

The Folio

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READING THE BIBLE AFTER THE HOLOCAUST

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Editor's Note: The following article is an excerpt of the Ann and Nate Levine Endowed Lecture in Jewish Studies given at Southern Methodist University on October 28, 2009.

The Holocaust, or Shoah (the Hebrew word for “destruction”) as it is more properly known, refers to the deliberate murder of some six million Jews by the government of Germany during World War II. Although millions of others were also murdered, Gypsies, Slavs, Gays and Lesbians, and other groups, the Shoah is a uniquely Jewish event because it took place as part of Germany’s effort to eradicate the entire Jewish population of the world. The Shoah points to genocide as an ongoing moral problem in our world, insofar as even modern governments, such as the government of Iran, continue to deny the Shoah and prepare for the destruction of the state of Israel as a prelude to imposing Islamic rule throughout the world.

When considered from the standpoint of modern Western religion, including both Judaism and Christianity, the Shoah raises fundamental questions concerning the presence, power, and righteousness of G-d and the presumed guilt and sin of those portrayed as subject to divine judgment in the Hebrew Bible.

Where was G-d during the Shoah? Why did G-d not act to stop the murder? Why were Jews targeted? Was it because of Jewish sins for which the Shoah was a punishment? If so, what sins would justify such a comprehensive program of murder throughout the world, and what would such murder say about the nature of G-d? Indeed, no moral charge can be sustained to explain the suffering of Jews in the Shoah. Jews did not die at Auschwitz because they sinned against G-d. One would have to claim instead that the Nazi government that murdered Jews and others were the ones that actually sinned against G-d.

Nevertheless, it is striking that suffering by Jews as the result of Jewish sin is foundational to the field of biblical theology. The Hebrew Bible, for example argues that Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 B.C.E. because Jews had rebelled against G-d, and the New Testament likewise charges Jews with sin in rejecting Christ. And yet it is striking that in modern biblical theology, the moral questions posed by the Shoah—does the mass murder of Jews in biblical Jerusalem prove that they were sinners who deserved to die? Was G-d righteous in decreeing the destruction of Jerusalem?—are not pursued. It is therefore imperative to consider the implications of the questions prompted by the Shoah in relation to the theological interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, recognized as foundational in both the Jewish and Christian traditions. Fundamentally, consideration of the Shoah points to a need to rethink traditional concepts of divine presence, power, and righteousness together with traditional notions of human guilt or sin in relation to G-d. Many biblical theologians presume that traditional notions of divine power and righteousness and human guilt and sin before

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G-d constitute the fundamental viewpoint of the Hebrew Bible. But sustained examination of the Hebrew Bible in relation to questions posed by the Shoah demonstrates that this viewpoint is only one among a number of viewpoints raised among the books of the Hebrew Bible. And even among those books or writings in the Hebrew Bible that articulate traditional viewpoints of reward for righteousness and punishment for wrongdoing, problems emerge in their respective presentations of this issue, e.g., does G-d always act responsibly in the world; are acts deemed as sinful in the Hebrew Bible actually sinful; what role must human beings assume when G-d fails to act or when G-d acts sinfully? And how do human beings relate to G-d?

In order to address these questions, I would like to consider one book from the Hebrew Bible that has important implications for rethinking biblical theology in the aftermath of the Shoah.

The book of Esther relates how Esther, a beautiful Jewish woman, was selected by King Ahasuerus of Persia to be his bride, how Esther's uncle Mordecai saved the king from a plot to overthrow the monarchy, how the evil Persian government minister Haman plotted to destroy the entire Jewish people because of his jealousy of Mordecai, how Esther revealed Haman's plot to Ahasuerus and thereby saved the Jewish people from murder, and how the festival of Purim was instituted to celebrate the deliverance.

Esther has always been treated as a particularly controversial book in both Jewish and Christian tradition, particularly because it never mentions G-d. Nevertheless, Esther remains a part of the sacred canons of both Judaism and Christianity and it demands serious theological interpretation as such.

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ELIZABETH TREVER: A MEMORIAL

November 5, 1916—April 13, 2009

Elizabeth Signe Burman was born in Oak Park, IL, on November 5, 1916. She is best known as a symphony harpist and the wife for 68 years of the famed Dead Sea Scroll scholar and photographer John C. Trever, Ph.D.

