

# Jesus

and the  
**nonviolent  
revolution**

**andré trocmé**

"One of the most important writings on nonviolence ever penned. I can think of no better introduction to this timely subject."

—Walter Wink



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## Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution

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In a time when the church is being seduced by the concentration of power and violence, this book gives us the ethic we need to remain faithful. Almost all the major themes on which John Howard Yoder later based his classic *Politics of Jesus* are here—in briefer and highly readable form.

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**Donald Kraybill**, author, *The Upside-Down Kingdom*

The revised edition is a welcome refinement to a classic study... Trocme has the prophetic gift of bypassing doctrinal fluff and cutting to the heart of Jesus' message: a stark call for repentance, love and socio-economic change. A prophet for the 21st century, Trocme speaks in plain and simple words we can understand but may not want to hear. Read him with caution: this book may change your life.

**Ched Myers**, author, *Who Will Roll Away the Stone?*

Trocme pioneered territory where many of us now dwell, and opened doors we seek still to pass through... It is wonderful that a new generation might come to know this book: it represents a continuing light in our darkness.

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**Stanley Hauerwas**, Duke Divinity School

This book—and especially this newly expanded edition—deserves to be more widely known... Trocmé's focus saves any account of salvation from pietistic distortion... His comparison of Gandhi and Jesus is also extremely important.

**Charles Scriven**, author, *The Transformation of Culture*

In this new edition of Trocmé's classic work, the genius of a pastor-revolutionary shines through once more, magnified under the light of notes that reinforce his startling conception of witness and hope.

**Craig Keener**, Eastern Seminary

Trocmé's courage in the face of Nazi oppression is reason enough to give him a fresh hearing in a world of continuing injustice and rising ethnic hatreds. One need not agree with every point to learn from his vision of justice—a vision to which we often give lip-service while neglecting its challenge in our daily lives.

**Richard Cassidy**, author, *Paul in Chains*

This volume deserves wider recognition as the classic it truly is. Plough is to be congratulated for this splendid edition.

**Craig L. Blomberg**, Denver Seminary

In an age of ever-increasing war and terror, Plough has done scholars, pastors and thoughtful laypersons all a great service by editing and reprinting this classic work on the nonviolent way of Jesus. Practicing what he preached, Trocmé helped save many Jews from the Nazis. His work inspired the late John Howard Yoder, and compares favorably with current authors such as Walter Wink and Glen Stassen. Not everyone will agree with every exegetical detail, but all will feel the compelling force of Trocmé's cumulative case. This is a book worth pondering at length.

**Walter Wink**, Auburn Theological Seminary

*Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution* is one of the most important writings on nonviolence ever penned. Trocmé not only lays out his principles with astonishing clarity, but he lived them out at great risk. I can think of no better place to begin the study of this timely subject.

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# **Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution**

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ANDRÉ TROCMÉ

Edited by Charles E. Moore



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## Introduction

**F**ew books stand the test of time as this one has. Perhaps the fact that it is still so relevant rests in the circumstances of its genesis—in the courageous life of its author. Since it first appeared in English in 1972, André Trocmé's *Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution* has influenced a whole stream of New Testament thinkers and peace activists. Dozens of books about Christian ethics make reference to it, and proponents of nonviolence turn to it repeatedly for guidance. For example, significant portions of John Howard Yoder's classic *Politics of Jesus* are based on Trocmé's thesis. However, one cannot fully appreciate Trocmé's ideas without some understanding of the man and of the amazing life story that forms the context for his message.

### **The Story of Le Chambon**

André Trocmé was born into a French-German family in 1901, at the dawn of a turbulent period that would eventually catapult all Europe into armed conflict. As a young man, André's youthful enthusiasm and impulsive deeds made him stand out. When the German army was rapidly marching into Northern France,



he excitedly hung a French flag from the topmost branches of a towering tree near his house.

During the First World War, André saw first-hand the horrors and senselessness of that war. At the age of thirteen he simply could not accept that his German cousins, his mother being German, might fight against his own half brothers. The shock of this, along with the senseless death of his mother from a car accident just prior to the war, and his encounter with numerous pacifist theologians after the war, cemented his orientation as a pacifist. Moreover, as a young student, he realized that military armistices could not establish peace between nations or reconstruct the moral fabric of a society.

