

# **‘Can These Bones Live?’**

## *Holocaust Lessons from Le Chambon*

(This paper accompanies the Powerpoint presentation given during the conference.)

### **Introduction**

Anyone who has tried to engage with the Holocaust/Shoah will appreciate just how difficult and draining, rewarding and sometimes oppressive the task can be. All kinds of emotions can be triggered that are not easy to understand and even harder to articulate, as I discovered first hand during my visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau and the sites of the other death camps in Poland some years ago. As a believer, seeking the Lord’s guidance *and* protection is essential in order to navigate safely through this unprecedented period of human suffering, and guard against becoming desensitized to its sheer horror by over exposure to film footage and graphic accounts. The Lord’s wisdom, and humility, must also be sought, especially when confronted with the precarious question — Why?

SIX MILLION is a huge number, but as it stands it is faceless, nameless, and lifeless – human beings cannot relate to digits. Such a number may provoke a disbelieving shake of the head, or leave a person completely unmoved. However, once the bare statistic is clothed with faces, names, and life stories, then a different kind of reaction is usually triggered. When Moses received his messianic calling from God, there were approximately 3 million Hebrew slaves languishing in Egypt. The number itself was of secondary importance. What truly mattered was the revelation given by God to Moses, when Moses was told how he was to address Egypt’s king:

And you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD, Israel is my first-born son, and I say to you, “Let my son go that he may serve me”; if you refuse to let him go, behold, I will slay your first-born son.’ (Exodus 4:22-23)

The LORD intended to make it very clear to Pharaoh – and to the Israelites themselves, all the nations of the earth, and ultimately the Church – how precious His people are in His sight. The nation which He set apart for His own possession and heritage must never be reduced to a mere statistic – ‘Israel’ has a face, a name, and a calling, and with that, a remarkable story that was God-ordained and will one day soon be God-glorifying.

In January 2005, I participated in the ‘Winter Seminar’ hosted by the International School of Holocaust Studies at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. Yad Vashem is The World Holocaust Remembrance Center that was established by the State of Israel in 1953 as its official memorial to the victims of the Shoah. The forty-five acre complex is located on Jerusalem’s

Mount of Remembrance (Har Hazikaron), and hosts a million visitors each year. The center's name is taken from Isaiah 56:5: "I will give in my house and within my walls *a memorial and a name* [yad va-shem] better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name which shall not be cut off." Yad Vashem seeks not only to inform people factually about the Holocaust, but also to safeguard the memory of those who perished by telling their stories — who these people were, where they came from, how they lived, what contribution they made to their families and communities, and what legacy/lessons have been left to the world. During the intensive three-week seminar, I met Holocaust survivors for the first time, including a lady who was a close friend of Anne Frank. These survivors had been invited by Yad Vashem to share their stories as part of an ongoing rehabilitation programme. This proved to be a very emotional time for me personally, as I not only listened to heart-wrenching testimonies of suffering and survival, but also observed the demeanor of the men and women who addressed us — composed and dignified.

When the prophet Ezekiel was asked by the LORD, "Son of man, can these bones live?," he did not offer an immediate, superficial reply: "Of course LORD, nothing is impossible with you!" Neither did he shrink back with a fearful or indifferent response: "I have no idea, LORD, it is not for me to say, it is too much for me to handle." It would appear that the LORD expected an informed answer from His prophet. That answer depended ultimately not on *what* Ezekiel was seeing, but on *Who* he was hearing. Although we are not told what passed through Ezekiel's mind as he was led among the dry bones, I imagine his heart to have been arrested by an unsettling, fearful, holy silence — he was standing in the shadow of death and devastation, but he was also in the presence of the Author of life and resurrection. In the end, Ezekiel's response was reverent, and full of faith: "O LORD God, thou knowest!" (Ezekiel 37:3) I would like to suggest that the same question which was asked of Ezekiel then, is still being asked of the Church now — and with added urgency, following the Holocaust and the establishment of the modern State of Israel. Sadly, the Church has not answered with one voice.

In this paper we will consider how and why one remote Christian community in France bucked the trend during the Second World War, at a time when mainstream churches across Europe were not listening to God's voice, and were largely indifferent to the plight of His first-born son. The Lord knew! What was it that set these French believers apart, when the helpless descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob suddenly appeared on their doorstep in need of sanctuary?

