The millstone (Mark 9:38-50)

by Joel Marcus in the September 13, 2000 issue

Eternal punishment. Like it or not, it is a biblical concept, albeit a late-blooming one. In the Old Testament, the afterlife is rarely spoken of, and when it is, it is usually pictured as a shadowy, wraithlike existence.

For the dominant line of thought in the Old Testament, “Sheol [the realm of the dead] cannot thank thee, death cannot praise thee; those who go down to the pit cannot hope for thy faithfulness”(Isa. 38:18). The dead are miserable, insubstantial shades, and it is better to be a living dog than a dead lion (Eccles. 9:4).

Only in the later books of the Old Testament, such as Daniel, do we encounter the idea of a resurrection of the dead at the end of time, “some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.”

This changed conception probably reflects terrible historical experiences, especially the persecutions and murders of Jews under the Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes near the beginning of the second century BC. If pious Jewish men, women and children were being brutally tortured and martyred for their faith, if the wicked were seeming to triumph in this world, where was the balance and justice in the universe? Somehow God had to make everything even, to reward the righteous and punish the wicked. And if he didn’t do so in this life, he would have to do so in the next.

The persecutions of Antiochus thus raised the same question for pious Jews of the second century BC that the Holocaust and similar horrors raise for Jews and Christians today. One answer to those questions, and a profound one, is expressed in a prayer offered by Auschwitz survivor Elie Wiesel at the 50th anniversary of the camp’s liberation:

> Those who are here remember the nightly marches [into the gas chambers] of children, and more children, and more children. Frightened, quiet. So quiet and so beautiful. If we could see just one of them our heart would break. But did it break the hearts of the murderers? O God, O merciful God, do not have pity on those who did not have mercy on Jewish

children.

This powerful prayer against forgiveness is related to the passage from Mark, not only by the general theme of divine judgment, but also by the specific subject of abuse and murder of children: “And whoever offends against one of these little ones . . . it would be better for him to have a millstone hung around his neck and for him to be cast into the sea.”

Are such sentiments substandard, un-Christian? It would be difficult to say so when it is Jesus himself who gives voice to them. And shouldn’t we let those who have suffered such terrible abuse be the ones to judge whether or not Wiesel’s words, or Jesus’s, are wrongheaded? Who would want to deprive the children of Auschwitz, their relatives, or other survivors of human cruelty, of the powerful, cleansing emotion that goes with the conviction that the destroyers of the innocent will one day be punished?

And yet, although dreams of retribution are sweet and even at times empowering, are they the end of wisdom? Can we be certain that we are not among those who destroy the earth and our fellow human beings, and who will be judged for it? Once, on a bus tour of Egypt, we were led into a “school.” It turned out to be a carpet factory where children sat hour after hour before huge looms, weaving lovely rugs to grace the living rooms of Western tourists like ourselves. They were beautiful children who flashed us shy smiles, and their hands flew so rapidly over the looms that we could scarcely see them.

I remember a young woman from the tour, a college student, hugging one of the little girls and weeping—weeping that this child should have to forfeit her childhood, and her hope for the education that might lift her out of poverty, for the sake of the few dollars she was earning for her family by making rugs for tourists. Somehow, just by visiting, we all felt complicit in the exploitation and destruction of spirit that was going on in that so-called school. And even on the individual level, is it not the sad truth that most child abusers were abused as children themselves? In the justice of God, then, how will such people be judged—with the punishment befitting abusers or with the compassion befitting the abused?

The calculus of revenge seems too complicated! There must be some other equation, or no hope will remain for any of us. And, indeed, the New Testament seems to hint at another equation when Paul says that God has imprisoned all human beings in disobedience in order that he might have mercy upon all (Rom.

11:32). Does this level the playing field totally, so that all humans become equally guilty of sin, thereby washing away the force of Jesus’s threats against those who abuse and murder children? No. Those threats must still represent a truth, a “word before the last word,”as Bonhoeffer puts it—a word that is terrible for the abusers and terrible for us to the extent that we participate in the “little murders” that punctuate daily life. But they cannot represent the final word, because the same Jesus who in Mark 9 says that it would be better if child abusers had never been born, in Mark 10 points to his own abused body as a sign of hope for all.