Years later he would be described by one writer as “a man of mystical fervor, aggressively loving, almost explosive in his rush to save lives.” But his path was not always so clear. As the specter of National Socialism began to haunt Europe, Trocmé, despite his aversion to violence, conceded that it might be necessary to plot against and assassinate Hitler. In the end he joined an altogether different kind of conspiracy, one that chronicler Philip Hallie called “a conspiracy of goodness.”

By the time Hitler’s war machine came to full force, Trocmé, now married and a father of four, was co-pastor of the French Reformed Church in Le Chambon sur Lignon. A farming village on a pine-studded plateau in the mountains of south-central France, Le Chambon seemed an unlikely breeding place for the radical resistance for which it would soon be famous. Yet it became a magnet to a stream of refugees that included both French and foreign Jews, providing shelter and safety from their persecutors.<sup>1</sup>

Already before the first Jews arrived, others fleeing from Franco’s regime in Spain, and later from the Nazis, found this Protestant sanctuary, consisting of twelve villages, willing to bid them welcome. In the parish of Le Chambon, Trocmé and his

fellow pastor, Edouard Theis, united the people in the effort to protect these fugitives, exhorting their parishioners to live not in fear of the state, but according to moral conviction. What eventually became a massive, organized network to protect and even educate Jewish children who had been taken out of internment camps, started at the grassroots with these first refugees. Villagers and farmers opened their homes to the refugees, sometimes to stay, sometimes to wait until accommodations could be arranged elsewhere or until they could be smuggled across the Swiss border. Besides the hospitality of individuals, by the middle of the occupation financial aid from outside the village was supporting seven larger houses of refuge. Several humanitarian organizations helped to establish boardinghouses for refugee children as well as a student center.

So it came about that resisting authority became a normal part of daily life in Le Chambon. The students at the private school L'École Nouvelle Cévenole, which Trocmé and Theis had founded, refused to salute the flag or hang the picture of Pétain, the Vichy leader, in every classroom. On a national holiday, Trocmé's parish ignored Pétain's order to ring the church bells at noon. They would ring the bells only for God. A tight network also provided the refugees with false identification cards that allowed them to pass as non-Jewish. But though it was truly resistance, the fighters in this nonviolent underground were not fueled by anger or hatred. Some maintained connections with partisan fighters in the area, while throughout the rescue effort anonymous messages and phone calls trickled in at just the right time warning of the possibility of raids by the Vichy police. Because of the risk of discovery, town residents never talked in public about their deeds.

Trocmé, at considerable personal risk, was at the forefront of much of the village's activity. On June 22, 1940, France surrendered to the Nazis and agreed to arrest and deport to Germany

any refugees Hitler's government might demand. The next day, during a Sunday service, Trocmé and Theis both preached about resistance.

Tremendous pressure will be put on us to submit passively to a totalitarian ideology. If they do not succeed in subjugating our souls, at least they will want to subjugate our bodies. The duty of Christians is to use the weapons of the Spirit to oppose the violence that they will try to put on our consciences. We appeal to all our brothers in Christ to refuse to cooperate with this violence...

Loving, forgiving, and doing good to our adversaries is our duty. Yet we must do this without giving up, and without being cowardly. We shall resist whenever our adversaries demand of us obedience contrary to the orders of the gospel. We shall do so without fear, but also without pride and without hate.<sup>2</sup>

Their sermon, if daring, was also timely. The Vichy government lost no time in implementing the Nuremberg laws and immediately began arrests. Jews and other refugees were zealously herded into internment camps. But Trocmé, true to his preaching, was not about to admit defeat. With the approval of his church council, and at the request of the American Friends Service Committee, he began to search for ways to provide refuge in Le Chambon for the children rescued from the camps—a dangerous and illegal undertaking. There the recently founded *École Nouvelle Cévenole*, as well as the public school, stood ready to assimilate them. He also urged his congregation to continue to shelter fugitives of “the people of the Bible,” and encouraged them to stay firm.

In the summer of 1942, Minister Georges Lamirand, head of the Vichy government's youth organization, showed up in Le Chambon and delivered a speech on the “New Social Order.” The speech over, he was immediately handed a letter by the local youth, protesting the recent roundup of nearly 13,000 Jews in Paris. They informed him in unequivocal terms that they intended to protect persecuted people whenever and however they could. Trocmé was

clearly the source of this defiance, and soon after was warned of the dire consequences facing him if he did not turn in the names of all hidden Jews. Trocmé refused, saying, “We do not know what a Jew is; we only know people.” For three weeks the police scoured the village and its surrounding areas, but the rescue network was so tight that they came up with only two arrests.

