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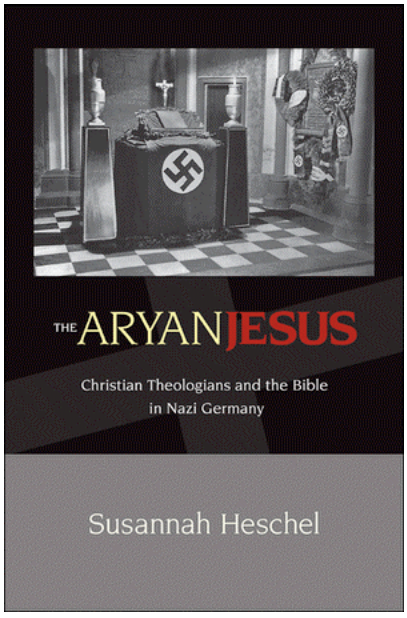

Heschel, Susannah

The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008. Pp. xvii + 339. Cloth. $29.95. ISBN 9780691125312.

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Over the course of her career, Susannah Heschel, Eli Black Professor of Jewish Studies at Dartmouth College, has published many articles about the intersection of Nazi anti-Semitism and Christian anti-Judaism in Nazi-era Germany, focusing particularly on key institutions and players in the German state of Thuringia.[1] In *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany*, Heschel revisits this ground, presenting a detailed history of the Institut zur Erforschung und Beseitigung des jüdischen Einflusses auf das deutsche kirchliche Leben (Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life) and of its leaders, especially Walter Grundmann, the head of the board that directed Institute projects. Between 1933 and 1945, the German Protestant church was embroiled in a debate over the proper relationship of church and state and the appropriate response of the church to Nazi anti-Semitism and nationalism. Arguably the most powerful faction in this debate was the Deutsche Christen (German Christians), whose members advocated active church support for the Third Reich and its anti-Semitic policies. The Thuringian branch of the German Christians, known as the

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[1] For a listing of relevant works published since 1994, see Heschel's bibliography on pages 305–6.

Kirchenbewegung Deutsche Christen (German Christian Church Movement; henceforth KDC), was particularly devoted to this mission and was well-positioned to enact their agenda, with members holding leadership positions in local government, the state church, and the theology faculty of the University of Jena. One of the main vehicles for the KDC to advance its goals was the creation in 1939 of the Institute, whose purpose was to identify and eliminate from Christian theology and liturgy anything that showed evidence of Jewish influence—for example, removing any Hebrew words or Old Testament references from the New Testament.

Heschel provides the initial context for her study in her introduction to the volume, briefly discussing the German church conflict and outlining the Institute's history, as well as discussing the relationships of anti-Semitism and Christianity, and race and theology, in the years leading up to and including the Nazi era. Heschel's stated goals for the overall study were: (1) to present the history of the Institute and its key leaders within the context of Christian theology and Nazi ideology; and (2) to use that history to demonstrate how the attempt to dejudaize Christianity "reveals the impact of Nazi anti-Semitism on the church, Christian involvement in the Nazi projects against the Jews, and the absence of significant Christian opposition to the Holocaust" (23–24).

Heschel begins her study, in chapter 1, "Draining Jesus of Jewishness," by reviewing some of the theological, philosophical, sociological, and anthropological trends in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholarship that anti-Semitic scholars and theologians used to justify the "aryanization" of Jesus (i.e., the claim that Jesus was not a Jew and that his teachings were anti-Jewish) and thereby to support the "dejudaization" of the church. Chapters 2 and 3, "The Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life, 1939 to 1942" and "Projects of the Institute," provide a detailed history of the Institute, covering not only the period of the Institute's existence but also the events that led to its creation and development. Here she addresses the opposition the Institute's founders faced, particularly from other German Christian and Protestant groups, but also from the Nazi government—which at times sought to promote National Socialism as a more authentically German alternative to Christianity—as they pursued their goals.