Raised in a musical family (her father owned a music store in Chicago), she became an accomplished pianist, organist and harpist. She graduated with the highest honors from Pasadena High School and Pasadena Junior College. She then entered the University of Southern California to study religion and music. Mrs. Trever graduated *summa cum laude* in 1937. She ranked number 2 out of over 1500 graduating students at USC. She was also inducted into Phi Beta Kappa and the Sigma Alpha Iota music fraternity.

After graduating from college, she was married August 29, 1937 to John C. Trever, also a USC graduate in the 1937 class. She then moved to New Haven, CT, where John entered the Yale Divinity School and she worked as a secretary and records librarian for the Yale Department of Psychiatry and Mental Hygiene. Her first son John Paul was born in 1943 while John was the Assistant Minister of the Santa Monica First Methodist Church. In 1944 she accompanied John to Des Moines, IA, where John was Associate Professor of Bible at Drake University. In 1945, her second son James Edgar was born.

Despite the rigors of raising two boys and tending to a household, Mrs. Trever made time to play the harp with symphony orchestras in Des Moines, IA, Charleston, WV, and Berea, OH. In addition to presenting numerous harp recitals, she taught both harp and piano lessons.

In 1975 Elizabeth returned to California where John served as the Director of the Dead Sea Scrolls Project and Consultant in Lay Education for the Claremont School of Theology until 1992 when they retired to Leisure World, Laguna Hills, CA. In 2000 Elizabeth moved with her husband to Freedom Village in Lake Forest, CA. In 2006 Elizabeth was named to the Claremont School of Theology National Advisory board.

Elizabeth Burman Trever is survived by sons John Paul and James Edgar; six grandchildren and ten great grandchildren; and her brother-in-law, Winston Trever, also a resident in Freedom Village.

Mrs. Trever led a life, by example, dedicated to music, integrity, worship, love, service, and the desire for world peace.

Submitted by James E. and John P. Trever

Indeed, the modern experience of the Shoah points to the theological importance of a book that depicts divine absence at a time that the Jewish people is threatened with extermination by the government of one of the most advanced and powerful nations of the time. Esther is written to make a point, viz., human beings must act to defeat evil in the world when G-d fails to do so. Such responsibility for human action applies to everyone and anyone no matter how unlikely a candidate one might be, such as a relatively unreligious and assimilated young woman who rises to prominence by means of a beauty pageant or her equally unreligious and assimilated uncle and manager/confidant. There are no great religious or military heroines or heroes in Esther, like Deborah or King David, only ordinary people who find themselves by happenstance to be in a position to act against gross injustice.

The literary character of Esther as a novella, with its development of plot, characterization, and its exaggeration and hyperbole in the portrayal of events plays an important role in enabling the book to convey its teachings. Interpreters generally recognize its episodic narrative structure, viz., it develops a plot that emphasizes the setting of the scene, the introduction and preparation of the major characters of the drama, the introduction of the narrative conflict or tension in the form of Haman's plot to destroy the entire Jewish people, and the resolution of the narrative tension when Esther exposes Haman's plot and Ahasuerus acts against Haman and his supporters. The exaggerated portrayal of events plays a key role in building the narrative tension and the resolution of the novella.

Ahasuerus appears as a drunken fool throughout the narrative, which contradicts the image of the powerful monarch of the leading empire of the time. His drunkenness and foolishness prompts him to dismiss his wife Vashti when she refuses his request to show her beauty to his equally drunken friends at a banquet. Vashti's dismissal provides the basis by which Esther, a beautiful young Jewish woman, becomes Ahasuerus's wife and queen of Persia by an unlikely national beauty contest which runs counter to the Persian royal practice of marrying only within a select group of Persian noble families. Chance plays a role as well when Esther's uncle Mordecai overhears a plot against the king and thwarts it by reporting the matter to the authorities. When Mordecai is honored for his loyalty to the crown, the evil minister Haman plots to kill the entire Jewish people due to his envy of Mordecai's honor. When Haman's plan is approved by the king without any serious discussion of such an act, Esther invites both Ahasuerus and Haman to a banquet at which Haman's accidental fall onto Esther's couch convinces the king that Haman has attempted to assault his wife and aids in convincing to act against the man who would kill Esther and her entire people. When Haman and his sons are executed by order of the king, he also authorizes the Jewish people to attack and kill Haman's entire family numbering some seventy-five thousand persons. The plot itself is seemingly incredible, although the modern experience of the Shoah has demonstrated that such a scenario is not as incredible as perhaps Esther's authors and readers might have imagined it to be.