In August, under surveillance and with rumors circulating that he might soon be arrested, Trocmé preached to an overflowing church on Deuteronomy 19, concerning the entitlement of the persecuted to shelter, “so that innocent blood will not be shed.” His own response was clear: “These people came here for help and for shelter. I am their shepherd. A shepherd does not forsake his flock.”

Eventually, though, Trocmé’s activities were brought to a halt. In February of 1943 he and Theis, his co-pastor, as well as the director of Le Chambon’s public school, were arrested and shipped to a French internment camp. Surprisingly, after four weeks of imprisonment all three men were freed, even though they refused to sign a declaration of obedience. However, Trocmé and Theis were warned that their lives were in danger, so the two men went into hiding for the next ten months but secretly stayed in contact with rescue efforts. Four months after their arrest, the German police finally raided Les Roches, the center for young adult refugees near Le Chambon. This hit close to home for Trocmé; his cousin Daniel, director of Les Roches, was arrested along with seventeen students. He was later murdered by the Nazis at Maidanek, just weeks before the concentration camp was liberated.

The great war finally played itself out. The fighting ended, and the need for secrecy passed. The people of Le Chambon and of the surrounding plateau had kept thousands of innocent lives from harm right to the end, despite repression and intimidation.

Ultimately, the rescue network provided a haven or safe passage for an estimated 2,500 refugees, with a large percentage being Jews and children.<sup>3</sup> And everything took place right under the noses of the Vichy police and, later, of the Gestapo themselves.

### **Missionary of Nonviolence**

Trocme, in the words of Marlin Miller, who helped translate this book, “was one of the rare Christian pacifists who refused to choose between impassioned action and intellectual clarity.” His efforts, which sprang from his clarity of purpose, would be devoted to peace and reconciliation for the remainder of his life. World War II over, Trocme served from 1948 to 1960 as European secretary for the Fellowship of Reconciliation, traveling and lecturing all over the world. His House of Reconciliation, an international peace center in Versailles, positioned him as one of the links in a chain that united such leaders of nonviolence as Martin Luther King, Jr., Toyohiko Kagawa, and Gandhi.

Driven by his faith, Trocme and his wife, Magda, set out in 1956 to study the conflict in war-torn Algeria. For a short while there they volunteered their personal time in overcoming illiteracy. They also learned more about the plight of French resisters who refused to serve in the French army. This concerned Trocme tremendously. He thus worked with the Mennonites to help found Eirene in Morocco, which has now become a worldwide service program for conscientious objectors and development workers.

In 1960, for what was to be the final decade of his life, Trocme returned to pastoral ministry. Because of his absolute pacifist stand it was difficult for him to find a French church to lead. Finally, he was invited to become pastor of a large Reformed church in Geneva, Switzerland. Despite the bourgeois lives of his congregants, he motivated them to organize and support technical development work in northern Algeria. Shortly before his death,

Yad Vashem awarded him and his wife, along with others in Le Chambon, the prestigious “Righteous Among the Nations” medal for the part they played in the rescue efforts.

Trocme’s convictions and ideas grew out of his activities as a peacemaker. His writings were forged not in theoretical musings, but in the fiery events that had been his baptism into the world of nonviolent revolution.

Trocme wrote much and often but only managed to publish two books. His first book, *The Politics of Repentance* (1953), proposed a strategy for peacemaking in situations of conflict. *Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution* (1961, French edition), is a systematic treatment of Christian nonviolence and the more influential of the two books.

When this book first appeared it broke the clutches of “Christian realism,” spearheaded by Reinhold Niebuhr, which was so dominant at the time. Trocme offers a truly Christ-centered social ethic, one to be taken seriously not just by individuals but by the church. He understands from personal experience that Christ’s redemptive work extends far beyond the individual to encompass society and nations. His understanding of discipleship is revolutionary without succumbing to political ideology or sheer activism.<sup>4</sup>

There is nothing fancy about Trocme’s approach. With prophetic intuition rather than weighty analysis, he renders interpretations that are both subtle and provocative. His core argument is simple: Jesus inaugurated the kingdom of God based on the Jubilee principles of the Old Testament. These principles call for a political, economic, and spiritual revolution in response to human need. Jesus intended nothing less than an actual revolution, with debts forgiven, slaves set free, and land returned to the poor.

