

# **The Holocaust As Judgment: A Suggestion for an Interpretation of Catastrophe as a Witness to Jews Prior to and Including a Final Time of Calamity**

By Arthur Katz

"The lasting significance for Auschwitz for humanity lies in its disclosure of the human condition as something incomprehensible and insoluble in merely human terms...humanism lacks the categories of judgment by which it can [recognize?] repudiate evil on a transcendent scale...this turning away from one of the greatest human tragedies in neither wise nor moral. The dangers which threaten our own [Jewish] society arise out of ills which lie in that past. They have remained uncured (27). Auschwitz discounts the theology of earthly evidence and demands the disclosure given from above (107)...'to fail here, is to fail everywhere' (K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.1.p.9). Only from the standpoint of eternity can the temporal impasse be surmounted (108). Our humanity depends on...the assurance of the meaningfulness of the meaningless (109).

*A Theology of Auschwitz*, Ulrich E. Simon, Victor Gollancz Ltd., London, 1967.

In collating some of the remarks from Simon's little known and out-of-print classic, I find occasion to renew again my own long standing passion to 'think the unthinkable'. Certainly it is true that the very magnitude of the tragedy eclipses Jewish self-concern and holds the key to an understanding of the human condition itself. The title of philosopher/theologian, Arthur A. Cohen's work, *The Tremendum* (Crossroad, New York, 1981), strains at a language needed to express the inexpressible dimensions of the evil represented in the *Shoah*. In the multitude of books occasioned by the disaster every explanation is sought in the academic disciplines of political science, sociology, history (ecclesiastical and secular), —but few, if any, have sought it in a simple turning to Scripture. When, in an only and rare occasion some years ago, I asked Elie Wiesel to what degree he would acknowledge the Holocaust (and all previous Jewish calamity) as the fulfilment of what was prophetically forecast for us in the latter days in the conclusion of the books of Leviticus and Dueteronomy, he replied "*I refuse to consider that*".

That *refusal* coming as it did from the most eminent Holocaust survivor and commentator, may itself be a statement of its cause. By that I mean, that the very unwillingness to consider the word of God and its clear indictment of Jewish sin and apostasy, is itself the

evidence of that apostasy—all the more in one who has suffered the predicted consequences and yet refuses what ought to be, to a Jew, its first and evident explanation. In this is human opinion and will elevated over that of God Himself—the very nub of sin—and our evidently continuing condition. The unhappy fact is that interpreting catastrophe as the consequence and judgment for sin is totally incompatible with contemporary Jewish self-assessment. The fault lies, I think, in the Jewish rejection of a previous '*Tremendum*' that of the crucifixion of Jesus as the statement of a righteous God's judgment for sin.

This 'revisionist' and continuing rejection, condemns one to a singularly sanguine view of the human condition which subsequently and right up to the disaster allowed modern Jewry to celebrate as ultimate civilization that which would soon enough destroy them and it. I would raise the question if catastrophe (as judgment fulfilled), is not God's penultimate *provision* to bring to repentance a nation who would otherwise have no consciousness of that need? The failure to so interpret it must result then in the condemnation of men—and necessarily of God—for inherent defect in His Creation and His apparent inability to intervene in preserving Jewry from that calamity. Richard Rubenstein's *After Auschwitz* is the classic statement of such cynicism, indicative of a wholesale loss of traditional faith from which there is not likely to be a recovery. Such is the nature of inexplicable disaster, and the one yet future for world Jewry, that is *calculated* to destroy all lesser 'faiths' for the prospect of that one alone that is *given* of God as grace unto life eternal. In Thomas Raitt's, *A Theology of Exile*, (Fortress Press, 1977.) we read:

One can hardly exaggerate the challenge to Israel's faith posed by the collapse of the national state, Judah, and the removal of its survivors to captivity in a land hundreds of miles away. The rude and crushing factuality of these events brought to an end traditions of expectation which had been developing in Israel for over six hundred years. The one tradition which could approach making sense of this catastrophe, the prophetic assurance that the nation's sufferings would be proportionate to its sins, had to stretch itself out of reasonable proportions in the face of these horrible reversals...such a calamity violated what could be reasonably be expected from a "God of providence" (pp.1-3).