### **Righteous Among the Nations**

Jean is my favorite counselor. He was studying to be a doctor when he and his fiancé were arrested by the *Gendarmes* [French paramilitary police] ... She was sent away on a train, and they beat him for seventeen hours straight. He survived, and they

released him, and he came here to hide. He's Jewish like me ... It's been over two years since I got that letter from Mama and Papa. Nothing since then. I suppose I'll never see my family again. My life is here now.<sup>i</sup>

These words were written in 1944 by Nathalie Stern, a fourteen-year-old Jewish girl from Belgium who had been living with her parents in Paris before the Germans invaded in May 1940. Two years later, on March 27, 1942, the first Jews in France were deported to the East. During the next two-and-a-half years approximately 76,000 Jews, including 11,000 children, were transported to the death camps, the majority to Auschwitz; only 300 of the children survived. Nathalie was one of those who escaped deportation. In June 1942, a Protestant pastor in the southern city of Agen had urged her parents to send her away for safety. "I think it has something to do with us being Jewish,"<sup>ii</sup> wrote Nathalie, before she was taken to a village on a mountainous plateau in the Haute-Loire region of south-central France. She believed she was heading for summer vacation camp. In fact, she was taken to a poor farming community above the Rhône valley, about 350 miles south of Paris. The name of the village, which was to be her home for the next three years, was Le Chambon-sur-Lignon.<sup>iii</sup>

In 1990, the people of Le Chambon and the neighbouring villages on the plateau Vivarais-Lignon, were recognised as "Righteous Among the Nations" by Yad Vashem. They were so honored for having sheltered thousands of Jews between 1941 and 1944, most of them children like Nathalie Stern. The official figure given is 5,000, although the actual number, which is impossible to ascertain, may have been closer to 3,500. (By comparison, German industrialist Oskar Schindler is credited with having rescued 1,200 Jews.) Mordecai Paldiel, former director of Yad Vashem's Department of the Righteous, described what happened on the plateau as "probably the most celebrated case of Christian charity"<sup>iv</sup> during the Holocaust. Le Chambon remains only the second village/town to be honoured by Yad Vashem in this way, the first being Nieuwlande in Holland, whose 117 inhabitants were recognised as "righteous" in 1988.

On January 5, 1971, André Trocmé (1901-1971), the Protestant pastor of Le Chambon, was the first resident on the plateau to be individually recognised by Yad Vashem. The self-effacing Trocmé was a reluctant recipient of the Medal of the Righteous, Israel's highest civilian honor. When he finally consented, he did so on the condition that the ceremony be held in Le Chambon itself in order to acknowledge the sacrifice made by all the villagers. The ceremony was set for May 31, 1971, but as the day approached Trocmé found himself hospitalized in Geneva; he died shortly afterwards. Trocmé's wife Magda received the medal on his behalf during the funeral. Along with Trocmé's assistant Eduard Théis,<sup>v</sup> and many other members of the community, Magda Trocmé was recognised by Yad Vashem some years later. André Trocmé was also twice-nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by the Quakers, largely for his post-War crusade against nuclear weapons, and awarded the

Rosette de la Résistance by the French government, an honor reserved for those recognised as having performed acts of remarkable courage in defence of the nation.

In 2004, then French President Jacques Chirac visited Le Chambon and hailed the village as the great symbol of French resistance during the War. He proudly declared: “Here in adversity, the soul of the nation manifested itself. Here was the embodiment of our country’s conscience.”<sup>vi</sup> One man who was dismayed by Chirac’s claim was Pierre Sauvage, a Jewish documentary filmmaker<sup>vii</sup> and president of the Chambon Foundation. Sauvage, who was born and sheltered in the village towards the end of the War, gave this response: “There is nothing at all symbolic about Le Chambon, as far as wartime France goes. Quite the contrary: it was the exception in a country that overwhelmingly submitted to the Nazi regime.”<sup>viii</sup>

### **Vichy and the Jews**

During the Nazi occupation of France, the French government was led by Philippe Pétain (1856-1951), the decorated veteran general from the First World War and recipient of the nation’s prestigious title, Maréchal [Marshal]. At the age of 84, he became the country’s oldest head of state. In accordance with the armistice agreement signed with Germany on June 22, 1940, France was divided into two zones: the occupied German zone in the north, and the unoccupied “Free Zone” in the south, which was ostensibly under French control. The government was relocated from Paris to the central spa town of Vichy, about 120 miles north of Le Chambon.

By the close of 1940, the Vichy government had commenced “a legislative assault upon Jews living in France”.<sup>ix</sup> The most significant measure was the *Statut des Juifs* (‘Statute on the Jews’), which was enacted on October 3, 1940. Its purpose was to define Jewishness, and it did so along racial lines. Furthermore, it excluded Jews from employment in a host of occupations, and imposed a quota system limiting their involvement in others. Among Pétain’s most notable accomplices in this anti-Semitic crime were Pierre Laval (Chief of the Government, and a pre-War prime minister of France), Xavier Vallat (Commissioner-General for Jewish Questions), Vallat’s rabidly anti-Semitic successor Louis Darquier de Pellepoix, and René Bousquet (Secretary General of the Vichy police). Following the liberation of France in 1944, Pétain was sentenced to death for treason, but had his sentence commuted to life imprisonment; Laval was executed by firing squad; Vallat was sentenced to ten years’ imprisonment but released on parole after serving just two; Bousquet’s prison sentence was quashed on account of him having aided the Resistance; and Darquier de Pellepoix was sentenced to death *in absentia*, having fled France for Franco’s Spain.