It was this threat to vested interests that awakened the hostility toward Jesus that led to the cross. Jesus understood the kingdom of God in terms of God’s work in human history; every sphere of

life was a domain for God's rulership. But he saw, too, that such rulership would always cost a struggle. The first Christians, who were charged with seditiously "turning the world upside down," understood their master well. They had caught this vision and begun to live it out.

Trocmé is careful to locate Jesus within the socio-cultural context of his day. He therefore expends a great deal of effort surveying various movements, social groups, and patterns of authority and influence that situate Jesus and help to delineate his unique mission. Jesus' way transcended the alternatives of his day, while at the same time it grew out of intense interaction with his contemporaries. Jesus was no spiritual mystic. He had to overcome the temptations of employing violence, of escaping into the desert, and of compromise.

Yet, as Trocmé shows, Jesus refused both the way of violence and of spiritual quietism. He called for practical changes but rejected violence as a means of achieving social change. Instead he articulated and exemplified a way of life that obviates the kind of social order that produces injustice and poverty, and the violence inherent in them. Jesus' nonviolence was not a philosophy or a tactic, but a matter of obedience to God.

Trocmé makes it clear that Jesus should be the center of the church's life and practice, not nonviolence or revolution or justice. Jesus' nonviolent revolution, and ours, is rooted in the cross. Jesus was ready to sacrifice his "cause," the liberation of his people, for the sake of a single human being in need of healing. Human need—be it physical, emotional, spiritual, or social—was Jesus' reason for being, and should be ours. Jesus' sacrifice makes possible a new social order where human lives are dignified with justice, uplifted in compassion, and nurtured by peace.

Trocmé takes the liberty of interpreting certain passages of Scripture in fresh ways. Though somewhat imaginative at times,

he puts forth insights that in the broader narrative of Jesus' life make perfect sense. Historical and exegetical work have subsequently proven Trocmé, if not right, then at least on the right track. His work is constructive as well. By showing us how Christ continues to do his work here and now through his people, he broadens our understanding of Jesus' mission, and makes plain what Jesus expected of his followers.

By any standard, Trocmé's work deserves ongoing attention. This edition is new in several respects. First, the text has been edited to read more smoothly. Some material has been rearranged with new subtitles, certain sections deleted to eliminate repetition, and transitional phrases added that were not in the original English edition. New material has also been incorporated, particularly in chapters 14 and 15, which are from Trocmé's book, *The Politics of Repentance*. Finally, references have been added to show how trends in current thought affirm Trocmé's thesis.

Not much has changed since World War II, the Holocaust, and the Cold War. Ours is still an age of bloodshed. We live by the hellish logic of revenge, just war, might makes right, and deterrent force, while inequality, oppression, and exploitation flourish. *Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution* refutes such logic. Trocmé answers our continued propensity toward violence with, as he terms it, "the algebra of God's kingdom." If only more Christians were courageous enough to follow Trocmé's lead in obedience to Jesus' call, the story of Le Chambon sur Lignon would not be so exceptional.

*Charles E. Moore*



## Preface

**T**here is no easy peace. The earth's exploding population renders more difficult each day a peaceful solution to the problems of hunger, national security, and social justice. Simultaneously, the threat of nuclear destruction continues to hover over the future of humanity.

Meanwhile, the gap widens between the mentality of our contemporaries, shaped by a technological civilization whereby we control nature, and traditional religion, conceived during a rural epoch when human beings bowed under the weight of nature. Though technology threatens human existence more than it ever did in times past, Christian thought—frightened by the responsibilities it should assume—refuses to see in the gospel anything but a message of individual salvation. It might even be said that today's Christianity finds suspect any actions performed for the physical salvation of the human race. It spurns any practical efforts of authentic Christian obedience as presumptuous and pharisaical—and that in an age much in need of them. Such a reversal of the teachings of Jesus Christ must be rectified, lest the church disqualify itself as an instrument capable of pointing the way for a humanity bordering on collective suicide.