Key to Esther's role in this narrative is Mordecai's statement to her in Esth 4:13-14 when she is reluctant to act, "Do not imagine that you of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king's palace. On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father's house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis."

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As an assimilated Jewish woman, Esther is an unlikely heroine, but she is in a position to act and therefore has the responsibility to do so.

The identity of the primary protagonists in the narrative, Esther, Mordecai, and Haman, is also key to the narrative's didactic purposes, insofar as they are constructed to reprise the failure of King Saul, the first king of Israel, to obey G-d's instruction through the prophet Samuel to kill the Amalekite King Agag, and thereby to destroy an implacable enemy of Israel who would rise again and again in attempts to destroy the entire Jewish people (1 Samuel 15). As a result of his failure, Saul lost his right to serve as king of Israel and later died as a suicide in 1 Samuel 31 as his people were defeated by the Philistines. On introducing Mordecai, Esth 2:5 identifies him as "the son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish a Benjaminite," which recalls the identity of King Saul son of Kish of the tribe of Benjamin in 1 Sam 9:1-2. As Mordecai's niece, Esther would share his ancestry and identification with King Saul. On introducing Haman to the narrative, Esth 3:1 identifies him as the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which of course reprises the character of Agag the Amalekite king from 1 Samuel 15. Exodus 17:8-15 and Deut 25:17-19 identify the Amalekites as a people who are cursed because they attacked Israel from the rear in the wilderness when they were faint and weary. Later Jewish tradition identifies Amalek as the quintessential enemy who will stop at nothing to destroy Israel and must themselves be destroyed before they succeed in doing so. By identifying Mordecai and Esther with Saul and Haman with Agag in this manner, the book of Esther places its protagonists in the same positions occupied by Saul and Agag in 1 Samuel 15. But this time there is a different result, viz., Mordecai and Esther take action against Haman and his plot and in doing so save the entire Jewish people from annihilation by a powerful gentile government.

Finally, the absence of G-d in the narrative is also a key element. As is so often the case in the Shoah and other atrocities or disasters in human experience, the presence of G-d is difficult or impossible to discern. On such occasions, human beings must take the responsibility to act in the face of evil. Divine absence hardly portends divine judgment; rather it functions as a call for humans to act as responsible partners with G-d in creation.

Although Esther is so frequently overlooked or maligned, no other book in the Bible so fully addresses the theological issues posed by the modern experience of the Shoah.

Although divine power, righteousness, fidelity, and engagement in the world are clearly the ideals of the Hebrew Bible—and early Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism as well—the modern experience of the Shoah and our examination of biblical literature demonstrates that the realization of such an ideal is questionable. Our reading of Esther indicates that G-d does not always respond in times of crisis, and we are therefore frequently left on our own to face the challenges of evil in the world, whether such evil comes in the form of the Shoah or even at the personal level of death, suffering, abuse, etc.

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PUBLICATIONS AND UPCOMING EVENTS

Marvin A. Sweeney
Chief Executive Officer,
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Publications:

“The Legacy of Josiah in Isaiah 40-55,” *The Desert will Bloom: Poetic Visions in Isaiah* (eds., A. J. Everson and H. C. P. Kim; AIL 4; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), pp. 109-129.

“Images of Abraham and G-d in a Jewish Reading of Genesis,” *Sacred Tropes: Tanakh, New Testament, and Qur’an as Literature and Culture* (ed. R. S. Sabbath; BibInt 98; Leiden: Brill, 2009), pp. 183-192.

Mitarbeiter (Area Editor) for Prophecy and Apocalyptic, *The Encyclopaedia of the Bible and Its Reception* (ed., H.-J. Klauck et al; Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), volumes 1 and 2.

