

Article

Father and God (the Father) in Wiesel's *Night* as Response to the Holocaust

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Abstract: The proposed paper will begin by looking at the father–son relationship in Elie Wiesel's *Night*. I will then briefly note the father–child relationship between God and Israel in the prophets of the Hebrew Bible. I will link the two challenges evident in Wiesel's *Night* and in his continuing thought after the Shoah—the loss of family and the loss of God, his faith and/or his understanding of God—and note how these affect one another. After further assessing Wiesel's father imagery in *Night*, I will note how Wiesel's story, eventually making its way into the current version of *Night*, played a critical role in affecting the thought of Christian leaders and post-Holocaust Jewish–Christian reconciliation efforts.

Keywords: Holocaust; Shoah; post-Holocaust; Elie Wiesel; *Night*; religiosity; Jewish–Christian relations; father–son

1. Introduction

The Holocaust/Shoah has left behind countless afflicted hearts and souls who lived through its unrelenting fire, most of whose stories will never be known. But those that have shared their experiences have affected generations in the comprehension of what the Holocaust was and what unrelenting hate (of wicked people), alongside the unwillingness to stand for what was right (of “good” people who did nothing), can produce. Elie Wiesel's *Night* is one of those stories.

Wiesel's memoir of his experience of the Holocaust through *Night* (first published in French as *La Nuit*) gave multitudes a tiny window in. Wiesel's story reflects on his family and the Jewish community in his hometown and religious life prior to the deportations. He then chronicles his own and his family's experience of the deportations and then his and his father's experience of Auschwitz and Buchenwald. Wiesel's narrative features his agonizing questions, particularly in relation to his God, and in relation to his father and their experience of suffering together. Wiesel's original Yiddish version, *Un di Velt hot Geshvign* (And the World Remained Silent), is a longer and more raw narrative written for a (Yiddish-speaking) Jewish audience, also containing a more extensive examination of his relationship with his father in Auschwitz and detailing his weight of guilt in relationship to his father's death (Franklin 2011; Wiesel 1995).

I will look at Wiesel and his father's relationship as represented in *Night* and assess how this may have affected his understanding and experience of God during and after the Holocaust, particularly in connection to the Hebrew Bible. I will then briefly note the influence of *Night* and Wiesel on Christian leaders, many of whom became involved in Holocaust education and Jewish–Christian dialogue. I will begin with the renowned French Catholic writer François Mauriac, who encouraged Wiesel to write and publish his story (Mauriac 2006, pp. xvii–xxi).

2. Wiesel's Life and Work as Holocaust/Shoah Response

Before delving into Elie Wiesel's representation of his experience of the Holocaust, particularly with his father, in Auschwitz, as represented in *Night*, I will briefly look at his life prior to the war to contextualize his experience and his story. Wiesel was born in 1928



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to an Orthodox Jewish family in Sighet, Romania (which became a part of Hungary during World War II), his mother Sarah being particularly devout. His parents owned a store and his father Shlomo was respected in their community, being seen by Wiesel as “cultured” and “unsentimental,” rarely displaying his feelings, and spending more time involved in the welfare of those in the community than in his family (Wiesel 1995, 2006, p. 4). Sighet’s Jewish population was just over 10,000 in 1941 and made up almost forty percent of the town’s population (Marton and Schweiger 2020). It was one of the last European Jewish communities to be deported to the death camps as a part of the Hungarian deportations in mid-1944.

Elie Wiesel grew up learning Hebrew, the Torah and the Talmud with a strong influence from his maternal grandfather who was a prominent Hasid (Bard 2016). He was a particularly observant young man, wept when he prayed and was always eager to learn more about the God of his fathers (Wiesel 2006, pp. 3–5). The young Wiesel, prior to his experience of the Holocaust and his related cavernous losses, displayed a deep spirituality. His faith and spirituality, his upbringing and most of his family and community, were dealt one death blow after another alongside the lives of millions of other Jews throughout Europe.

Wiesel’s experience of the degradation and darkness of the Holocaust, beginning at the age of fifteen, turned his life into a nightmare that he would never shake. Between the holidays of Passover and Shavuot (in May) of 1944, he, his parents and his three sisters (as well as most of Sighet’s Jewish community) were expelled and deported to Auschwitz (Wiesel 2006, pp. 10–12, 21–22). The innocence of his childhood was shattered, and his spirituality was quickly ripped away. His experience of the death camps and the loss of his father, his mother and one sister in the camps would affect his religiosity and his understanding of God throughout his life, as evidenced in his writings.