Chapter 4, "The Making of Nazi Theologians," reviews the history of several prominent German theologians who were Nazi sympathizers and, in some cases, Institute members but focuses most of its attention on Walter Grundmann, its founding director, describing his role in the success of the Institute. Chapter 5, "The Faculty of Theology at the University of Jena," discusses the nazification of this historically important faculty and the extraordinary measures taken to subvert normal procedures and due academic criteria in key areas such as hiring of faculty, management of the curriculum, and evaluation of

doctoral dissertations. Finally, chapter 6, "The Postwar Years," and Heschel's concluding chapter discuss the fate of Institute and theology faculty members, and of their theological views, during and after denazification in the postwar period.

What Heschel has created in *The Aryan Jesus* is a fascinating and detailed picture of one group's commitment to an ideology and their struggle for the power and authority to disseminate that ideology. Heschel makes a compelling case about the impact of Nazi anti-Semitism on the German Protestant church and provides one explanation for church passivity in the face of Nazi atrocities against the Jews. The book is very well-written and often makes arresting reading. It integrates extensive archival research with a profound commitment to social and intellectual history. Heschel achieves most of her stated goals, falling short only on her claim that there was a direct connection between German Christian dejudaization efforts, on the one hand, and Nazi state projects against the Jews, on the other. Perhaps if she had devoted more attention to establishing a causal relationship between the two in the volume, she might have been able to construct a compelling case. As it is, her own evidence suggests the opposite, demonstrating instead that the Nazi government (especially as it consolidated its power) was largely uninterested in courting church support. This, however, is a minor quibble with what is otherwise a valuable resource to anyone interested in the disciplinary history of biblical studies and Christian theology under the Nazi regime.

While it is an important work, *The Aryan Jesus* does leave room for improvement in a possible second edition. First, Heschel perhaps does not take enough note of the influence of German history and culture on the mindset of the actors and their audience in her study. For example, she does not address the issue of the historically close relationship between church and state in Germany. Up through World War I, the church was actively governed by the state. Germany formally separated church and state after the war, instructing the various Christian denominations to develop their own constitutions and governing bodies. This process, which continued throughout the Weimar Republic and into the 1930s, was a source of conflict within the church, with some members resisting the movement toward independence from state control. The question is: How would certain factions within the German Protestant church that wanted the church to be subject to the authority of the state have handled the tension created when the state ideology became morally and ethically questionable? As another example, in her discussion of Protestant theology, she talks of "the conundrum of Christian supersession: the appropriation by the New Testament and the early church of Judaism's central theological teachings, … as well as its scriptures, its prophets, and even its God, while denying the continued validity of those teachings and texts within Judaism as an independent path to salvation" (26). The question arises whether the scholars and laypersons of the era under study would, or even could, have viewed Christian theology

and the Bible from this perspective. Professors of these texts were considered to be Old Testament scholars, not Hebrew Bible scholars. Would not their primary interest in the Old Testament have been its relevance for Christianity, rather than that for Judaism? Extending the problem outside the scholarly population, the question becomes: Would average Germans have even had concerns about the Jewishness of Jesus or the history of the Old Testament as a Jewish text, or would they simply have seen both Jesus and the Old Testament as Christian? In other words, would the Jewish problem raised by scholars like Grundmann have even registered as a problem to the majority of the German population?

Second, Heschel's discussion of the impact of Institute initiatives and activities at the University of Jena treats Jena essentially as a case study, one university among many whose faculty members were also members of the Institute. Since there was so much overlap between the Institute leaders and the Jena faculty, however, making a distinction between changes attributable to the Institute and changes attributable to the faculty is difficult. To demonstrate that the Institute's influence extended further than its leaders' direct span of control, Heschel would have benefitted from looking beyond Jena to other university theology faculties, examining their connection to the Institute and their dejudaization efforts.[2]

Third, it is not clear how this new work relates to Heschel's previous, extensive writing on this topic. The first chapter, which attempts to contribute to critical scholarship on race and theology, is new but is not well-integrated with the rest of the volume, which appears to be largely an expanded and reorganized version of her previously published articles. Particularly in the sections on the history of the Institute, of the University of Jena, and of the key figures in these two organizations, Heschel provides much greater detail, using German archival materials from the Nazi era, many of which have only become available since German reunification twenty years ago.[3] While this added detail is valuable for historical purposes, because Heschel has reorganized the presentation of her data, and does not discuss her own previous work in this new volume, it is difficult to determine whether or how *The Aryan Jesus* represents a change or evolution in her thinking on these topics.