As it was for 587 B.C. and 1941-5, so must we consider also the impact of an immanent 'Time of Jacob's trouble' now. What is needed is a 'theology of disaster' which does not

flinch from the insistence of catastrophe as judgment, both past and future, which will give to us as it did Jeremiah and Ezekiel 'the prophets of doom', prophetic authority as Oracles of deliverance, a deliverance as promised by the same God who faithfully executes judgment *according to His word*. The failure of the Church to take a Deuteronomic view of the Holocaust as judgment, made inevitable a condescension to Jewish interpretation of the Holocaust as the statement of inherent defect in Christendom and intrinsically in the Scriptures (that ostensibly demean Jews). It is only a short step then from that to a substitution of dialog with Judaism for the previous *evangelistic* posture of the Church (however historically unimpressive); for how could we belabor Jews with a gospel so traduced by the Church's apparent failure in the Hitler-time?

From that place one then, in the name now of ecumenical dialog, is required to acknowledge *the validity of Judaism* (Of what was Paul groaning and willing to forfeit his own salvation that they might be saved?), a review of our traditional Christology (For how could Christ have come and Jewry should suffer this?),—and finally, the doctrine of God (Him/her/) itself!. In a word, true faith begins (and is maintained) where the atheist thinks it should end—in the 'Tremendum' of devastation which is judgment for sin—both at Calvary and at Auschwitz! To what degree, must we ask, has the latter been made inevitable by the rejection of the former? And to what degree is the next tribulation the consequence of a failed understanding of the last? Nothing more underlines the prophetic calling of the Church not to proffer a false hope but to soberly warn of the judgments to come—and announce the restoration that follows for "the redeemed of the Lord" *after* "mourning and sighing shall flee away"(Isa.35:10;51:11).

The failure to rightly interpret the disaster of 70 A.D. as judgment—though prophetically forewarned by Jesus—influenced the formation of present rabbinical Judaism at Yavne which has cheated untold millions of the prospect of salvation through a repentance which would have more likely been theirs had the calamity been rightly understood. Instead, it set in motion the inevitability of yet future disaster by condemning Jewry to becoming in the nominal Christian world an 'anti-body', an 'indigestible' presence—and at worst an anti-Christ factor among the nations into which we have been cast. Even now, the logic of our American-Jewish position disposes us to oppose public Christmas crèches, school prayers (innocuous as they are) and other phobic anti-Christian actions that does not endear us to a nominally Christian but religious tradition-affirming nation. Our warped 'messianisms' have made us singularly conspicuous in promoting trans-national international ideologies

that have threatened the ethnic-religious loyalties of millions and have and will erupt into anti-a fury of anti-Semitic violence.

Little wonder Jesus wept looking upon Jerusalem. The consequence of His rejection reverberates still and incurs its own intrinsic and inevitable judgment. In short, surviving Jewry has not "turned aside to see", i.e., probe ruthlessly for the root cause of its historic calamities, for it is in the midst of that inextinguishable 'burning bush' of unrequited judgments that the triune God of Moses is to be found still. The Holocaust has been turned into a self-serving though vain attempt to educate the masses or sentimentalize it or politically capitalize upon it or academically statisticize it;—but its significance and potential for repentance and return to Him who smote us remains unknown. As previously stated, "Auschwitz discounts the ideology of earthly evidence and demands the disclosure given from above". Neither the Holocaust nor future judgments are explicable to our conventional frames of reference—which, as I have been suggesting—God is wanting to destroy. May He have in this last generation prophetic oracles, Ezekiels and Jeremiahs who will not withhold. "Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and show my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins"(Isa.58:1). Anything less, in view of the disaster still immanent, is false comfort. Contrary to the mentality that cannot reconcile God's judgments with His mercies, Raitt

"has come to see judgment and deliverance in creative interaction. Each acts on the other, affects the other; each has elements of the other in it. They are not totally separate entities; ultimately they come from the same source and center. They are banded together in the unity of the divine will *and the unity of the Divine Person*. They stand in a quite variable, but always in creative tension with one another ..It is precisely the latent or residual presence of justice and will towards judgment in the midst of unconditional deliverance which differentiates the epoch of salvation from the shallow grace of false prophecy" (Ibid., p.12, my emphasis).

