



## Nazis for Jesus/Jesus for Nazis

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# THE ARYAN JESUS

Christian Theologians and the Bible  
in Nazi Germany

Susannah Heschel

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**Reviewed by Rivkah Fishman-Duker\***

Professor Susannah Heschel's *The Aryan Jesus* disproves the commonly-held assumption that scholars have fully documented the policies of the Protestant and Catholic churches in Nazi Germany. To her credit, she has recognized the importance of exposing the activities of a substantial and influential group of theologians, professors, and clergymen who formed the German Christian Movement and during the post-war years successfully evaded their moral responsibility. *The Aryan Jesus* analyzes the movement's ideas, leaders, writings, and institutions in clear and eloquent English. It represents a major contribution to the field because of its originality, use of sources, and erudite observations.

### Background

Essentially an anti-Christian, secular political/social movement, Nazism had the attributes of a religion, such as a redeemer figure, a creed, doctrines, hymns, laws, and ceremonies. The principles of racial "purity," national solidarity, and obedience to authority comprised its core beliefs. Groups such as the *Deutsche Glaubensbewegung*<sup>1</sup> - German Faith Movement - sought to establish a non-Christian Germanic faith which rejected Christianity and replace it with pagan ceremonies, Nazi ideology and adulation of Hitler. According to their adherents, Nazism was incompatible with Christianity because of its Jewish origins and universality. These pagan movements were relatively small and most Germans remained nominally Christian.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, according to Heschel, several leading theologians and pastors founded the German Christian movement mainly because they perceived the public's growing enthusiasm for Nazism as a threat to the continuity of Christianity in Germany. The goal of this pro-Nazi faction within the German Protestant (Lutheran) Church which claimed some 600,000 members was "to create a unified German church...that would exemplify its nazified Christianity"(3).

After several years of planning and research, its leaders established the Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life - *Institut zur Erforschung und Beseitigung des juedischen Einflusses auf das deutsche kirchliche Leben* - at the Wartburg Castle on 6 May 1939, in order to develop and propagate its ideas. Heschel shows how the Institute's publications, seminars, and pronouncements supplied a vital theological dimension to the political, cultural, and racial anti-Semitism of the Nazi party and German society which targeted the Jews as eternal enemies and destroyers of civilization. It gave its full support to Hitler, the authorities and Nazi policies. After the defeat of Germany in April 1945, the Institute was closed. Its pastors and professors resisted de-nazification, disingenuously claiming that they were simply engaged in scholarly theological research; and so they continued their careers largely unscathed.

### The Aryan Jesus

The Institute adopted the idea of an Aryan Jesus, one whom a Nazi could identify with and worship. In order to do so, it had to remove the historical Jesus from his Jewish roots and context. Heschel explains the groundwork done in this area by racial theorists and experts in comparative religion during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While Christian thinkers emphasized the sharp distinctions between the ideas and practices of Jesus and his Jewish contemporaries, racial theorists posited that those differences derived from the fact that Jesus was an Aryan, not a Semite. Therefore, even those who rejected all religions per se, but accepted "scientific" theories, could find room for a non-Jewish Jesus whose conflict with a Semitic religion and people was predetermined by his racial origins. The figure of Jesus merged with the Teutonic

mythological heroic savior. His struggle against the Jews became an epic battle against an eternal foe that killed him. His resurrection, however, demonstrated the final victory of the Aryan over the Jew. The book offers depictions of Jesus as a Germanic hero in church art of the Nazi period and includes sheet music of several hymns which stress the triumphant Jesus, beloved of the German soldiers.

Heschel correctly argues that "in its specific iteration as anti-Semitism, race was used by some theologians as a restorative force of coherence for Christian ideology...not only a political tool, but as an avant-garde method for understanding society and human nature" (19). In fact, despite their disagreements concerning the German Christian movement's subjugation of the church to Nazi authorities and ideology, both the opposing Protestant Confessing Church and the Roman Catholics shared this anti-Semitism. It is a shocking revelation that the Confessing Church, frequently praised in post-war Germany for its leaders' resistance to Hitler, was in fact profoundly anti-Semitic.