I am neither a professor of history nor of theology, and the following little more than scratches the surface of areas normally reserved for specialists. Let me say, however, that having flirted with the theologies and philosophies of despair, I have now rejected their poison. Existential thought may sate one with its lucid analyses, which define the problems, but it fails to offer a courageous obedience capable of resolving them. Such an approach is nothing but a subtle excuse to evade one's responsibilities in the world and is thus characteristic of a period of moral and religious decadence. In fact, the tendency of Christians to intellectualize ethical issues is in direct proportion to the extent that they have become a part of the power establishment.

All of us, Christian and non-Christian alike, are responsible for the hunger, injustice, egoism, exploitation, and wars that devastate our time. Christians bear special responsibility: knowing that God can change both people and their situations, the disciple of Jesus can help bring into being God's future for humanity.

Christians profess that at a given place and time, God intervened in history, rendering all subsequent happenings on this planet as of divine importance. Because of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we know that every birth, every life, and every death matters to God.

If each person has thus been invested with such value, how great is the worth of the sum of human history! Whether one believes he is the Son of God or not, Jesus *is* the central event of history, because *de facto* his coming changed humankind. We must therefore understand who this Jesus was in order to fully grasp the value of humanity and of our task toward it.

Recent works have reopened the debate about who Jesus was.<sup>1</sup> Everyone agrees that when the authors of the New Testament attempted to present Jesus to the people of their generation, they made use of certain beliefs then current in the Mediterranean

basin. Obviously, Jesus and his disciples spoke the language of their contemporaries. This should not alarm us. We need not, for example, dispute the value of what people of the first century said about the universe simply because our knowledge of the universe has since expanded. Behind the vocabulary of Jesus' day, we can still discover the enduring Christ.

The gospel merits being read not only with faith, but with intelligence. This does not mean we have to give way to the demythologizing zeal of some interpreters, whose efforts to weed out the gospel have only transformed it into a desert.

If the New Testament has to be demythologized at all, it should be done with the assistance of the Old Testament, not our modern myths.<sup>3</sup> The more one adheres to the strict monotheism of the God of Israel, the more visible the thought of Jesus Christ becomes. The God of Jesus Christ is the God of Israel. The Christian faith dissolves into pure mythology as soon as it no longer leans upon Judaism. True, the authors of the New Testament borrowed from sources other than the Old Testament in order to explain Jesus to their Jewish and Greek contemporaries. But let us not forget that their main frame of reference was always the Old Testament.

Conversely, the Old Testament stands in need of the New. Jesus lifts the crushing fact of the original Fall and broadens the dogma of a narrowly elected people. He humanizes the ritual laws of Moses. He accomplishes what the prophets of old could only announce. Thus one loses nothing by Christianizing Judaism, because Jesus Christ has already done so.

The Jesus of history actually transcends both the Old and the New Testament. He is the point of encounter between two theological edifices, the Jewish and the Christian. He has fulfilled the first and engendered the second. He alone explains that which came before and that which came after him. One does not put a lamp under a bowl, but uses it to lighten the darkness. The

light dawns when we let Jesus himself interpret Judaism and Christianity for us.

Jesus' life and teaching are a bridge connecting two historical epochs—a bridge defined by the parables and aphorisms which he spoke. We should try to grasp their deeper meaning. Their depth is more striking than any rigorously consistent doctrine, for they spring from the presence in Jesus of the living God, who reveals himself as the loving Father of all people. God's presence manifests itself; it does not prove itself.

I have thus limited my ambitions to the modest goal of interrogating Jesus Christ by Jesus Christ. What have I discovered? In short, the portrait of a vigorous revolutionary capable of saving the world without using violence.

Although I have examined secondary literature, I wish to underline again my limited exegetical and historical competence. My many other activities have simply prohibited me from doing much scholarly work.<sup>3</sup> The theses concerning the proclamation of a biblical Jubilee by Jesus are my own. If their somewhat unusual character can stimulate the curiosity of the specialists and provoke further inquiry into the social ethics and nonviolence of Jesus, I will have attained my goal.

*André Trocmé*

PART I

## **Jesus and His Revolution**

## Jesus the Jew

In Jesus' time Galilee was a place in transition. Three languages—Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek—were used. Dualistic doctrines from the east on the devil, angels, and demons threatened belief in strict Jewish monotheism. Hellenistic civilization was invading the last strongholds of Judaism. Raised in this complex environment,<sup>1</sup> Jesus could have laid the foundations of his movement by simply borrowing from all the surrounding sources. But he didn't.

