an “exemplary” form of the mysticism of suffering unto God.¹⁰⁴

Prevot recommends that we understand Metz’s efforts charitably as those of a Christian theologian who takes seriously the prayers of the victims in Auschwitz and their traditions.¹⁰⁵ It may also be helpful to recall Metz’s self-conscious observation that his corrections issued to Christian theology with the return to biblical paradigms would be “one-sided” insofar as he would argue a point without necessarily exploring its shortcomings.

As Metz’s theology stands, his conception of following Christ, and Wiesel’s core exhortation to remember, both demand that listeners adopt a pattern of solidary action. In *Followers of Christ*, Metz characterizes Christ’s poverty as a “poverty of spirit” that involves not holding back in fear but giving of oneself unsparingly, “for his sake and moved by his love.”¹⁰⁶ Metz writes that “this mystical poverty continually protests afresh against those who follow [Christ],” but who maintain a habit of “bringing their lives under the tyranny of having and possessing.” This mystical poverty possesses a practical-political component of solidarity with

⁹⁹ Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 88.

¹⁰⁰ Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 89.

¹⁰¹ Martínez, *Confronting the Mystery of God*, 79.

¹⁰² Prevot, *Thinking Prayer*, 206, 211.

¹⁰³ Prevot, *Thinking Prayer*, 211.

¹⁰⁴ Metz, *A Passion for God*, 67.

¹⁰⁵ Metz, *A Passion for God*, 206.

¹⁰⁶ Johann Baptist Metz, *Followers of Christ: Perspectives on Religious Life*, trans. Thomas Linton (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 48.

those who are poor “in the social and political sense.”¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, the expectation of Christ’s second coming, the Parousia, should not lead believers to abandon the practical demands of following Christ, but rather to recommit to them. Quoting Matthew 25, Metz describes this as a “thoroughly apocalyptic” passage, “since awareness of the end and of the judgment is linked in it with the idea of the necessity of active commitment to others, for ‘the least of the brethren.’”¹⁰⁸ In short, imitating Christ, according to Metz’s formulation, would also be a form of adhering to Wiesel’s core exhortation to remember—and hence, to find hope and courage to take solidaristic action. We could even say that Metz can offer Wiesel a notion of memory as a *practical* category insofar as it transforms not only what individuals think but how they act and who they become: responsible, repentant, and compassionate, or forgetful and apathetic.

Conclusion

What can one say to Elie Wiesel’s charge that there can be no theology “after” or “about” Auschwitz? On the basis of his literary and personal legacy, I have argued that Wiesel does in fact envision a future way of speaking about God—one that lets the memory of past suffering and God’s previous acts of deliverance spur hope and action for a better future. Moreover, I have shown that Johann Baptist Metz, a German Catholic priest, provides a form of Christian theology after Auschwitz that could have earned Wiesel’s approval. Most crucially, Metz’s theology of prayer does not try to stifle questions about the meaning of suffering; it knows that faith is still alive in those who ask these questions. Additionally, Metz’s account of prayer identifies a means of transformation that Wiesel believes so many people living in modern societies need. What Metz shows is that Christian theology after the Holocaust can continue so long as forgotten elements of the tradition are retrieved. It need not lose its roots as it moves into the future.



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¹⁰⁷ Metz, *Followers of Christ*, 48–49.

¹⁰⁸ Metz, *Followers of Christ*, 79.