It is difficult to assess which factors most poignantly contributed to Wiesel’s response to the Holocaust as contained in his writings. We can, however, explore varying possibilities. One factor, Wiesel’s formative age during his experience of his world, his family and his faith falling apart, surely played a role. Beyond the occupation by the Germans, the creation of the ghettos and the shock of the deportations, Wiesel and his family entered the most infamous place in the world, Auschwitz, where they were immediately divided—he and his father sent to one place and his mother and sisters sent elsewhere (Wiesel 2006, pp. 29–31, 38). His death camp experience, including the slow but definitive loss of his father, moment by moment and hour by hour began. The tearing away of everything that mattered to this young man, including his awareness of God and the God of his people, left him in an abyss of darkness. Wiesel’s belief and religiosity, and his ability or inability to find hope and life in God during and after the events of the Holocaust, bear witness in some sense to what the Holocaust itself was: a momentary absence of God and of good.

Wiesel’s sense of loss, the loss of God and thereby the loss of hope, cries out on his first night at Auschwitz as illustrated below. Despite Wiesel’s articulate telling, his devastation saturates the words of *Night*, representing, with infamous poignancy, what the Holocaust did to those who experienced it:

Never shall I forget that night, that 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 those things, even were I condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never (Wiesel 1985, p. 43).

Wiesel points to the beginning of his experience at Auschwitz as the end of his life, the end of the day and the beginning of his ongoing night, exemplifying the title of the book. Wiesel’s “seven times cursed and seven times sealed” alludes to a cycle of the curse of captivity to sin and death and then being sealed in the book of life that will not and cannot

be broken despite one's desire to exit. The word picture of flames consuming Wiesel's faith leads one to images of the crematorium consuming the bodies of his Jewish brothers and sisters—Auschwitz consumed not only bodies but the hope, humanity and faith contained within the soul. The agony of Wiesel's words, particularly those describing the “nocturnal silence which deprived” him of the desire to live, are reminiscent of Job's anguish:

Let the day perish on which I was to be born, And the night which said, 'A boy is conceived.' May that day be darkness; Let not God above care for it, Nor light shine on it. Let darkness and black gloom claim it . . . Why is light given to him who suffers, And life to the bitter of soul, who long for death, but there is none, And dig for it more than for hidden treasures, . . . I am not at ease, nor am I quiet, And I am not at rest, but turmoil comes (Job 3:3–5, 20–21, 26 New American Standard Bible).

Only days after arriving at Auschwitz, Wiesel notes how much both he and his father have changed, “I glanced over at my father. How changed he looked! His eyes were veiled . . . I too had become a different person. The student of Talmud, the child I was, had been consumed by the flames . . . my soul had been invaded—and devoured—by a black flame” (Wiesel 2006, p. 37). The veiled eyes of his father and Wiesel's consumed, invaded and devoured soul shout of the agony they have begun to experience, his father on the outside, Wiesel on the inside. Throughout *Night*, in poetic imagery, Wiesel continuously alludes to the annihilation of his own soul, particularly in relation to his faith, during the process of his father's dying and his brethren's extermination.

The Jewish religious response of those who survived the Holocaust varies greatly with many factors involved. Wiesel is a part of this response, never quite letting go of the God of his fathers but wrestling throughout his life as evidenced by his writings and his work. His experience of the Holocaust, his thought about the God of Israel and his connection to his father are poignantly revealed in *Night*. I will briefly take note of the characterization of God as a father in the Hebrew Scriptures and then assess Wiesel's relationship to the loss of his father in the Holocaust with the concept of God as father and how these ideas may correspond with one another as a part of Wiesel's response to the Holocaust.

3. God the Father in Wiesel's Scriptures

3.1. The God of Israel as Father in the Hebrew Bible

A quick assessment of God as a father in the Hebrew Bible finds God choosing a man to follow Him¹ to a place and into a relationship, and to then become a father of a people and then of many nations (Genesis 12:1–3), arguably because the God of the Hebrew Bible is a father (אב or Av). A relationship grows between God and this man and his wife (Abram and Sarai) and Abram builds altars to and calls upon God (Genesis 12:7–8, 13:3–4, 14–18). God enters into covenant (ברית or Brit in Hebrew) with Abram, changes his name to Abraham, “a father of many nations” (Genesis 15:12–18, 17:1–5) and his wife's to Sarah (“princess” of many peoples) (Bible Gateway 1988; Hirsch et al. 2020), solidifying the promises he has already given to Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 17:1–22, 32:24–28).

