
Mark's Gospel And Wiesel's Night: Considering Night As A Religious Doctrine

Wiesel's Novella, *Night*, can be labeled a 'religious book' when looked at in light of the unquestionably religious text, the "Gospel According to Mark" from the "New Testament" of Christianity's Holy Bible. This proves to be the case if one looks at the central parallels which may be drawn between the two works. A comparable narrative framework, consistent use of light and dark images (indicating 'good' and 'evil,' respectively), and the ongoing theme of questioning faith serve as these central similarities. However, the works do part company when the reader seeks to answer those questions of faith which the characters of both works raise.

The narrative frameworks of the two texts are quite similar. Both are biographies (*Night* in first person, the "Gospel" in third person) of a strong and admirable individual's life (or aspect of his life) told in the form of a story. Both of these individuals, Wiesel and Jesus, experience an inversion of occupation within their lives. Wiesel, a "student" at home, says that he is a "farmer" when he is brought to the concentration camp in order to seem to the SS officer who is questioning him that he will be a good worker (Wiesel 29). Likewise, Jesus, who by birthright was a carpenter, chooses to lead his life as a teacher and healer. The oddity of this inversion is pointed out by the people of Jesus' "hometown", they ask "is not this [Jesus] the carpenter?" (Mark 6.3). Their question implies the absurdity of his teaching the word of God and healing when he is 'supposed' to be a carpenter. In addition, in both texts, the narrator's perspective is limited. Mark's limitation is revealed by the other three gospels, that serve as a part of the canon of the "New Testament," in that his testimony is not entirely consistent with theirs. This is shown most explicitly in the difference between his gospel and John's gospel; "Mark's Jesus will neither confirm nor deny that he is the long-awaited king... [but] repeatedly throughout John's gospel, Jesus declares himself to be the means of salvation" (Oxtoby 211). Mark does not narrate the definitive version (or perspective) of Jesus' life. Wiesel's limitation is admitted by himself. He is a prisoner, and so he does not know what is going on in the greater world, or even who is winning the war. Another likeness within the narratives is the active expression there being a natural kinship among those who are human (this excludes both Jesus, who is divine, and the Nazis, who are demons). Wiesel describes the first relief he has at the concentration camp as being the words prison-block leader when he says, "let there be comradeship among you. We are all brothers... Help one another" (Wiesel 38). Wiesel also regularly makes use of the word "we" throughout his novella in order to reinforce this sentiment. Mark postulates the same idea. He says that Jesus has "compassion" for the people gathered "because they [are] like sheep without a shepherd" (6.34). The use of this metaphor indicates that all people are the same in Jesus' eyes as all sheep are the same in humans' eyes. They are the same because they are all

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"brothers and sisters," they are all humans (Mark 10.30). The resemblance of Wiesel's narration to Mark's causes there to be similar tones to the works as wholes and this causes the reader 'hear' the works in similar ways. In this case, the fact that the "Gospel" is a religious piece, and is meant to be taken as such by its readers, implies that Wiesel's piece would also be 'heard' and understood similarly by its readers.

There are many images in both manuscripts of light and dark. These images indicate an underlying sense of there existing good (light) and dark (evil) from the narrators' perspectives. Mark cites both the prophet Isaiah, and Jesus himself, as verbally expressing light / dark images to illustrate the good / bad distinction. A quote from Isaiah opens the "Gospel," saying God's "messenger [Jesus]" will be sent "ahead of you," his will be the "voice of one crying out in the wilderness" (Mark 1.2-3). The "wilderness" represents darkness and the lack of God, while the "voice" represents the sound that will bring people out of the wilderness and into the clearing where the light of God shines. Jesus too, in the 'lamp parable,' reveals this distinction. He says "there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; not is anything secret, except to come to light" (Mark 4.21). Again, the light represents the truth and knowledge and goodness of God. God's "light" will reveal all. In *Night*, the distinction is drawn, but in a less obvious way. The last moments which the Jews of Wiesel's city have in their own place is accompanied by "a blazing sun" (14). The light which such a sun gives off represents the goodness of being in one's home. "A glimmer of light" also brings "joy" later in the book because the living (including Wiesel and his father) are allowed to throw the dead off of the train on which they are being transported. In contrast to this, it is "pitch dark" when most of Wiesel's fellow prisoners are "dying and dead" including his friend, the violin player, Julie. The darkness represents the pure evil which brought about that situation. The title of the book, *Night*, also falls in this vein. The book as a whole is a horrifying tale -- dark and evil.