Several problems confronted the advocates of the Aryan Jesus. A major hurdle was the place of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) and the New Testament, texts sacred to Christianity. The Church Fathers had pronounced the Old Testament as an allegory of the New and the former's divine prophecies as fulfilled by the coming of Jesus. Some members of the German Christian movement wished to dismiss it altogether and discouraged the study of Biblical Hebrew, part of the curriculum of most departments of theology. Others ignored the Old Testament, downplayed its significance or interpreted it as historical proof of the evil nature of the Jewish race. Heschel describes the Institute's attempts to rewrite and censor the New Testament, particularly because the "rabbinic" apostle Paul preached the unity of all believers in Jesus, thereby negating racial differences. In practice, the German Christians' attitude to Pauline teachings resulted in the exclusion of Jewish converts to Protestantism from their Aryan churches and acquiescence to their deportation.

Heschel states that Lutheran tradition remained strong and, despite its efforts, the Institute was not successful in replacing Martin Luther's translation of the Bible or popular hymns with its own versions. The Institute's racism, however, corroborated Martin Luther's virulent anti-Semitism, which advocated burning synagogues, removing prayer books and the Talmud, and expelling the Jews.<sup>3</sup> Luther also supported a close relationship between the state and religion, as opposed to the universality of Catholicism. Heschel could have devoted slightly more attention to Luther's legacy.

#### **Revelations from Eisenach**

While Heschel presents an exhaustive bibliography consisting of most of the scholarly articles and studies on the subject, her unique contribution derives from the introduction of new sources - the archives of the Institute at Eisenach in the Thuringia region of the former Communist East Germany. During the 1990s, Heschel became the "first American, the first Jew and the first person with a laptop" (xi) to visit the Eisenach archives. Although, throughout the 1980s, she had written about the Institute and its most prominent founder and leader, the theologian Walter Grundmann, the archives opened up new vistas and filled in numerous gaps, providing intellectual and office correspondence, drafts of research programs, sermons, educational materials, church bulletins, and minutes of meetings. In addition, she made extensive use of German state and local church archives and material from numerous interviews with former students, colleagues, and relatives of members of the Institute, who gave her access to personal correspondence. Last but not least, the files of East Germany's notorious secret police, the Stasi, reveal Walter Grundmann's active cooperation in denunciation of his scholarly rivals to the Communist dictatorship (256-259). Her book also includes excellent pictures of churches and depictions of the Teutonic Jesus, some published for the first time, and portraits of the leading members of the Institute. *The Aryan Jesus*, therefore, constitutes a pioneering and comprehensive study which could not have been possible

earlier.

By writing a history of the Institute based on its archives, Heschel reconstructs its methods of work and internal politics, something not treated extensively in previous studies. She emphasizes its scientific projects, such as a theological dictionary of the New Testament, some of which received government funding and provided employment for professors and students at departments of the theology in leading German universities, such as Jena. Heschel discusses the courses, lectures, and seminars about the Aryan Jesus and racially-based Christianity which attracted German and Swedish pastors, students and faculty members. The list of dissertation topics starkly demonstrates how an entire field was compromised and sold out to mendacious politicized scholarship.

For the most part, Heschel organizes the material chronologically, thereby allowing the reader to follow the development of ideas and their execution nationally and locally. Her brief biographies of individual figures in the movement constitute a "who's who" of "Christian" Nazism, which reflects the acerbic observation of the *Mishna*, "the face of the generation is like the face of the dog" (Sotah 9:15). As few studies have covered the post-war period, her chapter describing the self-justification and naked opportunism of theologians, pastors, and students who scrambled to save their reputations and careers constitutes a chilling revelation. The conclusion assesses the ongoing deleterious consequences of the work of the German Christian movement.

Heschel's book reads well, although it occasionally becomes bogged down in the details of the academic correspondence and the workings of the Institute, which are of greater interest to the specialist than to the general reader. Furthermore, while the archival source material constitutes the major innovation of this study, since the archives were located in Eisenach in Thuringia, the narrative sometimes reads a bit like local history rather than providing the whole picture. Similarly, *The Aryan Jesus* often appears to be a detailed biography of Walter Grundmann, the major figure of the archives, its leading correspondent, and most prolific writer. Such pitfalls, however, may have been unavoidable, given the nature of the new sources. Perhaps Heschel should have devoted slightly more attention to the relationship between the German Christian movement and the neo-pagan *Deutsche Glaubensbewegung*, founded by Jakob Wilhelm Hauer.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, she could have further explored the influence of the Aryan Jesus on Catholic circles and the activities of the influential professor Gerhard Kittel after he left Germany for Vienna. These, however, are minor points and do not detract from her masterful descriptions of nazified Christianity, the Institute, and its theologians.