The *Statut des Juifs* had been preceded five weeks earlier by the repeal of the Marchandean Law on August 27, 1940. This effectively removed all restraints on the press, meaning that

“antisemitism was free to spread itself in French newspapers.”<sup>x</sup> It was now open season on the Jews of France, especially on foreign Jews who had settled in a country which had granted Jewish emancipation in 1791 – the first country to do so. In their seminal work, *Vichy France and the Jews* (1983), Michael Marrus and Robert Paxton comprehensively chart the way in which the Vichy government functioned autonomously in initiating these anti-Semitic measures, with little coercion from the Nazis:

During the four years it ruled from Vichy, in the shadow of Nazism, the French government energetically persecuted Jews living in France ... Indeed, Vichy France became in August 1942 the only European country except Bulgaria to hand Jews over to the Nazis for deportation from areas not directly subject to German military occupation ... Years of scrutiny of the records left by German services in Paris and Berlin have turned up no trace of German orders to Vichy in 1940 ... to adopt anti-Semitic legislation ... Vichy mounted a competitive or rival antisemitism rather than a tandem one.<sup>xi</sup>

There was little opposition in France, or elsewhere, to Vichy’s escalating persecution of the Jews. Even the Church failed, in large measure, to appreciate – or even care about – what was rapidly unfolding. As Marrus notes, with very few exceptions “Church opposition to the persecution of the Jews in France before the deportations had been rather limited or muted. Direct and specifically Christian attacks on antisemitism fell to individuals or to small groups.”<sup>xii</sup> Le Chambon was an exceptional case.

### **La Montagne Protestante**

France is a staunchly Roman Catholic country, and has been ever since it was known as Gaul by the Romans, and then conquered by the Franks in the fifth century. By the time Nathalie Stern arrived in Le Chambon in July 1942, less than one percent of the entire population was Protestant. On the plateau it was a very different story. In this remote part of France — known for its volcanic peaks, dense forests, wide open pastures, and winters so harsh that the plateau was providentially rendered inaccessible for several months — over ninety percent of the residents identified themselves as Protestant. Among them were descendants of the Huguenots.

The Huguenots were French Calvinists who suffered violent persecution at the hands of the Catholic authorities during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, particularly during the imperial reigns of Louis XIV (after whom the State of Louisiana is named) and Louis XV. Thousands were slaughtered for their defiance of Rome, during a period which became known as *le Désert* (“the wasteland”). The most infamous bloodbath was the Saint Bartholomew’s Day Massacre of August 1572, which was sanctioned by King Charles IX of France under the influence of his mother, Catherine de Medici. The massacre occurred during the French Wars of Religion (1562-1598), and accounted for the lives of tens of

thousands of Huguenots, some historians estimating the number to have been as high as 70,000. In 1679, during this period of relentless Catholic persecution, the original Protestant church in Le Chambon was burned to the ground; the present church was opened in 1821. During the Second World War, some of the same buildings in the village which had once sheltered Huguenot refugees — and, incidentally, housed many republicans who fled Spain during the country's Civil War of the late 1930s — were used to hide Jews.

## **Weapons of the Spirit**

In September 1934, Pastor André Trocmé and his young family moved to Le Chambon. The French pastor from Saint-Quentin in the north of the country, close to the border with Belgium, had accepted a one-year “take-it-or-leave-it”<sup>xiii</sup> position of interim minister. Much to his dismay, Trocmé, a conscientious objector, had been blocked from taking up posts in other parishes by the Reformed Church of France, which strongly opposed his outspoken pacifism. When the family finally arrived in Le Chambon, Trocmé, a city man at heart, described the village as “ugly,” “dreary,” and “unbearably sad”.<sup>xiv</sup> He was to be there for the next fifteen years.

During the early months of the War, a restless Trocmé was determined to help his country in any way he could, albeit non-violently. He approached the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) based in Marseille, a Quaker relief organisation that was taking urgent supplies into some of the thirty-one internment camps in the southern zone. The most notorious camps included Gurs, Les Milles, Le Vernet, and Rivesaltes, where conditions were inhumane. Among those detained were 30,000 foreign-born Jews who were destined for deportation. Following a meeting with the AFSC's representative, Burns Chalmers, Trocmé realised that the best course of action would be to make Le Chambon a city of refuge for the Jews.