God's relationship with Abraham and Sarah is like that of a father to his children, leading them and continually calling Himself, “the God of your father(s)—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” and calling Abraham's lineage “children” or more specifically, “the children of Israel” (Genesis 26:24, 28:13, 31:42, 32:32, 36:31; Exodus 3:6, 15 are just a few examples). God's forthright self-revelation as a father, particularly Israel's father, comes to the forefront in the Exodus story when God, via Moses, declares to Pharaoh, “Israel is My son, My firstborn” and then demands of Pharaoh, “let My son go that he may serve Me” (Exodus 4:22–23). God is again identified as Israel's father in Deuteronomy (1:31) and then, with stunning imagery, the voice of God through the prophets calls the people of Israel back to Torah and back to Himself as their father, shepherd, and the one who cares for their soul.

¹ In following with Wiesel's writing and the references to God in the third person in English translations of the Hebrew Bible, Him and Himself is capitalized.

Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel's seminal work on the prophets of Israel gave definition to the Hebrew prophets as ones created by God who experienced the pathos of the Divine while sharing experience with, and attachment to, his or her people (the Hebrew people, or the people of Israel). Where Heschel (a friend and mentor of Wiesel who also escaped Nazi Europe) sees the prophet as living between the God of Israel and His people, carrying a profound love for both and living to reconcile the two by calling upon the people of Israel to return to their King and Father (Heschel 1962, pp. xv, 19, 21), Wiesel sees the prophet as one who must choose between the King and Father of Israel and His people, rather than reconcile them (Wiesel 2003, pp. 186–87). Might Wiesel's concept of the prophet come from the degradation of his own father, and the coinciding degradation of his trust in the God and Father of Israel? Additionally, Wiesel writes that his father ignores early warnings given by prophet-type figures (in *Night*) and does not take opportunity to escape (Mueller 2019). These fate-altering decisions for Wiesel and his family could not have gone unnoticed in Wiesel's later conceptions of God, his father and the prophets. Because Wiesel could not bear to blame his father whom he says he did not really know (but desperately wanted to) for ignoring the warnings of coming destruction; he blames his God for the position the prophet is put in, as noted above (Wiesel 1995, 2006). In order to better connect these dots and note the continuity of the representation of God as a father in the Hebrew Bible, we will briefly assess God as a father and caretaker in the prophets.

3.2. God as Father and Caretaker in the Prophets

Of the many prophetic passages revealing God as a loving father or a caring shepherd, a few short excerpts from Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Hosea will be noted beginning with Ezekiel. Ezekiel chapter 16 paints a detailed picture of God as the father of an orphaned baby (Jerusalem) who has been rejected, left alone, and not cared for but whom God cares for:

As for your birth, on the day you were born your umbilical cord was not cut nor were you washed in water for cleansing . . . No eye pitied you (nor had) compassion (on you.) . . . "When I passed by you, and saw you kicking in your blood. I said to you, 'In your blood, live!' . . . I made you grow . . . I spread the corner of my garment over you . . . I swore to you and entered into a covenant with you," says Adonai. "So you became Mine . . . I adorned you . . . Your fame spread among the nations because of your beauty, for it was perfect, through My splendor, which I bestowed on you (Ezekiel 16:4–14 Tree of Life Version).

Ezekiel chapter 34 presents God as the shepherd father and rescuer of Israel who cares for His sheep/children when their leaders care only for themselves:

I will seek out My sheep and deliver them from all the places they were scattered on a cloudy and dark day . . . I will bring them to their own land . . . I will feed My flock and make them lie down . . . "I will seek the lost, bring back the stray, bind up the broken and strengthen the sick . . . "I will make a covenant of shalom with them . . . they will know that I am Adonai, when I have . . . delivered them from the hand of those who enslaved them. They will no longer be prey to the nations . . . They will know that I, Adonai their God, am with them. They, the house of Israel, are My people (Ezekiel 34:12–30 New King James Version, TLV).

God, through Jeremiah (chapter 31:8) declares, "I am Israel's father, and Ephraim is My firstborn." In this chapter, God is again revealed as the father and shepherd who gathers and watches over his people, ransoming and redeeming them and bringing them out of hopelessness, despair, mourning and sorrow (Jeremiah 31:9–13 TLV).

The following passages from Isaiah chapters 43, 46 and 49 reveal God as the one who created and bore Israel and Israel's father and/or mother who continually thinks of and longs for their child:

But now, thus says Adonai— the One who created you, O Jacob, the One who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are Mine" (Isaiah 43:1).