*The Aryan Jesus* clearly shows that even the soul-searching during the 1980s could not mitigate the long-term effects of the compromised religion of the movement and the Institute. In fact, its pastors, professors, and students failed to come to grips with the consequences of their misdeeds. They lamented the defeated Germany, regarded the de-nazification of universities, schools, and churches as cruel, and demanded forgiveness for party members, professors, anti-Semitic instigators and war criminals.<sup>5</sup> Heschel's work raises larger issues of the relationship between the authorities and intellectuals, universities and churches, which she does not discuss at great length. Institute scholars and pastors served the Nazi party, but did not wield political power. They may have succumbed to the attraction of strong men, dictatorships, and totalitarian ideas.<sup>6</sup> Walter Grundmann, for example, moved quickly from defending Nazi policies to supporting Stalinist East Germany. The example of Grundmann and others validate Hannah Arendt's assertion that despite ideological differences all modern totalitarian movements and their supporters share the common feature of anti-Semitism.<sup>7</sup> In addition to being "true believers," riding the wave of the Aryan Jesus advanced the careers of Institute members and gave them prominence. One may ask whether the current opportunistic politicization of mainstream German Protestant churches, undertaken in order to make them relevant to a predominantly secular society, may be following the example of groups such as the German Christian movement.

### The Historical Jewish Jesus

In her conclusion, Heschel asserts that the Jewish Jesus of history is now on firm footing as "post-war New Testament studies shifted from Germany to the United States" and American scholars "were the prime forces demanding a new and positive Jewish setting for Jesus and his teachings...and a rejudaization of Jesus and Paul..." (289). Here, she is not entirely correct. Jewish scholars as early as Heinrich Graetz and Joseph Klausner,<sup>8</sup> whose works are dated, place Jesus in a Jewish setting and emphasize his Judaism. The Nazi era led to renewed attention to the Jewish Jesus by the Anglican James Parkes and the French Jew, Jules Isaac.<sup>9</sup> Professor Salo Baron's monumental work puts Jesus in the Pharisaic camp and dismisses Kittel, Grundmann, and the Institute.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls inspired Professor Geza Vermes in Oxford and the late Professor David Flusser of the Hebrew University to research the Jewish historical context of Jesus.<sup>11</sup> Scholars have restored Paul's Jewish context as well.<sup>12</sup> While this is not the subject of *The Aryan Jesus*, Heschel should have given proper credit to the contributions of these scholars. Her reference to an article summarizing the literature is inadequate.

### The Palestinian Jesus: A New Fabrication

Heschel's optimism with regard to the development of the field may be founded on assumptions which are too narrowly defined. It is odd that she does not mention a recent fabrication known as the "Palestinian Jesus," which is the obvious parallel to the Aryan precedent.<sup>13</sup> Both the Aryan Jesus and his Palestinian successor are deliberately torn from the historical context of Second Temple Judaism and the faith which Jesus of Nazareth actually practiced. The creators of each Jesus negate the Old Testament. Palestinians and their advocates promote replacement theology and claim that God rejected the Jews, while German Christians believed in the election of Germany which suffered because of the Jews. *The Aryan Jesus* assumed the role of a Teutonic mythological hero, whom the Jews, the eternal enemy, persecuted and crucified. His Palestinian counterpart, also a non-Jewish native of the land, is oppressed by the Jews. He embodies the resistance against the Jewish usurpers and will emerge victorious, just as in the teaching of the Institute the Aryan Jesus ultimately triumphs. In both cases, killing the Jewish enemy constitutes a heroic act. Both Jesus figures serve the ends of agitprop in order to conform to the political program of their respective political sponsors.

