

## Hope & Abandonment in the Bible

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Among many other portrayals, Jacques Ellul has been defined as a theologian of hope. *Hope in time of abandonment* is not the French scholar's only work analyzing this topic: a long path led him to the edition of this book, which he considered among his favorites, and after this masterpiece, other writings keep the idea of hope as one of their main roots. Hope is, of course, at the base of the eschatological *corpus* of Ellul's writings – and this book is just the main example.

In the context of our reflection on Ellul and the Bible, my contribution aims to focus on the pair of terms *déréliction-espérance* (abandonment and hope). I shall develop three main themes: a first, a view on how this binomial can be approached according to the dialectical method of the French scholar; a second reading from a more strict biblical perspective, presenting two aspects: the main biblical characteristics of Ellul's statements about hope and a note on an astonishing silence.

### Dialectical method and hope. The relevance of a binomial

More than the book itself, it is the idea of hope that has to be considered as a crucial issue in Ellul's work. Gabriel Vahanian noticed this in 1983<sup>1</sup>, and so did other scholars such as Maurice Weyembergh<sup>2</sup> (1989) and Lawrence Terlizese<sup>3</sup> (2005). More recently, Christophe Chalamet<sup>4</sup> and Bernard Rordorf<sup>5</sup> have been deepening the issue further.

The most important characteristic of Ellul's way of talking about hope is its dialectical construction: in a world divided between necessity and freedom, where a gap is present between history and *ananké, fatum*, destiny, hope, as Jacob van Vleet says, represents a "dialectical link between the realm of technique and the realm of freedom"<sup>6</sup>. What does this mean?

<sup>1</sup> Gabriel Vahanian, « Espérer, faute de foi ? », Etienne Dravasa, Claude Emeri et Jean-Louis Seurin, *Religion, société et politique. Mélanges en hommage à Jacques Ellul*, Paris, PUF, 1983, pp. 153-167. English text, Darrel J. Fasching, *The Thought of Jacques Ellul: a systematic exposition*, New York, Mellen, 1981, pp. xv-xxxviii.

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Weyembergh, « Espoir et espérance chez Jacques Ellul », Robert Legros *et al.*, *L'Expérience du temps. Mélanges offerts à Jean Paumen*, Bruxelles, Ousia, 1989, pp. 199-226.

<sup>3</sup> Lawrence J. Terlizese, *Hope in the Thought of Jacques Ellul*, Eugene -Oregon, Cascade Books, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Christophe Chalamet, « L'espérance comme provocation et comme invocation », Rordorf Bernard *et al.*, *Jacques Ellul. Une théologie au présent*, Le Mont-sur-Lausanne, Ed. Ouverture, 2016, pp. 53-73.

<sup>5</sup> Bernard Rordorf, « Jacques Ellul : l'espérance oubliée », *Perspectives protestantes*, n° 5, avril 2017, pp. 36-43.

<sup>6</sup> Jacob E. Van Vleet, *Dialectical theology and Jacques Ellul: an introductory exposition*, Minneapolis, Fortress press, 2014.

From the point of view of the structure of the statement, it is not possible, according Ellul, to talk about hope without putting it in relationship with *déréliction*. From a methodological perspective, the binomial is not made of two terms in opposition, but in relationship to each other: *déréliction* is not the “opposite” of hope. It is hope’s “place”, the other element, drawing hope’s boundaries and helping to define it. I come to this statement after having followed our author towards a path from *Présence au monde moderne*, towards different minor writings. This path led him to the conscious choice of a word, *déréliction*, representing what Bernard Rordorf calls “a theological judgement on an historical reality”. The crisis, deeply analyzed not only in the first part of *L’espérance oubliée*, but also in all his whole sociological works of 1950-1970 and beyond, is a crisis of meaning, whose root lies in the dynamic of switching Sacred from Nature to Technique.

### An emphasis: hope as the basis for the eschatological perspective

The second theme, as announced, brings us to the issue of the explicitly biblical roots of hope in Ellul’s work. We can notice that, of course, hope is the basis for Ellul’s eschatological perspective: I shall not treat this topic at length, as it has been deepened by others in this context; I thank them for their contributions pointing out the importance of this part of Ellul’s corpus. I’ll just recall some fundamental expressions concerning this theme, as we meet them in *Hope in time of abandonment* as well as in the works on the book of Revelation.

First of all, “réjétés—vers l’eschaton”: the clash between necessity and freedom, abandonment and hope, leads the human being to be “rejected towards the eschatological perspective”. In this situation, hope is “la présence éclatante des réalités dernières” [“the dazzling presence of the ultimate realities”]<sup>7</sup>. Secondly, hope is defined as the measure of the distance from the Kingdom and the accomplishment of God’s promise: “L’espérance provoque le pessimisme: car elle nous assigne notre place, loin de Dieu. Si loin que seul l’espérance est encore possible” [“Hope provokes pessimism: for it assigns us our place, far from God. So far that only hope is still possible.”]<sup>8</sup>.