Listen to Me, house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, borne by Me from birth, carried from the womb. Even to your old age I will be the same, until you are gray I will carry you. I have done it; I will bear you; I will carry you; I will deliver you (Isaiah 46:3–4).

But Zion said: “Adonai has forsaken me, Adonai has forgotten me.” “Can a woman forget her nursing baby or lack compassion for a child of her womb? Even if these forget, I will not forget you. Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of My hands. Your walls are continually before Me” (Isaiah 49:14–16).

Hosea fourteen reveals God as one in whom the orphans find mercy:

Return O Israel, to Adonai your God . . . “Take away all iniquity, and accept what is good, so we may repay with offerings of our lips . . . for with You, orphans find mercy.” “I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely, for My anger will turn away from him. I will be like dew for Israel” (Hosea 14:2–7).

Above is a very brief look at the depiction of God as a committed and loving father, and a tender, compassionate caretaker. God’s self-revelation as a father to the people of Israel in the Biblical prophets is that of one who will rescue, restore and take care of his children when they are in need. These Biblical ideas are unsurprisingly problematic to Holocaust survivors, their families and to the Jewish community at large, yet despite the catastrophic losses suffered by the Jewish people at the hands of the Nazi Germans and their collaborators, the cessation of Nazi Germany’s Final Solution to the Jewish Question and the preservation of a remnant of European Jewry could either testify to, or fly in the face of, these concepts. Wiesel and his writings illustrate this dilemma.

In light of the ideas and pictures of God as a father, in the prophets, throughout the Hebrew Bible, and in Israelite history, the experience of one’s father as it reflects upon one’s religiosity and comprehension of God plays a central role. To a deeply religious young man, such as Wiesel, these Scriptures and ideas were well-known. How might Wiesel’s firsthand experience of the complete deterioration of his father have affected Wiesel as it related to God and to the above depictions of God? These ideas and questions inform my reading and analysis of Wiesel’s *Night*.

4. His Father and His God

Wiesel’s telling of his time with his father and their suffering in Auschwitz via *Night* reveals a brutal, progressive tale of loss which forever remained with Wiesel, defining his experience of the Holocaust. It is difficult to separate the loss of Wiesel’s father from the other exceptional losses Wiesel experienced at the hands of the Nazi Germans. We see a struggle entail within Wiesel—what if he had responded differently to his father, would his father have lived? Despite knowing that Wiesel could not have saved his father, he could not rid himself of the guilt of this memory and experience. He watched his father suffer and grow weak and helpless, almost making it to liberation, but eventually dying in the midst of the horrific circumstances created for the Jews by the German Nazis in the death camps and on the death marches. In spite of his death, Wiesel’s father follows his son into his adult life through dreams and fixations of memory, their unspeakable suffering together emblazoned on Eliezer’s (Wiesel’s given name and the name his father always called him) soul, haunting him throughout his life (Wiesel 1995).

As they entered Auschwitz and others told them of the burning and the crematorium, Wiesel expressed his disbelief that such a thing would be tolerated by the world to which his father answered that the world was not interested in them and that today even the crematorium was possible. His father then wept, shaking as he did alongside other Jewish men facing the same fate. These men began to recite the mourner’s Kaddish to which Wiesel became angry, turning the prayer of celebration and sanctification of God’s great name into an accusation against God, “The Almighty, the eternal and terrible Master of the Universe, chose to be silent. What was there to thank Him for” (Wiesel 2006, p. 33)? A struggle with the God he had studied and whose commands he had desired to obey ensued within Wiesel as the darkness of the night became darker still.

Wiesel's "quarrel with God" begins, further developing throughout the years with the relentless question/accusation of why God did not intervene in the suffering of the Jewish people, His covenant people, during the Holocaust (Berger 2020). While many have assessed Wiesel's religiosity and relationship to God in his works, and others have discussed his relationship with and loss of his father in his writings, I will look at these two relationships as fluid and connected one to the other (Berenbaum 1994; Berger 2020; Cargas 1997; Cohler 2010; Downing 2010; Patterson 2013).