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[2] See the studies by Kurt Meier (*Die theologischen Fakultäten im Dritten Reich* [de Gruyter Studienbuch; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1996]) and Stephen P. Remy (*The Heidelberg Myth: The Nazification and Denazification of a German University* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002]), both of which Heschel includes in her bibliography, though she does not discuss them extensively in her book.

[3] Prior to reunification, the two main factors inhibiting availability of the archives were restricted access of Western scholars to East Germany itself and classification of some of the archival materials as secret by the East German government, perhaps because some of the ostensibly rehabilitated Nazi theologians were restored to their former positions or other offices in the church in order to serve as informers for the State Security Service (the Stasi).

For example, in a 1999 publication she states, "The purging of everything Jewish from Christianity that was proposed by Institute members was perceived by many as radical and illegitimate,"[4] yet her present study (2008) seems to present dejudaization as much more broadly accepted in the German Protestant church. What convinced Heschel to reevaluate her earlier claim? Similarly, in previous studies Heschel has focused more on key individuals at the Institute or the University of Jena. In her present work, the same actions previously attributed to individuals are now attributed to the Institute, but it is not always clear whether these changes are the result of new evidence or are a reinterpretation of her previous work.

Fourth, it is difficult to determine how Heschel relates her work to other recent scholarship in this field. The volume includes an extensive bibliography,[5] including a number of modern studies on Germany during the Third Reich, but while she occasionally updates historical details based on these works or refers readers to them for more information on a particular subject, she only rarely engages them directly. As a result, it is often unclear to what extent and on what basis she agrees or disagrees with these scholars. To illustrate with contrasting examples, in her introduction Heschel discusses a study of Grundmann by Roland Deines. In this case, Heschel states clearly the points on which she disagrees with Deines and her reasons for her views (18). Unfortunately, such direct attention to other modern scholars is relatively rare. More often, Heschel treats these works more obliquely, using data from the studies to flesh out the historical account but not addressing directly her reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with particular scholars. Such is the case with her discussion of the hymnal, *Grosser Gott wir loben dich!*, which was a collection of traditional Christian hymns that had been "purged of references to the Old Testament or Judaism" (118)—such as the term Hallelujah—combined with a set of contemporary poems and songs supporting German nationalism, all to be used for church liturgy. The book also included materials designed for personal and family prayer and worship. Heschel

[4] Susannah Heschel, "New Testament Scholarship on the 'Aryan Jesus' during the Third Reich," in *A Multiform Heritage: Studies on Early Judaism and Christianity in Honor of Robert A. Kraft* (ed. Benjamin G. Wright; Scholars Press Homage Series 24; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 303–21.

[5] Some additional directly relevant studies (especially by Old and New Testament scholars reflecting on the history of the discipline under National Socialism) that would contribute to the larger synthesis Heschel seeks to provide include: Martin J. Buss, *Biblical Form Criticism in Its Context* (JSOTSup 274; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), esp. 327–33; Maurice Casey, "Some Anti-Semitic Assumptions in the 'Theological Dictionary of the New Testament,'" *NovT* 41 (1999): 280–91; Volker Leppin, "Vom Auseinanderbrechen zum Neuaufbau: Die Theologische Fakultät Jena um 1945," in *Hochschule im Sozialismus: Studien zur Geschichte der Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena (1945–1990)* (ed. Uwe Hoßfeld, Tobias Kaiser, and Heinz Mestrup; Köln: Böhlau, 2007), 148–70; and Wayne Meeks, "A Nazi New Testament Professor Reads His Bible: The Strange Case of Gerhard Kittel," in *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel* (ed. Hindy Najman and Judith H. Newman; JSJSup 83; Leiden: Brill, 2004), 513–44.