On Sunday June 23, 1940, the day after France surrendered to Germany, Trocmé and his assistant Théis made a joint statement before their congregation. It was a declaration of intent, which would test the words carved in stone above the church door: *Aimez-Vous Les Uns Les Autres* — “Love one another.” This effectively marked the beginning of Christian defiance on the plateau, the following extract summing up the rationale behind the resistance:

It is the duty of all Christians to resist the violence that will be brought to bear on their conscience, through *the weapons of the Spirit* ... We will resist whenever our adversaries will demand of us obedience contrary to the orders of the Gospel ... Let us learn to rely on our Father in Heaven, to depend on Him for our daily bread and to share it with our brothers whom we must love as we love ourselves.<sup>xv</sup>

On August 1, 1941, the village “openly said ‘No’ for the first time.”<sup>xvi</sup> The previous week, the mayor’s office had received a directive from the Vichy authorities insisting that on this date church bells were to ring loudly at noon for fifteen minutes. This was to commemorate the anniversary of the establishment of the Vichy regime. The custodian of the keys to Trocmé’s church was a little lady by the name of Amélie. When the appointed hour arrived, the bells of the local Catholic church rang loud and clear; those of the Protestant church remained silent, in compliance with Trocmé’s instruction. When Amélie was asked if everything had passed quietly, she told her pastor that two ladies who were visiting the village had confronted her at the church, insisting that the bells be rung. As Amélie explained to Trocmé, she stood firm:

I told them: the bells don’t belong to the Marshal, they belong to God. We ring them for God, and not for any other reason ... They ordered me to open the door so they could ring the bells themselves, but I didn’t want to. So I defended my church! I told them that I wouldn’t open the door, and they didn’t have the right to come in without the pastor’s authorization.<sup>xvii</sup>

### **‘Operation Disappearance’**

On August 9, 1942, Georges Lamirand, the Vichy Minister of Youth, together with Robert Bach, the administrative prefect for the region, visited Le Chambon. This was part of a concerted effort to rally the young people of France behind Pétain. To their dismay, they received “a glacial reception”<sup>xviii</sup> from the villagers. The formalities ended with Lamirand’s flourish, “Long live Marshal Pétain!” Silence ensued, only to be broken by a Salvation Army volunteer who exclaimed: “Long live Jesus Christ!”

Shortly afterwards, a delegation of students from the village school known as the École Nouvelle Cévenole<sup>xix</sup> approached Lamirand and presented him with a formal protest. They had been horrified by news of “Operation Spring Wind” (July 16-17, 1942), the mass round-up of 13,000 Parisian Jews by French police in collaboration with Nazi officials. Approximately 6,000 of them had immediately been transferred to the notorious Drancy transit camp in the Paris suburbs, final destination: Auschwitz. The remainder, of which 4,000 were children, were incarcerated in the indoor sporting arena known as the Vélodrome d’Hiver (“Winter Velodrome”), where conditions were deplorable – no food or water, no ventilation, and no sanitary facilities. When the Chambonnais youth confronted Lamirand, they were open and resolute:

We are afraid that measures will soon be taken to deport Jews living in the south. We wish to inform you that there are, among us, a certain number of Jews. We do not differentiate between Jews and non-Jews; doing so would be contrary to the teachings of the Bible. If our classmates ... receive a deportation order or even a

census order, we will encourage them to disobey the orders and will, to the best of our ability, hide them from the authorities.<sup>xx</sup>

Lamirand hurriedly left the scene, claiming that the matter was not his responsibility. His colleague, Bach, was furious and pointed the finger straight at Trocmé, who was warned of the potential consequences. Bach also made an astonishing defence of Pétain and the Vichy government:

The Jewish foreigners who are in Haute-Loire are not your brothers. They do not belong to your Church or your homeland! In any case, this is not a matter of deportation ... My information comes from the Marshal himself, and the Marshal does not lie! The Führer is an intelligent man. Just as the English created a district in Palestine for the Zionists, the Führer has ordered the Jews to be gathered together in Poland. There, they will have land and houses. They will lead the life that is best suited to them, and will stop contaminating the West. In a few days, our administration will take a census of the Jews living in Le Chambon-sur-Lignon.<sup>xxi</sup>

Two weeks later, Trocmé and Le Chambon's mayor were summoned to the *mairie* (town hall). Dozens of police and gendarmes had suddenly arrived, with empty buses in tow. Trocmé was ordered, under threat of arrest and deportation, to release a list of the names of all Jews who were in hiding, and to instruct them to register immediately at the hall. Trocmé was unequivocal in his response:

Even if I had such a list, I would not pass it on to you. These people have come here seeking aid and protection from the Protestants of this region. I am their pastor, their shepherd. It is not the role of a shepherd to betray the sheep confided to his keeping.<sup>xxii</sup>

No sooner had Trocmé exited the hall, than he dispatched the Boy Scouts. They were instructed to warn those who were sheltering Jews to send them into the forest until the danger had passed. He called the operation "the disappearance of the Jews,"<sup>xxiii</sup> and it lasted three weeks while the authorities lingered in the area, their only success being the round-up of a young man from Austria who was later released. The three thousand Chambonnais villagers were used to such heart-thumping moments, and faced repeated threats of reprisal. However, as Peter Grose confirms in his book, *The Greatest Escape* (2014), "Nobody snitched. Nobody broke ranks. The Plateau stayed solid."<sup>xxiv</sup> Their silent solidarity became known as *le miracle de silence*.