Night records a cognizant shift of mind and heart relating to both God and to Wiesel himself in Wiesel's first days at Auschwitz when his father is knocked to the ground for the first time for asking to use the bathroom. Wiesel does not even blink but watches and remains silent. He is ashamed of himself and how he has changed, feeling remorse at not fighting for his father and a deep anger and resentment at those who mistreated and humiliated him (Wiesel 2006, p. 39). Wiesel's heart has swiftly been invaded with anger and guilt, always and forever related to his father and to his God. The relationship Wiesel hopes for yet lacks with his father and the related resentment turn inward on Wiesel. His father, whom he loves and deeply desires affirmation from, falls apart before his eyes with Wiesel unable to do anything to stop it (Wiesel 1995; Cohler 2010, pp. 46–47).

Wiesel gives us insight into the loss of his father directly resulting from the suffering in the death camps and a key to his ongoing response to the Holocaust (despite his question as to whether such a tragedy can have a response) (Wiesel 2006, p. xv). The loss of Wiesel's father played a direct and prominent role in Wiesel's experience of the Holocaust, as told through *Night*, and played a prominent role in the rest of Wiesel's life as recorded by the author in a later memoir (Wiesel 1995). Many times, the reader is given opportunity to sense Wiesel's heartache in relation to suffering, living and dying alongside his father.

In Auschwitz, Wiesel's world is swiftly "reduced" to his relationship with his father and staying connected to him (Downing 2010, p. 154). In *Night*, Wiesel's father represents what he can still hold on to, still care for and find a semblance of stability in, possibly fearing what his life will be and who he will be without him. Do the above notions not similarly reflect upon his relationship with and faith in God in some sense? Wiesel may not be the devoted young man that he once was per his own admission, but he still finds identity in his God (as the God of the people of Israel for millennia), as he does in his father.

At his intake at both Auschwitz and Buchenwald, months apart, as well as numerous other times throughout *Night*, the young Eliezer expresses his need for the companionship of his father, "My hand tightened its grip on my father. All I could think of was not to lose him. Not to remain alone . . . I tightened my grip on my father's hand. The old, familiar fear: not to lose him" (Wiesel 2006, pp. 29–30, 104). His father first took hold of his hand the minute they were separated from his mother and sisters, when they "were alone," likely reminding Wiesel of his Shabbat walks to synagogue when his father held his hand, giving him a sense of reassurance and comfort (Wiesel 1995, 2006, p. 29). Both Wiesel and his father help one another to stay alive under the most horrific of conditions; in the midst of the separation from the rest of their family, when they are transported by train, when snow is their only food, and so many instances in between.

After they arrive in Buchenwald, weak, sick, and exhausted, Wiesel's father wants to lay on the ground and sleep. Wiesel tries to keep him awake as not to fall asleep and then not wake up. His father's desperate response is gripping, "'Don't yell my son . . . Have pity on your old father . . . Let me rest here . . . a little . . . I beg of you, I'm so tired . . . ' He had become childlike: weak, frightened, vulnerable" (Wiesel 2006, p. 105). Wiesel describes the condition he has watched his father quickly descend to (childlike, weak, frightened, vulnerable) in a role reversal that no teenage boy, let alone a mature adult, would expect or know how to handle without fighting a personal death on the inside. In another tragic and graphic scene recorded in *Night* in relationship to this, a man asks where God is as a child hangs on the gallows writhing and slowly dying, "From within me (Wiesel), I heard a voice answer: 'Where He (God) is? This is where—hanging here from this gallows . . .'" (Wiesel 2006, p. 65). One might wonder if Wiesel's answer is referring to the death of

his own soul alongside the death of this child on the gallows while Wiesel's father and his God seem unable to stop either.

An air siren went off soon after their arrival at Buchenwald, recounted above, and all of the prisoners were chased inside buildings by the guards. Wiesel recounts after getting out of the freezing wind, "sleep was all that mattered" (Wiesel 2006, p. 106). Wiesel awoke the next day realizing he'd lost his father in the frenzy of getting inside during the air raid. He walked around for hours and found him near the block where coffee was being distributed. "'Eliezer, my son . . . bring me . . . a little coffee . . . ' I ran toward him. 'Father! I've been looking for you for so long . . . ' I fought my way to the coffee cauldron . . . and I succeeded in bringing back a cup . . . I shall never forget the gratitude that shone in his eyes when he swallowed this beverage. The gratitude of a wounded animal. With these few mouthfuls of hot water, I had probably given him more satisfaction than during my entire childhood . . . " (Wiesel 2006, pp. 106–7). This is one more quote revealing the ongoing loss and heartache of Wiesel's experience with his father, and an insight into his perception of how his father saw him as a child.