mentions a difference of opinion between two scholars, Birgit Gregor and Hansjörg Buss, regarding Institute involvement in the hymnal's publication and indicates her agreement with Buss that the Institute was involved, noting overlapping membership between the Institute and the named publishers of the hymnal and a letter indicating the groups had "tactical reasons for keeping the Institute's involvement quiet" (118 n. 34). However, Heschel does not discuss Buss's evidence in detail; she gives no indication of the extent of overlap between the different groups or whether the intersection included any of the key leaders of the Institute. Nor does she address the details of the "tactical reasons" for limiting the Institute's involvement and how such insight into the political strategy of the Institute fits into her larger argument that the Institute was more influential than previous scholars have believed.

This last point also has potential historical implications that go beyond the wish to see Heschel relate her significant work more extensively to that of others in the field. If the absence of a publication credit for the hymnal was part of a larger strategy on the part of Institute leaders to position themselves to their own political advantage, then the nature, purpose, and results of that strategy could be important to understanding whether and how the German Christians and the Institute were manipulating public perceptions. While she presents evidence throughout the book regarding the public relations strategies and tactics of the German Christians and of the Institute leaders in their efforts to legitimate the aryanization of Jesus—for example, the removal of the term *Beseitigung* (eradication) from the name of the Institute and the dissemination strategies for Institute publications—Heschel's argument about the effectiveness of these actions perhaps would have been strengthened had she gathered all of this evidence into a single section in her book, rather than scattering it across several chapters of the work. This would then have allowed Heschel to also present the evidence for the reception of Institute efforts in a consolidated manner, to address the lack of consistent, definitive evidence about the reception of the Institute's activities, and to discuss why she believes the evidence for positive reception of these activities outweighs the evidence for rejection of the Institute's work.

Finally, should there be a second edition of this study, perhaps the following two minor points of interest could be addressed. First, there have been several published studies on the theology faculty at the University of Jena that discuss enrollment statistics and dissertation completion as a way of measuring the vitality and focus of the department during the Nazi era, but the numbers in these publications often disagree. One such discrepancy is actually included in Heschel's volume, where at one point she says forty-five dissertations were submitted between 1933 and 1945, of which thirty-five were successful (234), and two pages later she says thirty-seven were submitted, with ten being rejected (236). Earlier articles of Heschel's have contained yet a third set of numbers, with

ten of thirty-six being rejected.[6] I raised the issue of these and several other discrepancies in a 2004 article,[7] and from the content of her note 119 on page 234, it appears she may have reconciled the conflicting dissertation numbers, but the lack of an explicit statement explaining the earlier differences, and the presence in the current volume of two sets of numbers, leaves room for ongoing confusion about the data. It would be beneficial to future scholars if this issue were resolved, as well as discrepancies in the enrollment figures for the theology faculty at Jena during this period. Second, the chapter titles and running page headers for chapters 1, 2, and 5 do not match. For example, the table of contents and the first page of chapter 1 have "Draining Jesus of Jewishness" as the chapter title, but the running page header throughout the chapter is "Inventing the Aryan Jesus."

The Aryan Jesus is one of a number of recent studies on the intellectual and social history of biblical studies in the modern period, many of which focus on the lives of specific scholars, such as Gerhard Kittel, the Nazi-sympathizing founder and editor-in-chief of the *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* (which began to appear in 1932), and Johannes Hempel, the "brown" editor of *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* (the war-time legacy of the journal led, in part, to the formation of *Vetus Testamentum* in 1951).[8] One purpose of these studies is to identify the underlying beliefs and assumptions

[6] See, for example, Susannah Heschel, "When Jesus Was an Aryan: The Protestant Church and Antisemitic Propaganda," in *Betrayal: German Churches and the Holocaust* (ed. Robert Ericksen and Susannah Heschel; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 68–89 (at 79).