On February 13, 1943, Trocmé, Théis, and Roger Darcissac, headmaster of one of the village schools, were arrested and taken to the Saint-Paul d'Eyjeaux internment camp near Limoges. Without explanation they were released after 28 days, despite Trocmé and Théis



refusing to sign an oath of allegiance to Pétain. A few months later tragedy struck. In the early hours of the morning of June 29, 1943, the Gestapo raided one of the secondary schools known as La Maison des Roches, on the outskirts of Le Chambon. (Many of the schools and boarding houses on the plateau were funded by organisations based in France, Switzerland, Sweden, and the United States.) The school was run by André Trocmé's nephew, Daniel, who was absent when the Gestapo arrived. Forsaking his opportunity to escape, Daniel Trocmé rejoined his students, who had been interrogated and beaten. At midday, he and eighteen of the young people were taken away, the five Jewish students among them being sent to Auschwitz where they perished. Trocmé himself faced repeated questioning in French detention centres, before finally being sent to the Majdanek concentration camp in Poland where he died in April 1944, aged 34. His interrogators had been convinced all along that he was Jewish. According to Philip Hallie,

The one topic that the interrogations emphasized was his attitude toward the Jews. Again and again he expressed his compassion for them, until one of his questioners openly said to him, 'You must be one of them — otherwise you could not defend them so.'<sup>xxv</sup>

### **Lights in the Darkness**

Many of the children and youth who found sanctuary on the Protestant mountain had previously been held in the internment camps. Their release was thanks in no small part to the efforts of several relief organisations, which worked tirelessly in the most appalling conditions; some of the workers even took up residence in the camps. The agencies involved included the Protestant humanitarian organisation Cimade (*Comité inter-mouvements auprès des évacués – "Committee to Coordinate Activities for the Displaced"*), the Jewish humanitarian organisation OSE (*Œuvre de Secours aux Enfants – "Children's Aid Society"*), and the Swiss Red Cross. The Cimade also helped in the clandestine effort to escort a number of Jewish refugees across the border into neutral Switzerland, passing through villages like Le Chambon en route. Two of the most remarkable figures involved in the work were Madeleine Dreyfus (Lyon branch of the OSE) and Madeleine Barot (secretary general of Cimade). These women were indefatigable in finding shelter for the Jewish children they were able to release from the camps. Dreyfus, who took small groups several times each month by train from Lyon to Le Chambon, was eventually arrested by the Gestapo and deported to Bergen-Belsen in Germany. Liberated in 1945, she was awarded the Médaille de la Résistance two years later. Barot, in turn, was recognised by Yad Vashem in 1988 as "righteous".

Separated from their families, many of those who arrived on the plateau were agitated by fear, heartache, and despair. The villagers did their utmost to make life as 'normal' for them as possible, facilitating some brighter moments during this dark and dangerous time. One

such moment occurred in December 1943, when eighteen-year-old Rudi Appel from Germany commemorated Hanukkah with his friends. He wrote:

Tonight is the first night of Hanukkah, and I've organized a Hanukkah party. There are about twenty-five of us refugee kids living here [in La Guespy, a home run by Secours Suisse aux Enfants – "Swiss Rescue for Children"]. We're not all Jewish, but Mademoiselle Usach said we could have the party. I've even taught her how to play the Hanukkah song 'Maoz Tzur' (Rock of Ages) on the piano ... There's no synagogue in Le Chambon, but the pastor gave us a room in their temple ... I don't know how this war will end, but for now, Le Chambon is a good place to be ... We lit the Hanukkah candles and it was beautiful, but I couldn't help thinking about Mama. She's hiding in the town of Grenoble, being hidden in a room in someone's house ... I worry about her all the time.<sup>xxvi</sup>

## The Darbyists

Those involved in finding homes for the refugees frequently used coded language in their communications. "I am sending you two 'Old Testaments'," signified that two Jewish people were on their way.<sup>xxvii</sup> Daniel Curtet, a young Swiss pastor in a neighbouring village, used biblical code when writing to his parents, as the following letter, dated January 23, 1943, illustrates:

Continuing my study of first names (Mark 13/14b), I seldom come across the name Hans. On the other hand my collection has grown to include those of the 12 sons of the patriarch, and I have noted with pleasure that my parishioners and the Darbyists love them all.<sup>xxviii</sup>

The code was not too difficult to crack. Curtet wanted his parents to *understand* (Mark 13/14b) that there were *no Germans* (Hans) in the vicinity, but that *a number of Jews* (12 sons of the patriarch) had been safely received.