The story goes on with Wiesel's father becoming weaker and more ill, slowing wasting away of sickness and starvation. The following moment, recorded by Wiesel, of his father's last cries, words and breaths, and Wiesel's response, or lack thereof, similar to his father's broken body; lacerate and break the soul:

I remember that night, the most horrendous night of my life:

' . . . Eliezer, my son, come here . . . I want to tell you something . . . Only to you . . . Come, don't leave me alone . . . Eliezer . . . '

I heard his voice, grasped the meaning of his words and the tragic dimension of the moment, yet I did not move. It had been his last wish to have me next to him in his agony, at the moment when his soul was tearing itself from his lacerated body—yet I did not let him have his wish.

I was afraid.

Afraid of the blows.

That was why I remained deaf to his cries.

Instead of sacrificing my miserable life and rushing to his side, taking his hand, reassuring him, showing him that he was not abandoned, that I was near him, that I felt his sorrow, instead of all that, I remained flat on my back, asking God to make my father stop calling my name. So afraid was I to incur the wrath of the SS.

In fact, my father was no longer conscious.

Yet, his plaintive, harrowing voice went on piercing the silence and calling me, nobody but me.

'Well?' The SS had flown into a rage and was striking my father on the head: 'Be quiet, old man! Be quiet!'

My father no longer felt the club's blows; I did. I did not react. I let the SS beat my father, I left him alone in the clutches of death. Worse: I was angry at him for having been noisy, for having cried, for provoking the wrath of the SS.

'Eliezer! Eliezer! Come, don't leave me alone . . . '

His voice had reached me from so far away, from so close. But I had not moved.

I shall never forgive myself.

Nor shall I ever forgive the world for having pushed me against the wall, for having turned me into a stranger, for having awakened in me the basest, most primitive instincts.

His last word had been my name. A summons. And I had not responded (Wiesel 2006, pp. xi–xii).

The above words and telling were added by Wiesel in the preface of the 2006 updated English edition of *Night*. This passage was contained in the original Yiddish version of his story (as referenced above). Wiesel gives it to the modern reader, maybe as a gift or maybe as a curse, that will move the reader from passive to active in the midst of this agonizing read.

The excruciating words truly bear witness to the agony of not only Wiesel's father, but of Wiesel himself in these last moments of his father's wrestle against death that had so relentlessly pursued him for minutes, hours, and days that eventually turned into months. Wiesel states that this was the most horrendous night of his life—in light of the long night that he endured, beginning with that first night in the camp—we find Wiesel held hostage in a night within the longest night, a crushing blow within a seemingly endless fight he had been losing one hard strike after another. Wiesel chronicles his own heartbreak in relationship to the deep agony of his father, detailed in his father's last few expressions (calling out to his son 'Eliezer' to be with him and comfort him) and last few breaths on earth. The night within the night, the guilt within the suffering, the chosen loss of dignity within that which had been stolen away, the recognition of himself as base and defiled, the deep insufferable loss of innocence.

Was Wiesel retelling the story of Adam shamefully hiding when God asked him where he was (Genesis 3:8–10)? Or the story of Cain's guilt when God asked him where his brother Abel was (Genesis 4:8–9)? God summoning and man not responding. Was Wiesel thinking of these things when he wrote the above words? Was he wondering how he too became a stranger; a stranger to his father and to His God in the garden, or had he become a murderer of his brother (or his father) by not responding? Surely these stories, studied by Wiesel since he was a child were not far away when he gave expression to his own story of loss, turning, and the Holocaust. His father's cry for him over and over, pleading for companionship, pleading that his son would be there with him as he drew his last breaths haunted the man that Wiesel had become. This moment (of so many horrific moments) tore Wiesel's soul in pieces. It was the straw that broke his hope in God. It feels like God had died in Wiesel's heart when his father pleaded with him and he chose not to respond.

The question may be asked as to how Wiesel interpreted, after the suffering he and his father had borne together, this loss in the midst of the catastrophic losses, of family, community, home, and childlikeness. Was Wiesel's father in some sense a representation of God to him, once strong, wise and capable, and now weak, sick, and unable to even care for himself? Is this how (and partially why) Wiesel's understanding of God dramatically transformed, never to be the faith of the innocent child Eliezer was? Or was the knowledge of himself as a less courageous and honorable man than he'd hoped the reason for his inability to trust God like he had as a young man? Wiesel's loss of the image of himself and that of God, alongside the dehumanization and death of his father, in the furnace of the Holocaust speak to everything that mattered to Wiesel. The man he became, the writings he shared, the religiosity he desired and the God he could not quite take back are all considered a portion of his response.