The evil, illustrated by the images darkness in the pieces, is also illustrated by the presence of explicit, physical, non-human 'bad guys' in the pieces. Along the same lines, the good, illustrated by the images of light in the pieces, is also illustrated by the presence of the main character as a model of righteous behavior in the pieces. The demons, or "unclean spirits" of the "Gospel" are equivalent to the Nazis in *Night*. The unclean spirit, "Legion," enters a herd of "swine" and causes the swine to "rush down" and be "drowned in the sea" (Mark 5.8-5.13). In the same way that an unclean spirit causes the swine act wildly, an unclean spirit also makes a boy act wildly; it causes him to "convulse" and "foam at the mouth" (Mark 9.20). Nazis are shown in a remarkably similar 'wild' manner when Wiesel first reaches the concentration camp. They leap up in "black trousers" onto the wagon with "electric torches and truncheons... and [they] begin strike out to the right and left" (Wiesel 26). The advice of how to get rid of these 'bad guys' is also alike. Jesus says "all things [including the casting out of unclean spirits] may be done for the one who believes" (Mark 9.23) The "older ones," faced with the Nazis, advise their children, "you must never lose faith, even when the sword hangs over your head" (Wiesel

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29). In contrast to these demons, the main characters of the works serve as models of what is considered to be righteous behavior in the works. Certain basic assertions of what is righteous are the same in both texts. One in particular is primary in both texts. This one is put forth concisely when Jesus says "you know the commandment: 'Honor your father and mother'" (Mark 10.19). Jesus spends his whole life actively honoring his father, who is God, by serving him and spreading his word, and God is "well pleased" by him (Mark 1.11). Wiesel also spends much of the time in the book honoring his father. He eats on Yom Kippur "mainly to please his father, who had forbidden [him] to do so" (66). And then, at one point, near the end of the story, Wiesel prays to God to give him the strength to never betray his father (87). In addition, the novella, *Night*, itself is dedicated to the "memory of [Wiesel's] parents." He even wrote the book in order to honor them. The parallels drawn between the "Gospel" and *Night* concerning the good / light and the evil / dark are extremely important to the reader's understanding of the works. Since they both use these types of images consistently, it puts the reader in a position to see the works as professing a clear delineation between that which is good (or close to God) and that which is evil (or lacking God). The feeling which readers come away from the two works with are likely to be similar due to this similar duality within the content.

The theme of faith is played out in both texts through the use of predictions which are seen by others (including the reader) to be valid proof of power of the predictor if they are fulfilled. Jesus predicts the betrayal of Judas and then of Peter. "One of you will betray me who is eating with me" says Jesus, predicting Judas' betrayal of him (Mark 14.17). It is fulfilled when "the betrayer [Judas] gives them [the men who came to arrest Jesus] a sign, saying 'the one I will kiss is the man [Jesus]; arrest him'" (Mark 14.44). All of Jesus' disciples (and the reader) see that Jesus' prediction came true when they see him arrested at the sign of the disciple Judas. More privately, Jesus tells Peter "before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times" (14.30). This proves to be true, Peter denies that he knows Jesus three times, then the "cock crows for a second time," and Peter, remembering Jesus' accurate predication, "breaks down and weeps" (14.72). He is touched and pained by the lack of faith which he demonstrated by denying Jesus and which was fully restored by his true prediction. The other prediction which Jesus makes, and which proves to be true is on a larger scale. He says that he will be "betrayed into human hands and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again" (9.31). The end of Mark actualizes this prediction. A man sitting beside Jesus' tomb says "Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified... has been raised" (16.6). The reader is supposed to have faith in God after reading of these flawless predictions. *Night* displays a comparable string of predictions. At the beginning of the story, "Moshe the Beadle" comes back from his encounter with Nazis, saying that he came back to "tell the story of his death... to warn" the others (including Wiesel's family) of their approaching fate (Wiesel 5). This prediction unravels itself as being the whole of the story. Moshe warned that the Nazis were going to try to exterminate the Jews. Then, toward the end of the book, Wiesel's "neighbor" in the hospital 'knows' that Hitler "will annihilate all the Jews" because he has "more faith in Hitler than in anyone else" (76-7). This is the first case of

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those so far listed where the prediction doesn't come true. Hitler does not prove to be a "prophet" (Wiesel 77).

This is where the two texts part company. Where the reader of the "Gospel" is supposed to come away with a faith in God, as the central characters do, the reader of Night is given no such clear message. The question left to the reader of Night is whether one should maintain a faith in God, or anyone else, in light of the horrors of the Holocaust. Night can be labeled a 'religious book' if one compares it to the "Gospel According to Mark" because the reader is brought to view the world from many of the same angles. However, though both raise the central question of faith, only the "Gospel" ventures to answer that question for its reader.

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