We need merely to read the synoptic Gospels<sup>2</sup> to discover that Jesus was, at the very least, a Jewish prophet, the last in a line that had begun with Amos and ended with John the Baptist. Matthew in particular had one obvious intention: to demonstrate that Jesus was truly the Messiah whom the prophets had announced. Hence his generous use of Old Testament quotations.

The Gospels in general had no trouble showing the Jewish character of Jesus' thought. And this is for good reason. Jesus, as a Jew, had only one library at his disposal, namely the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms. These scriptures inspired his teachings and parables. Jesus' contemporaries made no mistake on this score. Even the ones who refused to recognize him as the Messiah saw him as an authentic prophet.<sup>3</sup> The theology and moral teaching

of Jesus was nothing less than Jewish theology and Jewish moral teaching without the ritual elements. “You diligently study the Scriptures... These are the Scriptures that testify about me” (John 5:39). “I have not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill them,” he affirmed. “What did Moses command you?” he asked his questioners. When he gave the Golden Rule, “Do to others what you would have them do to you,” still considered the supreme lay expression of morality, he justified it with a peculiarly Jewish expression, “for this sums up the Law and the Prophets” (Matt. 7:12).

The Law of Moses, enlarged and commented upon by the prophets, was *the* law of the Jewish people. It mixed together religious, moral, social, and political prescriptions. When the prophets sounded their calls they addressed themselves to Israel—the people of God. They thought of Judah and Jerusalem as corporate personalities. They thus called the entire people of God to repentance. Justice had to be restored, religion purified, customs transformed, and the Torah put into practice at all levels. Similarly, Jesus addressed his reproaches and his appeals to the entire Jewish people. When he proclaimed *metanoia*, that is, a radical change of heart and mind, he was not addressing himself to pagan “nations,” per se, but to the Israelite community. Jesus traveled up and down Galilee preaching the good news of the kingdom, the reign of God: “The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15). When he commissioned the twelve apostles, he instructed them: “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel” (Matt. 10:5–6).<sup>4</sup>

Keeping in mind that the Jewish faith was a national religion, it is worth noting that Jesus accepted and taught without hesitation several typically Jewish notions. For instance, Jesus’ universalism did not spring from Greek rationalism, or from

Roman law, or from some Enlightenment conception of individual rights. It was also certainly not the offspring of a happy marriage between Judaism and Neoplatonism. It grew out of a Judaism that “exploded” under the pressure and dynamism of the messianism borne within it. Greek and Roman ideals were simply too well balanced, too symmetrical to inspire action. Jesus’ universalism, rooted as it was in Judaism’s understanding of redemptive history was, on the contrary, asymmetrical. It contained a creative impulse that continuously renewed itself. How so? Consider the following.

### **The Chosen People**

The Old Testament recounts how God chose Abraham of Ur. “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you...I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen. 12:1–3). This sense of election, which pious Jews still believe in today, continues to cause suffering for the Jews and to be a scandal for non-Jews. Yet precisely because of its scandalous character and the disequilibrium it inspires, the notion of election generates movement and energy. This helps explain why the Jewish people has survived centuries of persecution intact, while other civilizations have come and gone.

Following in Israel’s footsteps, the church also understands itself as divinely chosen. It affirms that there is no salvation apart from Jesus Christ, and it undertakes in his name the conquest of the world through its reforming and charitable missions. This conviction of having been chosen by God has sadly and unnecessarily created tragic tensions between the Christian faith and other religions. Yet every time the church doubts its election, every time it plays down the “scandal of particularity,” its capacity to witness to the gospel also diminishes.