Wiesel's relationship to and loss of his father through *Night* seem to speak not only to Wiesel's loss of himself, the loss of the person he knew himself to be in light of the God he loved, but also of the perceived loss of God to Wiesel. If Wiesel's father could become similar to a suffering child in need of care and not be rescued by God, if Wiesel's people could go through the same, where was God? Was God weak like his father and dying with His people? Would He ever rescue His people Israel again? These questions will permeate Wiesel's writings his whole life long, never finding resolve.

In another way of looking at his words, Wiesel's father's slow departure from him and from the world somehow bears the image of God to Wiesel. As his father disappears, God slowly disappears from Wiesel as well. Wiesel wrestles with the idea of the loss of both, but they are rather intricately bound one to another. His father Shlomo is beaten and crushed and sick and dying—is this the same with the Father of Israel in Wiesel's mind and heart as expressed many times in *Night*?

The loss of his father and Wiesel's ambivalent feelings about him, continually eating away at Wiesel, also seemed to consume Wiesel's relationship to God. Wiesel's father's choice not to leave (twice) in attempts to rescue his family when there was still time reflected to Wiesel his God's lack in answering him (Wiesel 2006, pp. 8–9, 20). Wiesel's conflicted feelings about his father leave him conflicted in his understanding and assessment of God.

These are ideas for reflection based on the representation of both Wiesel's father and of God via Wiesel's own words in *Night*.

Wiesel sketches himself as a young man deeply identified with his God and the God of his people, devoted to religious studies and a life of prayer. Religious imagery permeates his work despite his anguish and confusion in Auschwitz, his accusations against God, and the suffering entailed in the loss of his father. Whether Wiesel was a "theologian of the void," in an ongoing "quarrel with God," and/or one still awaiting Messiah, the Biblical and Talmudic tales find their way into Wiesel's writing each time he puts pen to paper with an aggadic (tales contained in the oral Torah) cry heard through his words (Berenbaum 1994; Berger 2020; Horowitz 2013; Patterson 2013; Wiesel 1995, 2006).

All of these realities connote a similar ambivalence in his dealings with God as is the case in his dealings with his father. His father could not have been a more potent persona throughout his life despite the few years shared and the fewer conversations the young Eliezer had with him. Similarly, God, and the unresolved questions Wiesel has for God, bear a potency and effect on everything Wiesel does and every part of who he is.

Wiesel's rewritten version of the medieval Jewish prayer of belief in the Messiah, "Ani Ma'amin," or "I Believe," poignantly illustrates Wiesel's ambivalence in relationship to God. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are brought into interaction with the Holocaust, putting Wiesel's own doubts in the mouths of the patriarchs. "You promised me blessings for Israel—Is this your blessing? . . . You commanded me, O Lord . . . to leave my country, my home, and that of my father. To start anew in the land of Canaan. I did not know, my Lord, I did not know . . . the road would end in Treblinka . . . Majdanek . . . that every road at dusk would lead to Auschwitz" (Wiesel 1973). The words of doubt and then faith within Wiesel's version of, "I Believe," disclose Wiesel's inner conflict in relationship to his God, "Just God, unjust God . . . God present, God absent . . . Pray to God, against God, for God. *Ani maamin* . . ." He concludes with the traditional ending (translated as), allowing these doubts to be subsumed, even if for one moment, "I believe in the coming of the Messiah, and though he tarries, I wait daily for his coming, I believe" (Wiesel 1973).

In a prayer written for the Days of Awe in 1997, Wiesel voices heartfelt sadness at the loss of his childhood faith but a willingness to take God back as it were, "Master of the Universe, let us makeup . . . In my childhood I did not expect much from human beings. But I expected everything from you. Where were you, God of kindness, in Auschwitz? . . . Let us make up: for the child in me, it is unbearable to be divorced from you for so long" (Wiesel 1997). As Wiesel worked through the devastating loss of his father and his experience of the Holocaust over decades and through his many literary works, it seemed that he also came to a place of peace with God, at least in part (Cohler 2010, p. 49). The above reveals as much.