As Curtet's letter further indicates, there was a group of believers in his village – "the Darbyists" – who were not part of his congregation, but who loved the Jews and were involved in the rescue effort. In fact, approximately one third of all Protestants on the plateau were either Darbyists (*Darbyistes* in French), or Ravenists, who were cut from the same theological cloth. In his memoirs, André Trocmé mentions how the Darbyists were "the first people in the region who agreed to receive Jews into their homes," and how "our parish leaders followed, at first reluctantly, but gradually persuaded of the righteousness of their actions."<sup>xxix</sup>

The Darbyists and Ravenists belonged to the Plymouth Brethren, an evangelical movement which had its beginnings in Dublin, Ireland, in the late 1820s. The Darbyists were ardent

followers of the movement's principal founder, John Nelson Darby (1800-1882). Separated from the world, politics, and many of their fellow believers, they were to play "a crucial role in the battle against Vichy for the Jews."<sup>xxx</sup> In her book *Village of Secrets* (2014), Caroline Moorehead suggests that it was the "habitual modesty and silence"<sup>xxx</sup> of the Darbyists that kept them from receiving the full recognition they deserved. Moorehead offers the following insight into this enigmatic community:

Were John Darby to return to the plateau, to preach and wander from village to village, he would find life curiously unchanged ... In the Darbyist homes, the Bible is still read with undiminished piety. The war is remembered with some pride, but with no surprise. 'We are morally conscious people,' one man said to me. 'Our families didn't think of themselves as doing good. They did what they had always done, giving sanctuary to the persecuted.' This self-effacement has meant that there are very few Darbyists among the Justes [righteous].<sup>xxxii</sup>

During the nineteenth century, John Nelson Darby had been at the forefront of the evangelical restoration of biblical truth concerning Israel's restoration, the rapture of the Church, and the Second Coming.<sup>xxxiii</sup> He understood clearly what so many in the church today lamentably fail to understand, namely that the Jewish people are "very dear to our God and Father".<sup>xxxiv</sup> As he wrote in 1850, "Israel cannot cease to be the people of God. 'The gifts and calling of God are without repentance,' and it is of Israel that this is said."<sup>xxxv</sup> Darby helped establish many Brethren communities across Western Europe, especially in France, Switzerland, and Germany, and we know from his correspondence that he ministered extensively in the towns, villages, and hamlets of south-central France. In a letter dated November 10, 1860, for example, he included the following report:

Almost everywhere I have not had room for those who came desirous to hear, or at any rate the place was exceedingly crowded both in France and Switzerland. Part of my work has been in settled civilized places, part in most wild and out-of-the-way places, and mountains, far from all common comforts, but in both happy and helped in the work, and especially in the wild places in evangelizing ... There are in France upwards of 100 gatherings and 25 laborers, besides those who act in the meetings locally....<sup>xxxvi</sup>

In September 1879, towards the end of his life, Darby wrote:

I have had a happy and I trust profitable *tournée* through Haute-Loire, Ardèche, etc., and seen the brethren, save in two places ... We had readings in the different centres, and lectures in the evening: here three days, and there are many around, and large attendance everywhere. Blessings and conversions are given of God ... After St. Hippolyte and Montpellier, please God, Tuesday at Pau.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

According to one intriguing, but as yet unverified Brethren source, Darby wrote his hymn, “Sing Without Ceasing, Sing (The Upward Way),” in 1856 as he journeyed on foot through the mountains – he was allegedly on his way to Le Chambon.

The Darby link is intriguing, all the more so when Jewish film makers like Pierre Sauvage, and Jewish authors like Philip Hallie, connect what happened in Le Chambon during the War with Darby’s dispensational understanding of Scripture. In 1976, Hallie, a Jewish ethics professor and graduate of Harvard and Oxford, flew to France to interview some of the surviving villagers. In his formative book, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed: The Story of the Village of Le Chambon and How Goodness Happened There* (1979), he spotlighted the Darbyists and offered his own explanation as to why they had risked their lives to help the Jews:

Refugees would stay on the farms for long periods of time because of their safety, but also because of the special sympathy the Darbyistes had for Jews. Believing that every word of the Bible was inspired by God, the Darbyistes had a thorough knowledge of the history of the Jews as that history is told in the Old Testament. Once ... a German-Jewish refugee came to a Darbyiste farm to buy some eggs ... She was invited into the kitchen. Quietly the woman who had invited her in asked, with the light of interest in her eyes, ‘You—you are Jewish?’ The woman, who had been tortured for her Jewishness, stepped back trembling, and she became even more frightened when the farm woman ran to the steps leading upstairs and called up, ‘Husband, children, come down, come down!’ But her fright disappeared when the woman added, while her family was coming down the steps, ‘Look, look, my family! We have in our house a *representative of the Chosen People!*’<sup>xxxviii</sup>

## Theology Matters

Although there were a number of Protestant pastors on the plateau involved in the rescue mission, the central figure was undoubtedly André Trocmé. Much has been written on his pacifist convictions and the rescue effort he spearheaded, but little work has been done on his broader theology. The fact that he was an ordained minister within the Reformed Church of France would strongly imply that he upheld the church’s traditional amillennial supersessionism, which reinterprets Israel’s identity and renders obsolete the nation’s calling under God. This seems to be confirmed in a 2010 article published in the *Harvard Theological Review* by Alicia J. Batten, who writes:

In Trocmé’s writings, I do not find the idea that the “Old Israel” has been rejected even though he understands the church to be the “New Israel.” In the biblical studies notes that focus on Romans, Trocmé says that all of Israel will be saved (Rom 11:26) when all the Gentiles are converted to the gospel, but he does not indicate that