Above all, the Aryan Jesus and the Palestinian Jesus are malicious fabrications. At present, the major difference between them is that, for a time, the Aryan Jesus had the advantage of being marketed by a large state-supported institute in which trained professors propagated this counterfeit doctrine, making use of the apparatus of documented scholarship. In contrast, the Palestinian Jesus exists only on internet websites and in popular literature, pamphlets, and sermons. At present, honest scholars do not write about a dejudaised Jesus. However, in light of the current politicization of academia, fabricated scholarly constructs of a non-Jewish, a-historical, Palestinian Jesus may appear in the near future. Without intending to do so, Susannah Heschel has warned us of this imminent danger.

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### Notes

1. Schaul Baumann, *Die Deutsche Glaubensbewegung und ihr Gruender Jakob Wilhelm Hauer (1881-1962)* [The German Faith Movement and its founder Jakob Wilhelm Hauer (1881 - 1962)] (Marburg: Diagonal Verlag, 2005) [German].
2. There were 40,000 members of the neo-pagan *Glaubensbewegung*, 20 million Roman Catholics, and 40 million Protestants registered in Germany during the 1930s (*The Aryan*

- Jesus*, 3, note 5).
3. Martin Luther, "Concerning the Jews and their Lies - 1543," in *The Jew in the Medieval World* edited by Jacob R. Marcus (New York: Atheneum, 1969), 167-169.
  4. This book does not appear in Heschel's bibliography, see note 1.
  5. It is noteworthy that after the war, the German-Jewish philosopher Martin Buber also advocated a conciliatory attitude and, in 1949 he sent money to Hauer, the founder of the *Glaubensbewegung*, with whom he had a cordial relationship during the 1930s (Baumann, *Deutsche Glaubensbewegung*, 192-197, 268). Buber does not appear in Heschel's study.
  6. For example, George Orwell relates that the attraction of British intellectuals to Stalinist totalitarianism is a quest for power "where the intellectual could at last get his hands on the whip." (Cited by Sam Tanenhaus, "Introduction," in *Double Lives: Stalin, Willi Muenzenberg and the Seduction of the Intellectuals* by Stephen Koch (New York: Enigma, 2004), xiv. Perhaps, the same applies in the case of the leaders of the Institute.
  7. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Meridian, 1959), 2-123, especially 3-10.
  8. Heinrich Graetz, *History of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1893; third printing, 1974), II, 140-173. Joseph Klausner, *Jesus von Nazareth: seine Zeit, sein Leben und seine Lehre* [Jesus of Nazareth: his times, his life and his teachings] (Berlin: Juedischer Verlag, 1930) [German] and *From Jesus to Paul*, translated by William F. Stinespring (New York: MacMillan, 1943).
  9. James Parkes, *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue: A Study in the Origins of Antisemitism* (London: Soncino Press, 1934), 24-70, on Jesus and Paul. Jules Isaac, *Jesus et Israel* [Jesus and Israel] (Paris: Fasquelle, 1948) [French].
  10. Salo W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, Third Printing (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1958), II, especially 67-68 ff., 355-357, note 15.
  11. Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1976); *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); *Jesus in His Jewish Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003); David Flusser, *Jesus mit Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten* (Jesus in personal testimonies and pictorial documents) (Rheinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1968) [German]; *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity: Collected Papers* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988); *Jesus in collaboration with R. Steven Notley* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1997).
  12. On Paul and Judaism see the relevant chapters in: John Gager, *Reinventing Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
  13. This perversion of truth dates from the Palestinian armed uprising of 1987. On its manifestations and literature, see Bat Yeor, *Eurabia: The Euro-Arab Axis* (Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Press, 2005), 211-224; Margaret Brearley, "The Anglican Church, Jews and British Multiculturalism," *Posen Papers in Contemporary Anti-Semitism* 6 (Jerusalem: SICSA, The Hebrew University, 2007), 4-7; Gershon Nerel, "Anti-Zionism in the 'Electronic Church' of Palestinian Christianity," *Acta: Analysis of Current Trends in Antisemitism* 27 (Jerusalem: SICSA, The Hebrew University, 2006), especially, 9-29; Manfred Gerstenfeld, "Christian Friends and Foes of Israel: Interview with David R. Parsons," *Post-Holocaust and Anti-Semitism* 78 (Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs) (1 March 2009), 4-6.
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