5. *Night* and Wiesel's Effect on Post-Holocaust Christian Scholars

Wiesel's tale of anguish and loss(es), of his father, his God, his family and his world, as potentially described in *Night*, catapulted him into the hearts and minds of many Christians, ones he would have expected hostility from due to his experiences of "normal" antisemitism from Christians growing up (Rosen 2017, pp. 280–81). The profound honesty with which Wiesel shared his story gave him audience and friendship in circles that would have seemed impossible to the young man he was when he boarded the train bound for Auschwitz. *Night* and Wiesel himself affected a number of Christian scholars, who later became involved in post-Holocaust response and reconciliation efforts. Wiesel, in a sense, opened himself up to being involved in such efforts and dialogues because of the writing and publishing of *Night*. By openly laying his own agonizing questions at the feet of God and reassessing his religiosity in light of Auschwitz and the loss of his father, Wiesel made it easier for many Christian leaders to do the same.

François Mauriac, a devout Catholic writer as mentioned above, whom Wiesel met as a young journalist and who wrote the foreword to *Night*, helped Wiesel publish his story for the world to partake in. In their first meeting in 1954, not knowing Wiesel's story,

Mauriac expressed to Wiesel his deep sadness regarding the Jewish children who suffered, being taken in cattle cars to death camps in the east. Wiesel responded by telling Mauriac that he was one of those children (Mauriac 2006, pp. xvii–xxi). In the foreword to *Night*, Mauriac describes how he wished he had been able to console and comfort Wiesel with words of hope tied to his belief in God, the God of the Jewish people, and the cross, yet all he could do was embrace him and weep (Mauriac 2006, p. xxi). Mauriac’s connection with Wiesel brought meaning to each of them due to the interconnectedness of their Catholic and Jewish faiths, as well as Mauriac’s desire to comprehend the Jewish people and their suffering in the Holocaust, and his embrace and encouragement of Wiesel to share his story with the world.

Additionally, Harry James Cargas, a self-described “post-Auschwitz Christian” was deeply affected by Wiesel’s telling of his experience with his father in Auschwitz in *Night* (Cargas 1997, pp. 33–39). In fact, Cargas’ journey into the study of the Holocaust came via his connection to the relationship between father and son and the tragedy that came to Wiesel through the loss of his father as told in *Night* (Cargas 1997, p. 35). His study of the Holocaust quickly brought him face to face with the millennia of Christian antisemitism and the complicity of the Church with the murder of the Jews in the Holocaust. He met and interviewed Wiesel, taught one of the first college courses on the Holocaust in the U.S., and wrote numerous books about the Holocaust, particularly in connection to religious issues (Cargas 1997, pp. 38–39). Wiesel led Cargas on this path, in a sense, first via *Night*, and then in friendship.

Beyond the above two, Wiesel deeply influenced the lives and work on the Holocaust of Carol Rittner, Eva Fleischner, John K. Roth, Alice and A. Roy Eckardt among many others, all Christians and scholars alike (A. R. Eckardt 1997; Alice Eckardt 1997; Fleischner 1997; Rittner 1997; Roth 1997). The story Wiesel recorded in *Night* began a journey and a work that would influence countless men and women of the Christian faith (alongside others). In encountering Wiesel’s heartache and his questions, they found themselves in need of a reconsideration of their ideas and theology, particularly in relationship to the Jewish people. Beyond intellectual reconsiderations, Wiesel’s narrative of personal suffering with his father and his God indirectly influenced many to step into a space of repentance reserved for those whose hearts broke alongside Wiesel (and all those who had suffered in the Holocaust).

6. Conclusions

Wiesel’s narrative in *Night* chronicles the depths of anguish of a fifteen-year-old boy while his world tears apart at the seams. His mother and sisters are stolen away; his father is humiliated, beaten, and starved, suffering immensely and slowly dying before his son’s eyes. Additionally, Wiesel bears profound personal distress, physically and psychologically, as he is no longer able to find his bearings, his center, his hope or his God. Wiesel’s connection to his father and the traumatic experience of watching his father deteriorate and die closely corresponds to his loss of his spirituality and his God—these are two separate deaths for Wiesel yet they happen simultaneously and in deep connection with one another. Wiesel sees the faces of his father and his Father God meld into one, one who no longer has the strength, the perseverance or possibly even the love to stay.

Wiesel’s powerful telling of his encounter of the Shoah/Holocaust through *Night* captures the inexplicable event in a way many were able to connect with, if only faintly. Though still incomprehensible to those who did not experience it, *Night* shone light to this immensely dark chapter. Despite his incomprehensible suffering, Wiesel’s response to the Holocaust via his literary lament called *Night* has affected generations (Downing 2010). Wiesel’s writings contain his questions and his outcry, his inability to quit searching for hope and for his God. Through his works, Wiesel draws others into a deeper understanding of the Holocaust, awakening many to ask critical questions, and in turn to fight against hatred, antisemitism and injustice.

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