Whereas the Western church has lost much of its conquering dynamism, many in the proletariat, or working class, now consider themselves heirs of Christianity's chosenness. Perhaps because they are "free from the sin of exploitation," the poor have increasingly felt called to guide humanity in the "movement of history." The oppressed thus compel the Christian West to arouse itself from the rationalistic torpor that it so much enjoys.<sup>5</sup>

But let us return to Israel's election. It is the result of a divine choice as inexplicable as love, because Israel is "the least of the nations." Strangely enough, even though God's choice is arbitrary, it binds the responsibility of the elect. For if God makes a covenant with Israel to which he will be faithful, Israel is in return required to uphold its part of the agreement. Israel must be "holy," or "set apart," because it is to be a witness among the nations, with God as its light. As a result of this witness, all nations will eventually recognize that Israel's God is the only one worthy of worship. But if Israel breaks the stipulations of the covenant and becomes unfaithful to Yahweh, terrible punishments will come. God's people will be devastated, carried off in bondage, and destroyed. Only a small remnant will escape. And with this remnant God will again rebuild a faithful people.<sup>6</sup>

Jesus obviously shared this belief in Israel's election. Precisely because of his Jewishness he addresses his prophetic call to the people of Israel. And having drawn the consequences of the Jews' disobedience, he dared to announce the rejection of this stiff-necked people, while also envisioning the birth of a "remnant," of a "small flock," to which the Father would give the kingdom and to which the nations would be drawn.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Moral Bias**

Perhaps even more important than the belief in election is Israel's moral sense, or what we shall call the "moral bias of the Old

Testament.” Like the Greek philosophies, Oriental cosmogonies try to explain the creation of the world and the origin of evil and death. Yet humanity always comes out as the victim of fate. Some refer to the Fall as a cosmic catastrophe; others explain evil as the necessary shadow cast by the good. For some, creation is subjected to the perpetual cycle of death and new beginnings. For others, the problem of evil is resolved by successive reincarnations of the human soul until its final absorption into God. The majority find consolation for the world’s injustices in the hope for a celestial paradise where sin and death will be abolished.<sup>8</sup>

The Old Testament, on the other hand, dares to attribute evil and death to a strictly moral cause. Death enters history because of humanity’s fault. And it is man who drags the other creatures with him into death.<sup>9</sup> At first glance, such notions seem revolting. How can Genesis be reconciled with modern paleontology and evolutionary views that tell us that disease and death affected plants and animals long before man ever appeared on earth? Moreover, if the Old Testament is right, the righteous should be rewarded for their virtues. But how many depraved families enjoy impudent happiness, and how many virtuous ones are struck by inexplicable catastrophes! How many inoffensive nations are annihilated while the brute force of unscrupulous conquerors prevails! No. Humanity’s sin cannot be the only cause of suffering and death. Job and the Old Testament psalmists already protested against such an unjust doctrine.

However, there is another way, asymmetric to be sure, of looking at the biblical notion of the Fall and its consequences. It demands that we abandon the search for an *explanation* of evil and death. When we look deeper into the Bible we discover something very different, something that incites action. Here I am, thrown into the world, a person alone before the God of Israel. I cannot declare, “I was born by chance,” or “I am conditioned

by my environment, the toy of heredity and of events that drag me along.” No, I must allow myself to be “offended.”<sup>10</sup> What? God says *I* am the only one to blame for my sins? Yes. The only master of my temperament? Yes! Of my environment? Certainly. Of my nation and the way it behaves? Indeed. Of my death and the fall of a world headed straight for suicide? Exactly. The Bible describes how we are all responsible for our death and the death of those around us. And because the Bible is not a philosophical dissertation, it adds one paradox to another by stating that we are guilty because we reject forgiveness. We would not be guilty if our heredity had no cure, but we are guilty insofar as we neglect the cure that God freely gives us.

Jesus gave no other explanation to those who questioned him about the death of eighteen people crushed by a falling tower. “Do you think that they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish” (Luke 13:4). In other words, repentance comes first. Fall on your knees before God and confess your sin. Then get up and change the course of history!

In the Hebrew world, there is no explanation of evil. Redemptive history shows us a different way to get out of it: repentance and faith. By requiring us to repent, God acts in history not so much as Creator, but as Redeemer. Through the repentance of a few, God says to the whole of a sick history, “Rise and walk!” Such an injunction awakens in every person who hears it the response of faith. Such faith gives humanity its true measure and moves history forward. This is the gospel of the kingdom of God.

### **Inexorable Justice**

The asymmetrical nature of Hebrew thought, and thus of Jesus’ approach, can also be found in its requirement of justice. Take, for example, the law of retaliation expressed for the first time in

the Book of Genesis after Cain had killed his brother. Abel's blood demanded revenge. Justice had to be established. Cain was to die because he had killed. But God decreed that whoever would kill Cain must also pay the price of blood: "If anyone kills Cain, he will suffer vengeance seven times over." "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man" (Gen. 4:15; 9:6).