Far from being a "shallow grace", I consider false prophecy to be no grace at all but rather a deception that leads to unpreparedness and collapse when the unanticipated calamity falls. The important thing here is the note that God is not only triune and composite in His Persons, *but also in His acts*. Could it be that the erroneous monotheism so lauded by Judaism misses the one because it misses the other, leaving them with a god of their own making and, in effect, *without God*? Seeing that the knowledge of God, as He in fact is and not as we thought Him to be, constitutes the greatest safeguard against deception, the view that reconciles the God of mercy with the God of judgment may guard the Church against last day's deception as well as being a key to the revelation of the Triune God for the Jew. The revelation refused by us at the Cross of Calvary may yet at last be recognized

in our own 'crucifixion' in the calamities of times past and that which is yet future. Divine judgment then becomes a hermeneutical key for the revealing of the mystery of the Godhead Himself. The 'revisionist' rejection of the crucifixion has historically condemned Jews to a view of God which is not God and one who cannot save out of calamity. The greatest calamity, of course, is that which is eternal and irremediable for which every lesser calamity, rightly interpreted, was calculated to save us. Israel's first deliverance was initiated by a man who 'turned aside to see' a Burning Bush not consumed out of which the pre-incarnate Second Person of the Godhead sounded His call. Could it be that Israel's final deliverance waits upon a Church that will not flinch from looking into the issues of judgment to receive its call, mandate, and authority in the revelation of God given only in the fires of Judgment and not to be obtained in any other place?

As averse as modern man is to consider calamity as judgment, so also are we in an highly individualistic age equally alienated from the concept of national culpability. What is the rationale or justification, for a whole people being brought into judgment? This is not amenable to our conventional frames of reference—the very thing, I am wanting to suggest, that God through the Tremendum of inexplicable devastations is wanting to destroy. Raitt continues,

The institution of secular law has no precedent for God bringing His whole people under accusation. A different framework is needed to understand that...Only where an obligation exists can an accusation be raised. This obligation presumed by the prophets is defined through the covenant relationship between Yaweh and Israel (Ibid., pp. 19-20).

This critical view is lost to contemporary Jews and even to the Church—locked as we are into non-generational mentalities. What needs to be asked is whether *covenant is still in force in terms of its penalties (and its stipulations binding)* even when it is lost to the consciousness of subsequent generations and even to their desires. What is likewise lost to us is the Biblical concept of *solidarity in sin* by which past and future generations are joined in **collective accountability**. Walter Eichrodt reminds us in his *Theology of the Old Testament* that

The prophets bring not only their own contemporaries before God's judgment, and denounce them for their rebellion, but also see them linked with all previous generations in a unitary entity, for which the sins of the fathers are also the sins of those now alive, *and will be required of them*. At the same time, the fact that the sinful condition of the present generation has re-

sulted from the perverted decisions of an earlier one in no sense does away with the responsibility of the former (vol.2,p.407, my emphasis).

What does this mean? Only that *we remain in unbroken continuum with our forbears, continuing in and perpetuating their sins as our own, until we come to a repentant acknowledgment of that past that alone saves us from the deadly consequence for our future.* There is no magical abrogation of sin, but rather like a cumulative obligation, the debt, *no matter how long deferred*, is compounded yet the more by the neglect. Is this not the very basis that Israel has relentlessly pursued and continues to pursue and bring to justice the criminals of Nazism? Gideon Hausner, Israel's prosecuting attorney in the Eichmann trial, writes in his memoir *Justice in Jerusalem*,

It may well take some time before a criminal is brought to justice. In Eichmann's case it took fifteen years since he had gone into hiding, but he was ultimately found, exposed to the obloquy of mankind, and executed. *Neither the passage of time nor the distance of asylum saved him. These facts are worth bearing in mind.* ..The assumption that present day Germany is an entirely new nation immune to the perils of the past is as dangerous as it is false (my emphasis).