Israel must have faith in Jesus. It is not entirely clear what Trocmé thought about this issue, and thus it will require more investigation.<sup>xxxix</sup>

Does this matter when lives were at stake? Of course not. However, in the broader context of the Church's corporate call to bear witness to, and uphold, the truth of God's Word, it is significant. Without offering any comment or clarity, Batten makes an additional point:

Finally, it has been acknowledged in a variety of places that Trocmé and the people of the plateau never attempted to convert Jewish visitors to Christianity. Some Jews were able to maintain religious practices while in the area during the war.<sup>xl</sup>

*Attempting to convert* the Jewish people, and sharing the love of God and the Good News of Jesus Christ with them, are not necessarily one and the same thing; there may be a fundamental difference in motivation and attitude, as there has been throughout Church history. Without any corroborating testimony or context, Batten's statement simply raises more questions. However, in her article she acknowledges the assistance she received from André Trocmé's daughter, Nelly Trocmé Hewett. In an interview for a Jewish documentary tribute to Le Chambon, Trocmé Hewett shared the following story relating to her father; she can be heard on the film placing strong emphasis on her father's words:

I remember very well my father telling me about a young man who came, a Jewish young man, and who wanted to convert and become a Christian. And my dad said, "No way, I mean, you are a Jew, you have a wonderful religion, a wonderful history."<sup>xli</sup>

As it stands, this testimony is troubling, and tarnishes to some degree the otherwise commendable legacy of the Trocmé family. Of course, André Trocmé is not here to clarify what happened and explain what he meant by the words he allegedly used. Nevertheless, the Apostle Paul could not have made it any clearer:

*For I am not ashamed of the Gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek ... For Christ is the end of the law, that everyone who has faith may be justified ... For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him. For, "everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved." But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can men preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach good news!" (Romans 1:16, 10:4-15).*

The way in which the Gospel is shared with the Jewish people is critically important, and the situation that suddenly unfolded in Le Chambon during the War was undoubtedly unique and momentous. Personally, I cannot imagine how difficult and dangerous it was for the believers who were isolated on the plateau, and I do not wish, in any way, to diminish their sacrifice or elevate one individual above another. What they did for the Jewish people was remarkable, and the Chambonnais Christians have rightly been recognised together as a community. Even so, the injunction to bear witness to the Lord Jesus has never changed, and remains the greatest need of every hour.

One of the few Darbyists to have been interviewed over the years was Marie Brottes, who was recognised by Yad Vashem in 1989. The following brief extract from her interview with Pierre Sauvage, which he used in his film, *Weapons of the Spirit*, at least suggests that the Darbyists on the mountain may have been more forthcoming with the Gospel. This would certainly have been in keeping with the urgency integral to a premillennial, pretribulational understanding of the end times, which John Nelson Darby advocated:

Pierre Sauvage: “For you, these were people seeking help, but also Jews.”

Marie Brottes: “Yes, they were Jews, of course. Yes, that was very important. *And even though they didn't really accept the Gospel, that's for sure*, even if they remained very Jewish, or nothing much at all, we acted anyway because they were the People of God. That's what mattered.”

We may need to read between the lines here to make a definite contrast between the Darbyists and the other believers on the Protestant mountain. Even so, it is critically important that the Gospel commission does not get lost in all the emotion and fascination of the story of Le Chambon, and every story connected with the Jewish people. As the Apostle Paul testified in his epistle to the Romans, “*Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved*” (Romans 10:1).

## **Conclusion**

On September 2, 1944, Le Chambon and its neighbouring villages were liberated. Tragically for many of the Jewish children and young people, there was to be no family reunion. Rudi Appel, the boy in the Hanukkah story, was one of the exceptions, as was Nathalie Stern. Nathalie was reunited with her family at Agen station in France in 1945, while Rudi and his parents were reunited a year later in Philadelphia. Nathalie became a successful artist, Rudi an international businessman and charity worker who helped establish the museum in Le Chambon. One of Rudi's best friends in the village during the War had been Alexander Grothendieck, a fellow Jew from Germany — he went on to become the man many regard as the greatest mathematician of the twentieth century.

By January 1, 2018, Yad Vashem had recognised just under 27,000 so-called “righteous” Gentiles. What makes Le Chambon unique, however, is the fact that an entire village — an entire *Christian* village — was involved in the rescue effort. Furthermore, the fact that there was a particular group of believers on the mountain who interpreted the Bible literally, and who understood from Bible prophecy that the Jewish people would one day be restored as a nation in their ancient homeland, makes the story all the more compelling and instructive. My late pastor, Andrew Robinson, first taught me about God’s everlasting love for Israel, and demonstrated that love throughout his life and ministry. It was he who expounded to me the same essential truth which John Nelson Darby once expounded to the Brethren in France, a truth which later inspired many of his followers to embrace the Jewish people in their darkest hour. Darby summed it up with these words:

The Jews are the habitual object of the thoughts of God ... In all times, Israel is His people, according to His counsels, and the thoughts of His love ... He was and is always the God of the Jews.<sup>xliii</sup>

Dr Paul Wilkinson

Pre-Trib Study Group Conference, Irving, Texas (December 2018)

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<sup>i</sup> Deborah Durland DeSaix and Karen Gray Ruelle, *Hidden on the Mountain: Stories of Children Sheltered from the Nazis in Le Chambon* (New York: Holiday House, 2007), 70-71.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>iii</sup> Le Lignon du Velay is a 53-mile long river running through the Ardèche and Haute-Loire regions.