This principle of justice, known as the *lex talionis*, was codified by Moses in the following terms: "You are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise" (Exod. 21:24). From then on, strict accounting regulated human relationships and one's relationship to God.

Today, our customs are less rigid. Of the law of retaliation, our legislators have retained only provisions concerning liability.<sup>11</sup> Israel, however, could not rid itself of its peculiar election. It existed for a moral purpose. God had said, "You shall be to me a holy nation." Much more was required, therefore, of the Jews than of the other nations. They had to give an account for every sin before it could be erased.<sup>12</sup>

Israel was also marked by God's law in its relations with other nations. No compromises were allowed. Yahweh ordered the destruction of non-Jews living in the land. "Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshipping their gods, and you will sin against the Lord your God" (Deut. 20:16–18). The Pharisees of Jesus' time continued to observe this law to some extent when they ordered the Jews to avoid all contact with pagans or Samaritans (John 4:9). They acted this way to save their people from idolatrous contamination. Even in Jesus' day the people of Israel were ready to use holy violence as soon as the purity of worship was desecrated. We even know of one inscription that threatened death for any pagan who dared venture into the court of the temple.

The Christian faith, rooted in the Jewish mindset, does not deny the necessity of sacred violence—far from it. But this violence has assumed a different form, thanks to the person of the *goel*.

Who is the *goel*? He is the “avenger of blood.” According to the Law of Moses, if someone had been murdered, the *goel* had the responsibility of carrying out the vendetta against the guilty person. “The avenger of blood shall put the murderer to death; when he meets him, he shall put him to death” (Num. 35:19). The *goel* was the victim’s next of kin. He was also the appointed protector of his relatives. If an indebted kinsman were forced to sell his land, the Book of Leviticus decreed, “his nearest relative (*goel*) is to come and redeem what his countryman has sold” (Lev. 25:25). The *goel* is thus closely intertwined with the ideas of vengeance and redemption.

The *goel* was also expected to marry the wife of his deceased kinsman as well as redeem a kinsman who had become enslaved. “If one of your countrymen becomes poor and sells himself...one of his relatives may redeem him, an uncle or a cousin or any blood relative” (Lev. 25:47ff.).

In Isaiah and the Psalms the *goel* often refers to God himself, with the double meaning of avenger and redeemer of the people of whom he is the kinsman. “Leave Babylon, flee from the Babylonians! Announce this with shouts of joy and proclaim it... The Lord has redeemed (*ga’al*) his servant Jacob” (Isa. 48:20). “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you... For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt for your ransom, Cush and Seba in your stead. Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you, I will give men in exchange for you, and people in exchange for your life” (Isa. 43:1ff.). The payment of a ransom is never omitted from the duties of the *goel*.

In Isaiah, chapters 52 and 53, another idea of *goel* appears: he is the one who redeems Israel by taking upon himself the chastisement of God. For the Christian, the figure of the “Servant of Yahweh,” who gives his life in ransom for the guilty ones fallen into slavery, now thrusts itself upon Jesus (Mark 10:45). In this way the law of retaliation was transmuted. Its demand for justice, for holiness, could never be abolished. But God’s vengeance would now be borne by God himself, by the God who is the *goel* of his people in the person of his Son.

Jesus believed he was the *goel*, that is, the instrument chosen by God to carry out redemption. When Jesus healed a woman with a deformed back in the synagogue, the ruler of the synagogue became indignant because Jesus had healed someone on the Sabbath, and he told the people, “There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.” But Jesus answered back, “You hypocrites! Doesn’t each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?” (Luke 13:14–16).

**In all these ways**—Israel’s sense of election, humanity’s moral foundation, and the divine requirements of justice and redemption—it is clear that Jesus’ identity and mission were rooted in Hebrew thought. Jesus’ theology was Jewish and he expressed it in the fundamental paradox that generates action. If God is all-powerful, nothing that happens is outside his ultimate will. But if God is good, he cannot be the author of evil and death; on the contrary, he is fighting them until the final victory.

Jesus’ moral monotheism thus leads to a pragmatic dualism. We use the term “pragmatic” because Jesus, who struggled with evil, did not revere evil. However, the reality of evil, the frightening influence it has over the world, and the power it possesses over