[7] Bernard M. Levinson and Douglas Dance, "The Metamorphosis of Law into Gospel: Gerhard von Rad's Attempt to Reclaim the Old Testament for the Church," in *Recht und Ethik im Alten Testament* (ed. Bernard M. Levinson and Eckart Otto; with assistance from Walter Dietrich; Münster: LIT, 2004), 83–110.

[8] Among these studies are Roland Deines, Volker Leppin, and Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr, eds., *Walter Grundmann: Ein Neutestamentler im Dritten Reich* (Arbeiten zur Kirchen- und Theologiegeschichte 21; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2006); Anders Gerdmar, *Roots of Theological Anti-Semitism: German Biblical Interpretation and the Jews, from Herder and Semler to Kittel and Bultmann* (Studies in Jewish History and Culture 20; Leiden: Brill, 2009); Horst Junginger, ed., *The Study of Religion under the Impact of Fascism* (Numen Book Series 117; Leiden: Brill, 2008), which focuses on the history of religions School, rather than on the Bible or theology; Burke O. Long, *Planting and Reaping Albright: Politics, Ideology, and Interpreting the Bible* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997); Christopher J. Probst, " 'An Incessant Army of Demons': Wolf Meyer-Erlach, Luther, and 'the Jews' in Nazi Germany," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 23 (2009): 441–60; Rudolf Smend, *From Astruc to Zimmerli: Old Testament Scholarship through Three Centuries* (trans. Margaret Kohl; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007); Mark W. Smith, "W. F. Albright and His 'Household': The Cases of C. H. Gordon, M. H. Pope and F. M. Cross," in *"A Wise and Discerning Mind": Essays in Honor of Burke O. Long* (ed. Saul M. Olyan and Robert C. Culley; BJS 325; Providence, R.I.: Brown Judaic Studies, 2000), 221–44; Cornelia Weber, *Altes Testament und völkische Frage: Der biblische Volksbegriff in der alttestamentlichen Wissenschaft der nationalsozialistischen Zeit, dargestellt am Beispiel von Johannes Hempel* (FAT 28; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000); and Rudolf Smend's response to Weber (providing alternatives to several of her key conclusions), in "Johannes Hempel (1891–1914): Ein Alttestamentler in kritischer Zeit," in *"Mein Haus wird ein Bethaus für alle Völker genannt werden" (Jes 56,7): Judentum seit der Zeit des Zweiten Tempels in Geschichte, Literatur und Kult. Festschrift*

that influenced the scholar's claims and actions. Too often, "history of scholarship" as a category is restricted to who has said what about specific problem X or Y—as if the discipline were not part of a broader social, cultural, and intellectual history, both shaping that history and being shaped by it. Studies such as those mentioned here allow the work of these scholars to be appropriately assessed for its value to future scholarship. Heschel's contribution to this discussion is a genealogy of the theological and biblical scholarship (some of which was never fully divorced of its anti-Semitic roots) of a group of Deutsche Christen educators and church leaders who continued to work and publish in their fields and thereby to influence the development of Old and New Testament scholarship long after the Nazi era came to a close.[9]

für Thomas Willi zum 65. Geburtstag (ed. Julia Männchen and Torsten Reiprich; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2007), 347-70.

[9] For example, Grundmann's New Testament commentaries were popular at universities in Germany after the war, meaning a generation of biblical scholars used his work on a regular basis in their studies. The most recent edition of his commentary on the Gospel of Mark is still available for purchase on the publisher's website (*Das Evangelium nach Markus* [10th ed.; Theologischer Handkommentar zum Neuen Testament 2; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1989]; online: http://www.eva-leipzig.de/product_info.php?info=p2260_Das-Evangelium-nach-Markus.html).