Only what Ellul calls “hope’s pessimism” can be helpful in approaching reality without sinking into despair. The pessimism – or realism – of hope can lead to the impossible possibility of God’s abandonment. The link between this statement and what André Neher says about the “peut-Etre”,

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Ellul, *L’espérance oubliée*, ed. 2004, p. 169.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.

the “might-be” – and the Possible - is strong. Nevertheless, this remark still shows more of a theological perspective in the thought of our author than an explicitly biblical approach.

### An absence: keywords

Here we find an astonishing silence, in the construction of Ellul's thought: there is another idea, coming from the dialogue with Neher, which could have been exploited. A small note, remembering the importance of the two biblical terms *nehama* and *azav*, makes us realize that *Hope in time of Abandonment* lacks a deepening of the biblical words used both for abandonment and for hope<sup>9</sup>. Quite an astonishing silence, as we know that Ellul takes the time to deepen other biblical keywords, elsewhere: *hevel*- vanity<sup>10</sup>, the four horsemen<sup>11</sup>, the image of the city<sup>12</sup>, to give just some main examples.

We find the note on Neher's exegesis in the pages of *L'espérance oubliée* talking about a silent God, a God who chooses to be silent, and about a hope which does not accept this choice. This hope steps up to dare violence and blasphemy, to provoke an answer, to break the silence, to make the walk to the Promise start again<sup>13</sup>. Hope represents, in this part of the work, the will to make God change, to make God repent of his own choices<sup>14</sup>. The two keywords suggested by Neher and noticed by Ellul are *nehama* and *azav*, « repentance » and « abandonment », as actions coming from God. Let us go deeper.

*Nehama* comes from the root *nhm* and occurs 119 times<sup>15</sup>. Neher reminds that as we affirm that God not only changes his mind, but sometimes repents of his own choices, this “seems so intolerable that this hypothesis is often rejected by the Bible itself (Nb 23, 19 – I Sam 15,29)”<sup>16</sup>. Of course:

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 179-180, note 1 : « Dans son analyse sémantique, sur le silence de l'espérance, Neher donne la note remarquable suivante : le même mot (*nehama*) désigne le *repentir* de Dieu, son regret, sa lassitude, l'échec de ses prévisions et en même temps la *consolation* : reprise de soi-même en face de l'échec - Volonté de reprendre l'œuvre, et l'espérance. Egalement, le mot *Azav* signifie d'un côté l'abandon et de l'autre le fait d'être recueilli. 'La déréluction et l'engrangement se tiennent non pas par l'effet compensateur du temps qui passe et qui guérit mais par la dialectique interne de leur incassable relation' [cit. Neher, p. 255, n.d.r.]. Ainsi l'espérance est bibliquement liée à la déréluction ».

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Ellul, *La raison d'être. Méditation sur l'Ecclésiaste*, op. cit., pp. 61-73.

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Ellul, *L'Apocalypse. Architecture en mouvement*, op. cit., pp. 179-182.

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Ellul, *Conférence sur l'Apocalypse de Jean*, op. cit., pp. 89-90, and *Sans feu ni lieu. Signification biblique de la Grande Ville*, op. cit., pp. 45-61.

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Ellul, *L'espérance oubliée*, op. cit., pp. 168-187.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

<sup>15</sup> H. Symian-Yofre, « *nhm* », G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, Heinz-Josef Fabry (éd.), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Grand Rapids, MI – Cambridge, Eerdmans, 1999, vol. IX, pp. 340-355, p. 342.

<sup>16</sup> André Neher, *L'exil de la parole. Du silence biblique au silence d'Auschwitz*, op. cit., p. 255.

repentance comes out from realizing a mistake, a defeat. Thus, the repentance of God speaks about a God going wrong, a God who is neither perfect nor confident. What Neher points out then is that “the Hebrew word expressing this feeling is *nehama*, and this word indicates at the same time repentance but also *consolation*”. Through this, the French biblist shows another image of God: “It is the opposite attitude, the recovery of oneself in face of defeat, it is will, energy, hands going back to the dough, it is hope. Therefore, defeat and hope are no longer two separate moments of the divine action ... and one only word expresses their simultaneity, so that, in the biblical text, defeat and hope are read through the same word, are received in the same hinge of the biblical adventure”<sup>17</sup>. *Nehama* talks about a God who of course can change of attitude and repent, but also seeks for reconciliation and for building a future of hope again.