The relentless hunt of these criminals becomes ironically our own indictment. What would present Jewry today choose if presented with the alternative of a Barabbas or Jesus? The failure to see our culpability in His death renders us incapable of either forgetting or forgiving. How much greater is our own accountability before God as His covenantally obligated people? Indeed, "That which is past is now, and that which is to be hath already been, and God *requires* that which is past" (Eccl.3:15). Only a repentant break from the past frees us from being implicated in the unbroken continuum of the sin of the Messiah's death and makes available the cleansing blood shed in that very act. The Messiah's death is only the culmination of a longer standing estrangement from God attested by the prophets. When have we as a nation ever answered their indictment—indeed, even heard it? The discovery of the Mosaic covenant in the book of Deuteronomy sparked the revival under King Josiah; *is this not the ground to which Israel's present understanding be brought?* In reviewing the great covenantal blessing and curse liturgy of Deuteronomy 28, Raitt concludes that *"God's decision to intervene with judgment shows that these punishments are to be understood as an actualization of the covenant curses"* (Ibid., p.25). But as a secular people we are entirely outside the Biblical let alone the Deuteronomic context and few ever think to examine our calamities in its light. Is not the least of the Church's prophetic tasks to introduce *this* mindset to secular rejecting mentalities? What comfort can be ministered to Israel except that the true, unremedied cause of her sorrows be made known? Is not every other comfort false?

What needs be considered is alternative interpretations offered for the cause of the Holocaust in the absence of the Deuteronomic. Invariably it puts *God* in the dock. Evidently it is easier to consider His failure than the possibility of Jewish sin. Much theological activity is already underway in the re-examination of the Church's traditional doctrines of God and of Christology. Most liberal churches agree with the Jewish

assessment of the failure and bankruptcy of Christianity as being the principal cause of the Holocaust! In our inability to consider the Holocaust as judgment, the absence of an interpretation of our own compels us to the acceptance of theirs in which the denigration of the Church becomes ultimately the denigration of its Head! The Church's secret admiration for the Jew and the mystique of Israel, incapacitates it to consider the issues of judgment for sin given above. The result as I have said is to abandon its former evangelical witness in favor of a dialogical ecumenicity that has as its necessary condition the acknowledgment of Judaism's validity which in effect is the invalidation of Christian faith!

What is more, is that *the inability to recognize the past interventions of God as calamity in judgment, equally nullifies all hope in believing in His future intervention in mercy.* In fact, that God should intervene *at all* in the affairs of men is an ultimate offense to the liberal mind determined even now to obtain its own deliverance through its own efforts. This is clear in present Israel's deportment as a state in which there is an entire omission of divine reference except as obsequious deference to orthodoxy for purposes of political expediency. This is expressed also in Judaism's concern for 'education' as a means by which future calamity is to be circumvented lest we again become 'victim'. Frequent calls for a 'revised' New Testament in which invidious references to Jews be excised is a final and inevitable logic of the misreading of our own history and a symbolic re-enactment, the crucifying again of the Word made flesh!

What compounds our problem, is that modern Jews are as averse to the concept of sin as to divine intervention as judgment. This conjunction between intervention and sin is addressed in Paul R. Spohnheim's article 'Sin and Evil' in vol. I of Braaten and Jenson's *Christian Dogmatics*, p.376:

The act of sin in its reality...produces a destiny [i.e., has consequences]. Particularly in the Old Testament this sense of correspondence between crime and punishment plays a role, though not an unchallenged one. This sense of nemesis in history, of divine judgment active in life, *depends on the theme of God's activity in the world. Our task is to recognize that the Biblical witness calls for such a notion in understanding God's reaction to sin* (my emphases).

Where are the prophets now who would communicate such an understanding?—the causal connection between Israel's historic apostasy and her sufferings—to an autonomous generation that chooses not to know? That the consequences of covenantal dereliction as curse may be deferred tends to blur this causal connection but does not obliterate or remove it. *Is present Jewry still under the indictment? What has happened to nullify its continuing validity? Has the spirit of the people appreciably changed? How are we more qualified now for what we were rejected for then?* To bestow upon a later generation what was denied the former (not vastly different in character to the one that was judged) is, in effect, to presumptuously annul that judgment as invalid and unjustified—in effect, to annul *God*. It assumes that what was divinely appropriate in ancient or biblical times is inappropriate—even inconceivable—in modernity! That God (who is the same yesterday,

today and forever) has 'grown-up', 'matured' and need not again express Himself in Old Testament wrath and fury! Our own sense of these things as the Church has been blunted in deferring to Israel's sense of herself as victim rather than causative agent. In the end the Omnipotence, Omniscience and Sovereignty of God will fall victim to a Time/Newsweek view of causation as attributed to men, circumstance and accident—a universe bereft of God leaving puerile man sole agent.

