

The Aryan Jesus

Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany

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Susannah Heschel

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Adolf Hitler did not stand alone as the spokesman for the “dejudaization” of Germany. Susannah Heschel’s *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* explores the dark relationship of theology and Nazi-era Germany. Through her vast and meticulous archival research, we find that many of Germany’s theologians worked tirelessly to provide the theological grounds for the eradication of Jews and the spread of the Nazi vision.

Heschel’s central focus is upon the little known “Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life,” a research arm of the pro-Nazi German Christian Movement (3). Her thesis is clear: “This book presents the history of the Institute: how it came into being and won approval and financing from church leaders; the nature of the dejudaized New Testament and hymnal that it published; the many conferences and lectures that it organized; who joined and became an active member, especially from the academic world of theology, and in particular, the figure of its academic director, Walter Grundman (1906 to 1974)” (23).

The goals of the Institute were obvious from the beginning; “Jesus had to be drained of Jewishness if the German fight against the Jews was to be successful” (26). The Institute scholars went to great lengths to posit an anti-Jewish Jesus, essentially revising the Marcionite heresy of the second century in order to fulfill the Nazi need to dejudaize the New Testament (26, c.f., 48). And subsequent scholarly extremes resulted in such claims as “the faith of Jesus was that of Indian religion and stood in sharp opposition to Judaism” (39) and “[t]he fantasized differentiation between Gentile and Jewish populations of Galilee ... used to signal a distinction between the teachings of Jesus as Galilean and Judaism” (56). Through the result of bizarre scholarship, the Institute created an anti-Semitic Jesus who was not only Aryan but denounced Judaism entirely. “By manipulating the theological and

moral teachings of Christianity, Institute theologians legitimated the Nazi conscience through Jesus” (66).

Heschel goes on to show in chapter two that the Institute aimed to carry out a full revision of orthodox Christianity. “The goal was not only to radically revise the church and its teachings, eradicating all ‘Jewish’ expressions, but to produce antisemitic propaganda in the service of the Reich’s efforts to create a Germany purged of Jews” (68). This revision presented a total rejection of Jesus as a Jewish prophet and actually presented him as a “proto-Nazi” himself (71). The Institute took shape on these radical grounds and proceeded to contribute to the cause of Germany’s dejudaization. Walter Grundman wrote in 1939, “Thus the task of the churches is, on the one hand, to account for any possible Jewish influence within its own history, and, on the other hand, because of their responsibility for German life, to remove any possible Jewish influence” (80).

Once founded, the Institute undertook a variety of projects to contribute to its desired end. Chapter 3 describes how it published its own dejudaized New Testament (*Die Botschaft Gottes*), altered the hymn book, and updated the catechism, all in the effort to rid German Christianity of all Jewish influence. In particular, the importance of revising orthodox theology for the Institute is seen in their dejudaized catechism, which “omitted traditional doctrinal positions regarding miracles, virgin birth, incarnation, resurrection, and so forth, in favor of positioning Jesus as a human being who struggled on behalf of God and died not only as a martyr but also a ‘victor’ on the cross, despite being a victim of the Jews” (126-127). In the end, “the Institute shifted Christian attention from the humanity of God to the divinity of man: Hitler as an individual Christ, the German Volk as a collective Christ, and Christ as Judaism’s deadly opponent” (164-65).

In chapter 4, Heschel explores the phenomenon of “The Making of Nazi Theologians.” In particular, she examines the life and thought of Walter Grundman, who was the visionary behind the Institute (175). Interestingly, Grundman’s generation “was a generation that witnessed theological crisis wrought by the devastation of the [First World] war, and was imbued with a mood that demanded a radically new approach to Christianity” (175). Particularly noteworthy in Grundman’s development as a theologian is his relationship to his doctoral advisor, Gerhard Kittle, famous for his *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* and an ardent Nazi. Grundman’s own influence spread at the University of Jena, where the Institute was housed (chapter 5). The theological curriculum there was

fundamentally reshaped: “Hebrew was no longer required of students; History of Religions methods were substituted for theology; and racial theory was made an essential tool of interpretation” (202). And the faculty itself was pressured to conform to such ideology. For example, the dean “criticized [Gerhard] von Rad for insisting on the value of the Old Testament for Christians and for failing to integrate racial historiography into his theology” (216).

Chapter 6 concludes with the dark story of the postwar years, which were characterized by cover-ups and excuses on the part of Nazi academicians and churchmen who were seeking immunity from legal ramifications. Grundman himself was eventually reinstated into the church in Thuringia and actually presented as one who “distanced himself courageously from the Nazi Party shortly after Hitler came to power” (254). In her postscript, Heschel concludes, “Once the war had ended and the Jews were murdered, the theologians could retreat to the shelter of the church” (289).

By unearthing previously untouched archives and forgotten history, Heschel has done a great service not only for theologians and historians, but responsible citizens at large. Heschel’s writing exudes meticulous, determined, and cutting-edge research. Concerning her hunt for important archives, she notes, “Thuringia, in the geographic center of today’s Germany, had become part of East Germany after World War II, and access to its archives by Westerners was highly restricted until the Berlin Wall fell. I was the first American, the first Jew, and the first person with a laptop, I was told, to appear at the Eisenach archive” (xi). This unrelenting determination in research is characteristic for the book as a whole.

On a critical note, the sub-title of the book, *Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany*, is a bit misleading. The reader may imagine that Heschel will provide a full survey of the general problem of Christian theology in Nazi Germany, yet her thesis is not nearly that broad. Although the book does indeed grapple with the reality of Christian theology in Nazi Germany, it is by no means a general survey of the issue. It is an intentionally focused account of the very specific state of Thuringia and of the Institute. With such a general subtitle, the reader expects Heschel to provide more than her very scant attention to the anti-Nazi theologians such as Bonhoeffer and Barth. The impression is that there were literally no Christian theological voices from within Germany that critically denounced the evils of Naziism. Yet given her focus on the Institute, this dire portrait is fitting. Perhaps a sub-title highlighting the “Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish

Influence on German Church Life” would be more appropriate.

In sum, Heschel’s work is a historical account far too vital to overlook. The book implicitly emphasizes the fundamental importance of theologians, whose efforts have the tremendous ability to impact the world for good or evil. One of the most unnerving revelations in Heschel’s work is that, despite a few dissonant voices, Germany’s best and brightest theologians and biblical scholars embraced the Nazi vision of the dejudaizing of Germany and the eradication of Jews. That is why this book deserves wide readership. It encourages the marginalized to continue speaking and questioning and challenging the majority, especially theologians. The powers of evil in this world are far too real to allow the most popular ideology to win the day unchallenged. Heschel’s account shows just how destructive a perverted theology can be. As with the Institute, theology proved not to be a mere word game for clergy and academics, but lended a hand in the cause of genocide. Theology is a matter of life and death, and it must be done accurately. Thus, Heschel’s work issues a clarion call for theologians to speak to and challenge the currents, trends, and status quo of academia in pursuit of what is true and good.

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