Let us have a look to the Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament : « The only element common to all meanings of *nhm* appears to be the attempt to influence the situation : by changing the course of events, rejecting an obligation, or refraining from an action, when the focus is on the present ; by influencing a decision, when the focus is on the future ; and by accepting the consequences of an act or helping another accept them, or contrariwise dissociating oneself emotionally from them, when the focus is on the past »<sup>18</sup>. Whether the action aims at the past, present or future, its goal is thus to influence a given situation. Briefly, in the interpretation of the verbal root *nhm*, there is a clear link with will, freedom and with the reasons for choices. This is why, in my opinion, it is very important to remember the two meanings of *nehama* as we talk about hope as God’s silence-breaker: it brings further arguments to Ellul’s thesis. As it fights for God’s repentance and return to the creature, abandoned in silence, hope acts from the certitude that consolation and healing inhabit that God, of whom we see only the back: a consolation which is destined to the human creature inside its own abandonment.

André Neher also highlights two different readings of the root of abandonment, *azav*: this one, meaning both abandonment and collecting, expresses once again the simultaneity of hope and defeat. “There is no season gap between throwing seeds and the richness of the harvest. The two movements are simultaneous. As the biblical man affirms ‘I have been abandoned’ he also claims, with the same word, ‘I am raised’. Abandonment and harvest are joint together, not by the action

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*: « C’est l’attitude inverse de la précédente, la reprise de soi-même en face de l’échec, la volonté, l’énergie, les mains se remettant à la pâte, l’espérance. Ainsi, l’échec et l’espoir ne sont-ils pas deux moments espacés de l’œuvre divine ... et un seul et même terme exprime leur simultanéité, de telle sorte que, dans le texte biblique, l’échec et l’espérance se lisent dans le même mot, se captent dans la même charnière de l’aventure biblique ».

<sup>18</sup> H. Symian-Yofre, « *nhm* », art. cit., p. 342.

of time passing by and healing, but in the inner dialectic of their unbreakable relation”<sup>19</sup>. We meet *azav* in the semantic context including synonymies and antinomies, in spatial, social and emotional perspectives: leaving and staying, going and coming, letting someone go and staying with someone, losing and finding, forgetting and remembering, despising and respecting, and so on<sup>20</sup>. There is no abandonment without a new meeting, no turning back without reconciliation, no *déréliction* without *espérance*.

## Conclusions

What about hope, then? It is designated by different keywords in the Bible, and multiple circumlocutions describe it. Ellul chose not to deepen any of them. Neither *elpis*, nor *tiqvah* or one of the other, less common, *seber* and *towchelet*. Yet at the same time, he worked a lot on the difference between *espoir* and *espérance*, a difference we only find in French. Another paradoxical attitude.

What we can affirm is that more than deepening the single key\*words of the vocabulary of hope and abandonment, Ellul has decided to lean on the biblical narrative’s witness of the dialectical movement between the two.

For this reason, I think it is fundamental to keep Ellul’s work on hope in close dialogue with other authors and scholars that he himself quotes in *Hope in time of abandonment* and in other works - in particular, Neher, Kierkegaard, Ricoeur, Moltmann, Vahanian. It is from these comparisons that the idea that a *Kairos*, a *time*, for hope exists and comes out with strength, and that this *Kairos* is found in that breakthrough, in that hiatus which is always present between necessity and freedom, between the kingdom of technique and the kingdom of freedom. I am presently reflecting on the idea of an “utopic function of hope”, an expression coming from the resumption of two keynote dialogues with Paul Ricoeur and Gabriel Vahanian, who invite us to re-appropriate the word utopia and the meaning we can give to this idea. But this is another story.

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<sup>19</sup> André Neher, *L'exil de la parole. Du silence biblique au silence d'Auschwitz*, op. cit., p. 255 : « Et cette simultanéité de l'échec et de l'espérance en Dieu se retrouve du côté de l'homme, marqué également par l'ambivalence d'un seul et même terme – *azav* – qui signifie à la fois l'*abandon* et le *recueillement*. Aucun intervalle de saison entre le lancement des semailles et la cueillette de la récolte. Les deux mouvements sont simultanés. Lorsque l'homme biblique dit : *Je suis abandonné*, il dit au même instant et par le truchement de la même parole : *Je suis recueilli*. La *déréliction* et l'*engrangement* se tiennent, non pas par l'effet compensateur du temps qui passe et qui guérit, mais par la dialectique interne de leur incassable relation ».

<sup>20</sup> E. Gerstenberger, « 'āzaḅ », G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, Heinz-Josef Fabry (éd.), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, op. cit., vol. X, pp. 584-592, p. 589.