Again, if God *is* the same yesterday, today and forever, why *should* His response to Israel differ from what it was historically and prophetically? If the causative factors are unchanged (covenant breaking, sin, apostasy) should not the penalty? Why, in fact, is it not reasonable to expect *greater* penalty ("I will punish you yet seven times for your sins". See Leviticus 26:18,21,24,28)—all the more for the testimony of past judgments which we have refused to consider. ***Should not the resemblance of Israel's present moral and spiritual condition to the generation that was judged be at least a cause for caution, concern and warning?*** Who is not grieved at Israel's worsening moral condition? Her financial, social, political and military scandals are well known. Abortion, physical abuse of women, contempt of Russian women accosted or degraded as prostitutes, the torture of prisoners, etc., are prodigious. The Jerusalem Post (International Edition, January 21, 1995) cites the complaint of the Minister of Education, Amnon Rubinstein of the increase of films celebrating violence emphasizing "the deliberate torture and murder of a victim as entertainment". Two youths interviewed who collect and view these films "laconically describe how victims have been disemboweled and dismembered alive". A member of the Knesset, Shlomo Benizri, in a discussion over the mounting phenomenon called it "the result of a sick society".

Such phrases in Micah as "For her wound is incurable" (1:8; reiterated also in Jer.30:12), "The transgressions of Israel were found in you" (1:13), "this evil nation" (Jer.8:3), "the generation of His wrath" (Jer.7:29) are suggestive not just of a people living at that time but of *a pervasive condition that remains—and must remain—until removed by a genuine repentance or the miraculous re-creation of the nation out of death!* In the judgments of the 'Time of Jacob's Trouble' which are yet future, though immanent, Scripture testifies that we will experience "the chastisement of a cruel one, ***for the multitude of thine iniquity, because thy sins were increased***" (Jer.30:14,15). Why should we be surprised? Have Jews some intrinsic virtue above other men? Is God's assessment of the *human* condition been altered? Are Jews other than *man* exempt from that assessment, —indeed, the very epitome of it? How remarkably do the issues of judgment—once entered—open us up for considerations that would otherwise have not been made. Certainly we need also in this regard to consider a view of the "inviolability of Zion" which was understood to imply that no matter the transgressions of His people, God was obligated to preserve His city and His temple—thereby assuring the ultimate safety of the nation. A present rendering would be that "God will not allow" hundreds of thousands of Russian Jews to perish having brought them to the land. By that logic the Holocaust itself should not have taken place and any future holocaust is rendered unthinkable. Imagine the *moral* devastation, as well as the physical for Christians as well as Jews in the failure of these false expectancies and hopes.



Jer.8:5 hints at an unbroken continuum of sin in God's anguished question: "Why then is this people of Jerusalem slidden back by a *perpetual* backsliding?" Webster's Dictionary defines 'perpetual' as "never ceasing, continuing forever in future time...continuing or continued without intermission; uninterrupted; permanent, fixed; without intermission; without limitation". Is that not cause to not only look back at the weight of Israel's past transgressions, but also *forward*? **The mere passage of time does not alter the historically demonstrated *disposition* of this people** as even we shall one day brokenly acknowledge ( Jer. 3:25):

We lie down in our shame--and our confusion covereth us:  
For we have sinned against the Lord our God, We and our  
fathers, *from our youth even unto this day*, and have not  
obeyed the voice of the Lord our God.

The commentary in Jamieson, Fausset and Brown equally deserves quoting:

Men of the world exhaust their ingenuity in devising  
novelties, shifting from change to change,, in order to  
escape from care. But they who change their *position*  
do not thereby change their *disposition*  
(Italics in original, p.9 on ch.2 of Jeremiah).

God's plea to "Only acknowledge thine iniquity" (Jer.3:13)  
evidently goes unheard right up to the time of the millennium when at the  
time that "they shall call Jerusalem the throne of the Lord",..."neither shall  
they walk any more after the imagination of *their evil heart*"(v.17) only  
because in the mercy of God that though the whole land be made desolate  
"Yet will I not make a full end" (4:27). In that 'end', ***it is the  
unchangeable character of God--not that of Israel***--that brings covenant  
mercy! The adamant condition of Israel even in the face of judgments  
indicates **why** restoration must exclusively be the work of God:

Thou hast stricken them,--but they have not grieved;  
Thou hast consumed them,--but they have ***refused***  
to receive correction:  
They have made their faces harder than a rock;  
They have ***refused*** to return (Jer.5:3).