“Amos,” *EBR* 1, cols., 1029-1035.

“Aramitess,” *EBR* 2, col. 645.

“Arna,” *EBR* 2, col. 795.

“Saga,” *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*. Volume 5 (ed., K. D. Sakenfeld et al; Nashville: Abingdon, 2009).

Editor, *Hebrew Studies: A Journal Devoted to Hebrew Language and Literature* 50 (2009), “The Golden Anniversary Edition,” forthcoming, November 2009. Published by the National Association of Professors of Hebrew.

Events:

“Samuel’s Institutional Identity in the Deuteronomistic History,” World Congress For Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, Israel, August 3-6, 2009.

“The Elijah Narratives,” Taus Lecture Series. Temple Beth El, San Pedro, CA, September 14, 2009.

“World of the Bible,” Academy for Jewish Religion California, Los Angeles, CA, Fall 2009.

“The Elijah Narratives,” Academy for Jewish Religion California, Los Angeles, CA, Fall 2009.

“Reading the Bible after the Holocaust,” Ann and Nate Levine Endowed Lecture in Jewish Studies. Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX, October 28, 2009.

Panel Review: Marvin A. Sweeney, *King Josiah of Judah: The Lost Messiah of Israel* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), Annual Meeting Of the Society of Biblical Literature, New Orleans, LA, November 20-24, 2009.

Panel Review: Marvin A. Sweeney, *Reading the Hebrew Bible after the Shoah: Engaging Holocaust Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), Annual Meeting of The Society of Biblical Literature, New Orleans, LA, November 20-24, 2009.

“Jeremiah 31 in Jewish Perspective,” Lecture to be presented at Georgetown University as part of a symposium on Jewish-Christian Dialog, Georgetown University, Washington, DC, February 2010.

Invited lecture on the Book of the Twelve Prophets. Symposium on the XII Prophets. University of Münster, Germany, January 2011.





James A. Sanders

*Professor Emeritus,
Claremont School of
Theology/Claremont
Graduate University*

Publications

“The Book of Job and the Origins of Judaism,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 39/2 (May 2009) 60-70.

“Credo in Unum Deum: A Challenge,” with Paul E. Capetz. *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 39/4 (November 2009) 204-13.

“Orpheus as David—Orpheus as Christ?” *Biblical Archaeology Review* (35/4-5, July-October 2009) 12-16.

“Why Are the Hebrew Bible and the Old Testament So Similar yet So Different?” DVD disk by the Biblical Archaeology Society.

Lectures and Activities

Continue to teach the Introduction to the First Testament for the Episcopal Theological School at Claremont/Bloy House.

Scheduled to teach a course on “The Function of Scripture in Luke/Acts” for the Episcopal Theological School at Claremont/Bloy House (located on the CST campus) on Friday afternoons during the spring semester 2010 beginning January 15th. Inquiries may be addressed to: etscregistrar@cst.edu



Tyler Mayfield

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Publications

Literary Structure and Setting in Ezekiel (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, forthcoming, 2010).

“Blindness in the Hebrew Bible,” in *Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Reception* (de Gruyter, forthcoming).

“Bel and the Dragon,” in *Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Reception* (de Gruyter, forthcoming).

“Isaiah 58:1-12,” Exegetical essay for *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Volume X, Year A*. (Westminster John Knox, forthcoming).



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In the aftermath of the Shoah, we human beings have suffered as a result of divine absence, and we must now make choices for the future even though we do not possess full knowledge of our situation. Will G-d act in the world with power, righteousness, and fidelity? Or will G-d continue to be absent? To a degree, the question of divine engagement or absence is irrelevant. The key question for us is how will we approach the future? Will we continue to uphold the ideals learned from G-d of power, righteousness, fidelity, and engagement in our own lives? Or will we abandon those ideals because we perceive G-d to have abandoned us? Do we recognize that perhaps G-d needs us just as much as we need G-d? We are after all created as partners with G-d, and our task is to assist G-d in the completion and sanctification of the world of creation. We may err in carrying out such a task, but we must nevertheless accept our own responsibility to complete and sanctify the world of creation in which we live. As Rabbi Tarphon states in the Mishnah, “you are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it” (m Abot 2:16).

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