<sup>iv</sup> Mordecai Paldiel, *Sheltering the Jews: Stories of Holocaust Rescuers* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 36.

<sup>v</sup> In 1925, Trocmé was awarded a scholarship by Union Theological Seminary in New York, where he pursued graduate studies. During this year of study, he was employed by the Rockefeller family as a private French tutor to John D. Rockefeller Jr.’s sons, Winthrop and David. This helped pay his way through seminary. Trocmé spent the Christmas of 1925 in Florida with the Rockefeller family. It was during his time in New York that he met Italian-born Magda Grilli.

<sup>vi</sup> Tim Carroll, “A Haven from Hitler,” *Sunday Times Magazine*, June 4, 2006.

<sup>vii</sup> In 1989, Sauvage released his award-winning documentary film, *Weapons of the Spirit*, which was the first to tell the story of what happened on the mountain.

<sup>viii</sup> Carroll, “A Haven from Hitler.”

<sup>ix</sup> Michael R. Marrus and Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews* (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), 3.

<sup>x</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xi</sup> *Ibid.*, xi-xiii, 5.

<sup>xii</sup> Michael R. Marrus, “French Protestant Churches and the Persecution of the Jews in France,” in *The Holocaust and the Christian World: Reflections on the Past, Challenge for the Future*, ed. Carol Rittner, Stephen D. Smith, Irena Steinfeldt (London: Kuperard, 2000), 90.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Magda and André Trocmé, Resistance Figures*, ed. Pierre Boismorand (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2014), 64.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>xv</sup> *Ibid.*, 89-94.

<sup>xvi</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>xvii</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>xviii</sup> *Ibid.*

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- <sup>xix</sup> This international peace school was founded in Le Chambon in 1938. It was the brainchild of Magda Trocmé, and was run by her husband and his assistant, Eduard Théis.
- <sup>xx</sup> Marrus, "French Protestant Churches," 110.
- <sup>xxi</sup> *Ibid.*, 110-111.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Philip Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood be Shed: The Story of the Village of Le Chambon and how Goodness happened there* (London: Harper Torchbooks, 1985), 108.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Peter Grose, *The Greatest Escape: How one French Community Saved Thousands of Lives from the Nazis* (London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2014), 177.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood be Shed*, 216.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> DeSaix and Ruelle, *Hidden on the Mountain*, 53-54.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> *Ibid.*, 39-40.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Grose, *The Greatest Escape*, 116.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Boismorand, *Magda and André Trocmé*, 105.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Caroline Moorehead, *Village of Secrets: Defying the Nazis in Vichy France* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2014), 106.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> *Ibid.*, 337.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> *Ibid.*, 339.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Paul Richard Wilkinson, *Understanding Christian Zionism: Israel's Place in the Purposes of God* (Bend, OR: The Berean Call, 2013).
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> John Nelson Darby, "The Hopes of the Church of God, in Connection with the Destiny of the Jews and the Nations as Revealed in Prophecy (1840)," in *The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby*, ed. William Kelly, Vol. 2 (Kingston-on-Thames: Stow Hill Bible & Tract Depot, n.d.), 363.
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Darby, "Examination of a few Passages of Scripture (1850)," in *The Collected Writings*, Vol. 4, 254.
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> Darby, "Letter (November 10, 1860)," in *Letters of J.N.D.*, Vol. 3 (Kingston-on-Thames: Stow Hill Bible & Tract Depot, n.d), 325.
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> Darby, "Letter (September, 1879)," in *Letters of J.N.D.*, Vol. 3, 29.
- <sup>xxxviii</sup> Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood be Shed*, 182-183.
- <sup>xxxix</sup> Alicia J. Batten, "Reading the Bible in Occupied France: André Trocmé and Le Chambon," *Harvard Theological Review* 103:3 (July 2010), 327.
- <sup>xl</sup> Batten, "Reading the Bible in Occupied France," 327.
- <sup>xli</sup> The tribute was produced by The Blue Card, a Jewish organization based in the United States which provides financial assistance to Holocaust survivors. The Blue Card Video Library, "The Right Thing to Do" – The story of Le Chambon, [www.bluecardfund.org](http://www.bluecardfund.org).
- <sup>xlii</sup> Darby, "Studies on the Book of Daniel," in *The Collected Writings*, Vol. 5, 151-153; Darby, "Examination of a few Passages of Scripture (1850)," 255.