One wonders if Israel could mourn when they see Him whom they have pierced were it  
not for the Spirit of grace and supplication *first* being poured out (Zech.12:10)! In

this sense, one might also consider that not the least of God's purposes in allowing the establishment of the political state and insuring its existence till now is to give opportunity to see that *nothing has in fact changed* and "given enough rope" Israel would again "hang itself" in demonstration of that disposition unchanged from its fathers. **What has happened since 1948 that would indicate otherwise?** How does present Israel differ morally and spiritually from its Diaspora condition thought *in the Land* (always recognized by evangelical commentators as the continuing evidence of unaltered judgment)? One suspects by the increasing evidences at every hand that the present condition is possibly worse (Jer.7:23-26). For had there been a change in the nation's condition, it would necessarily require the alteration of Israel's view of Jesus as Messiah and the acknowledgment in the nation's sin in His rejection and crucifixion. **This continuing rejection therefore bespeaks an unchanged condition** (and this *despite* the Holocaust and the prospect there for repentant turning—let alone in the centuries of Diaspora persecutions which preceded it).

*Why in this greatest calamity of contemporary Jewish existence, was the classic interpretive principle of 'judgment in proportion to our sins' not applied? The very existence of the Diaspora itself should have been cause for inquiry of this kind—had there been a change of heart in the people.* In a prophecy likely yet to be fulfilled, the Lord proclaims that

The days are coming when I will punish all who are circumcised only in the flesh--Egypt, Judah, Edom, Ammon, Moab and all who live in the desert in distant places. For all these nations are really uncircumcised, *and even the whole house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart.* (Jer.9:25-6)

What needs to be asked is whether the penalties of broken covenant are *now* abrogated or voided? Because the blessings have been lost, are we exempt from the penalty of its curses? Are not all of the descendants of those who contracted with God at Sinai (Dt.29:14-15) subsumed in its agreements whether or not we know them or consider them as valid? Are not these warnings of Jeremiah as appropriate now, to the present occupants of Jerusalem and Israel, as they were then?

If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, ***if you do not oppress the alien***, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your harm, then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your forefathers for ever and ever.

Notice in this statement (Jer. 7:5-7) the high priority given to the alien in the land. There is today little present public acknowledgment of this biblical injunction, but rather, on the part increasingly of many, a quite unabashed 'death to the Arabs' mentality as if God had **not** spoken! *Should there be yet another expulsion, and there is sufficient Scriptural suggestion to warrant it, might it not likely be for this explicit*

*covenantal requirement?* How hauntingly appropriate is the Lord's indictment **then** for this people **now**: *Why does Jerusalem always turn away?...No one repents of his wickedness, saying, "What have I done?" Each pursues his own course...but my people do not know the requirements of the Lord"* (8:5-7). If the word 'generation' can be taken to mean 'a people of the same kind' as well as those of a particular time span, then the present occupants of Israel need fear the statement of God in Jer.7:29 that "the Lord has rejected and abandoned *this generation* that is under His wrath".

Walter Brueggemann (*Abiding Astonishment, Westminster, John Knox Press,p.27*) writes

"In such a construal, covenantal obedience, covenantal possibility, and covenantal risk disappear from public practice. When it is forgotten that God cares intensely about issues of justice and righteousness, then it follows quickly that human persons and human institutions can also scuttle such concerns. The abrogation of the commandments permits self-serving, self-indulgent forms of public life."

Many more testimonies of the unbroken continuum of sin abound in Scripture. *Our problem is that we do not see as God sees nor remember as God remembers. Our reckonings are individualistic rather than corporate and we do not see ourselves as implicated nor culpable in the sins of our fathers.* Often, therefore, we find in Scripture a rehearsal or review of a long-standing historical condition **yet unrequited and extant** indicating still that "that which is past is now" (Eccl.3:15).

Since the day that your fathers came forth out of the land of Egypt **unto this day** I have sent unto you all my servants, the prophets, rising up early and sending them; Yet they hearkened not unto me, nor inclined their ear, but hardened their neck; *they did worse than their fathers.* (Jer.7:23-6)

As God by this testimony brings the past into the present ("unto this day") in that unbroken continuum of sin. ***For what reason should we dismiss that this same divine logic in our present?*** The Spirit-inspired outburst of Stephen in Acts 7:51 ("As your fathers have done, so do ye also; you do always grieve the Holy Spirit") would indicate that so that we must ask ***What national act of repentant acknowledgment has severed this continuum? Are we not still under its indictment?***

Von Rad, in his classic work, *The Theology of the Old Testament* (vol.2,p.278) indicates that these fulfilments are yet future:

It is remarkable that the event [the return from Babylonian exile] made no particular impact either on its own or on future generations. The return was not accompanied by miraculous events--indeed, those who took part in it did not in any way regard it as a saving event. If they had done so, they would never have allowed it to fall into oblivion as if it were of no particular significance. *It was obviously not as the fulfillment of a great prophetic prediction. Deutero-Isaiah's prophecies had therefore still to be fulfilled.*

John Bright in his *Covenants and Promises* (Westminster Press, 1976, pp131-3) writes:

Deuteronomy places the nation's very existence under the stipulation of covenant. It knows nothing of unconditional promises! ***Even the promise of the land is laid under warning and threat.*** In positively classical fashion it addresses Israel as if she stood ***perpetually*** antecedent to the land—as if the promise of the land, long ago fulfilled, was yet an open question ***and subject to conditions.*** *It addresses each generation as if she stood with their ancestors at Sinai and had personally bound themselves to the terms of the covenant* (Dt.5:1-5; pp.129-130, my emphasis)...Israelites of *whatever generation* have committed themselves to the terms of the covenant, Deuteronomy calls them to absolute obedience to the covenant stipulations and warns them if they do not obey, ***all the promised blessings will be taken away.***

Where is there even so much as a hint that its conditions are passed, that Israel of whatever generation is exempt from its demands? *Does not the apparent absence of the blessings (Dt.30:16), the increasing anxiety and stress, the mounting fears, indicate that the God of these covenantal requirements is God still?* From that perspective, how impertinent in view of a 2000 year expulsion validating Yaweh's oaths, do we think to unilaterally to repossess the land without first considering the God of Sinai and His covenantal demands? The biblical testimony, our tragic diasporic history and that of present Israel's plight would seem to indicate that such a theological interpretation is true "and begs the people to heed the lessons of history before the midnight hour strikes"(p.132-3).

The notion that the nation might be threatened with destruction was simply too terrible to be entertained...They found security in the physical presence of the Temple in their midst...Since they could not believe that he would allow it to be destroyed, they felt equally confident that the city in which it stood was safe...and turn[ed] it into a dogma of absolute validity for all time to come...no matter what! Any suggestion that he might allow Jerusalem to be taken and destroyed could only be regarded as treason and blasphemy.

How much of today's confidence, even on the part of believers, is an echo of this tragic, false hope?

Bright, like Raitt, recognize that in Jeremiah and Ezekiel's uncompromising fidelity to the recognition of calamity as judgment, was there the revelation and pronouncement of a true hope out of its devastation's. Bright concludes;

But it was just that desperately needed explanation that Jeremiah (together with Ezekiel and the Deuteronomic writers) gave. Precisely in [to the degree ] that his message was one of judgment—of stern uncompromising judgment—it was a saving message. It gave the tragedy explanation—and in advance—precisely in terms of the covenant that had made Israel a people in the first place (p.189).

God would once again come to His people in His mercy (Ro:11:31) and not forever cast them off:

But what form would that hope for the farther future take?...The eschatological future in Jeremiah's preaching took the only form, that *in view of his theology* it could take: the promise of a *new covenant*. The awful chasm between the demands of the covenant by which the nation was judged and the sure promises of God...is bridged from the side of the divine grace... So it is that God, who has condemned his people by the terms of the covenant, will come to them again in the wilderness of the exile [Ez.20:33f] and will make with them a new and eternal covenant...[with] a people who are **made new**.

Critical response is welcomed. Please write to:

Arthur Katz  
Ben Israel Fellowship  
Rt.2, Box 183  
Laporte, MN. 56461

fax: 218-335-2562

