



The Cruelty of Supersessionism: The Case of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

01.05.2023 | John E. Phelan

The impact of the Shoah on Christian biblical and theological studies has been significant. The Christian doctrine of supersessionism, the replacement of the Jews and Judaism by the Christian church, has come in for particular criticism. Some more traditional scholars have either ignored these critiques or suggested that they were shaped not by critical study of the biblical text but by Christian guilt. It is also argued that the supersessionist argument is so thoroughly woven into the Christian story that extracting it would destroy the story itself. For some, it appears that there is no Christianity without supersessionism.

This paper argues not only that this challenge to supersessionism was indeed the result of post-Shoah reflection, but that such challenges were appropriate and necessary. It does this in part by considering the case of German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer whose early citations of the “teachings of contempt” were challenged by the violence of Nazis and the clarity of their intent to destroy both the Jews and, eventually, the church. A non-supersessionist Christianity is both possible and necessary, not simply to preserve the relationship between Christians and Jews, but to enable both communities to engage in the work of “consummation” and “redemption” that God has entrusted to them.

1. The Cruelty of Supersessionism

In perhaps the most tone-deaf statement ever made by a major scholar, N. T. Wright accused certain modern students of Paul of viewing the Apostle “through the misted-up spectacles of post-Holocaust western thinkers.” (Wright 2013, p. 1413). He goes on to mock those concerned with supersessionism sarcastically calling it “a nasty, dangerous thing the modern western ‘church’ has supposedly endorsed” and, at another point, “the ‘s’ word” (Wright 2013, p. 1412). The objects of Wright’s scorn are the theologians and scholars who, in the wake of the murder of six million Jews during the Second World War, asked a necessary and painful question: How did Christianity contribute to this catastrophe? Obviously, many of the baptized had taken part in the slaughter, but this was more than a question of the failure of discipleship. Was there something inherent in Christianity, in its theology and practice, that made such a failure possible? Many began to point their fingers at, among other things, supersessionism, the replacement of the Jews by the church in the wake of the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

R. Kendall Soulen describes supersessionism or “the theology of displacement” as follows:

“God chose the Jewish People after the fall of Adam in order to prepare the world for the coming of Jesus Christ, the Savior, After Christ came, however, the special role of the Jewish people came to an end and its place was taken by the church, the new Israel... Yet the Jews themselves failed to recognize Jesus as the promised Messiah and refused to enter the new spiritual Israel. God therefore rejected the Jews and scattered them over the earth, where God will preserve them until the end of time.”

(Soulen 1996, pp. 1–2)

Soulen argues that the early church developed a way of reading, a “canonical narrative” to

support this view. This canonical narrative is characterized by God's efforts as "consummator" and "redeemer". The failure of Adam and Eve to obey and sustain a relationship with God required God to begin the process of redeeming creation so as to eventually consummate a loving relationship with his erring children. The Christian reading of this story meant that "the Old Testament dispensation has *redemptive power solely by virtue of its reference to the future coming of Christ*. Circumcision, promises, law, temple, Israel's history... all point in various ways toward Christ and the church." (Soulen 1996, p. 27, emphasis his)

The implications of this were devastating for the Jewish people. Their ongoing existence was, as Soulen points out, "a matter of theological indifference for Christians not only within the sphere of the church but within human history as well." (Soulen 1996, p. 20). The Jews' refusal to acknowledge Jesus as Messiah and enter the transnational community of the church was seen as sheer stubbornness. After the coming of Christ and the foundation of the church, they were supposed to convert or disappear but most of them refused to convert and their communal and religious life continued to thrive. This sharpened the "teachings of contempt." Jews became the killers of Christ who rejected the gospel so generously preached to them. They were deemed to be under a divine curse, doomed to wander the earth, frail and miserable. Their teachings and traditions were "carnal" and inferior to the "spiritual" teachings of the church. They became, as Stephen R. Haynes puts it, "a witness people", an object lesson to reassure the church and further demonize the Jews (Haynes 1995). They were not to be slain, St. Augustine declared, but were to be kept in misery. Their status was to be a warning and a lesson (Fredriksen 2008).

The logic of supersessionism is then, according to Timothy P. Jackson, "erasure". Rather than being "allies with Jews in being vehicles of the one God's love and in humbling all temporal pretense and ambition", Christians engaged in "the vilification of a tradition in order to supplant it." (Jackson 2021, pp. 123–24). They engaged in a form of "parricide". Jackson is unwilling to let even the New Testament itself off the hook. Jesus' critiques of certain Pharisees and the various gospels' frequent references to "the Jews" in general as opponents of Jesus (especially in the Gospel of John) produced "one of the most tragic reversals, not to say falsifications in history: Imperial Rome, who crucified Jesus as seditious was exonerated and finally embraced, while the radically pious Jew, Jesus, was made an anti-Semite, an enemy of his own people and tradition." (Jackson 2021, p. 135). While many of the conflicts between Jesus and his opponents reflect inter-Jewish conflicts, without nuance, they became as dangerous as a loaded gun left on the coffee table in the home of a toddler. And the results were deadly. The alternative to supersessionism, Jackson argues, is turning away from the notion that "Christianity faithfully got right" what "Judaism... willfully got wrong", but "rather the careful tracking of how Judaism and Christianity share a common theological inspiration and continue to influence each other morally and spiritually to this very day." (Jackson 2021, p. 144)

Jackson would disagree with the assertion that Paul was responsible for supersessionism. He argues that "to make Paul a Christian supersessionist—indeed the Christian supersessionist—is to embroil him in evils as ironic as those that flow from reading the book of Job as a philosophical answer to the problem of evil." (Jackson 2021, p. 145). Many modern New Testament scholars would agree. Paul would be horrified at the very notion of the "erasure" of Judaism and the Jewish people. The man that declared himself willing to be cursed for their sake (Romans 9:2), who also declared "the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, the promises" and the "patriarchs" belong (not belonged) to them (Romans 9:4,5) could hardly have agreed to their erasure. In Romans 9–11, Paul struggles to make sense of Israel's resistance to his gospel. His conclusions are ultimately as inconclusive and open ended as those of Job, but certainly anything but supersessionist. Not only will "all Israel be saved" (Romans 11:26) but "as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of the ancestors: for the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable" (Romans 11:28,29). So far as Paul is concerned, Israel's election has not been revoked and will, in the end, be confirmed. Paul no more offers an answer to the conundrum of Israel and Messiah Jesus, than does Job to the problem of evil. But he does effectively put a spike into simplistic

theologies of supersessionism and replacement (see Bieringer and Pollefeyt 2012; Boccaccini and Segovia 2016; Nanos and Zetterholm 2015)

It is one of the burdens of Jackson's book to argue that supersessionism did indeed pave the way for Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany. Supersessionism alone was not enough to produce the Shoah, but it provided the seedbed from which virulent anti-Semitism would spring within Nazi Germany and throughout Europe. The Christian teachings of contempt, he suggests, made it difficult for Christians to rise to the defense of the Jews until it was far too late. Hitler and his henchmen, although in the end opponents of both Judaism and Christianity, found the teachings of contempt useful. Luther's virulently anti-Jewish tracts were republished and widely distributed during the era of the Third Reich. Christian leaders and scholars were co-opted and used to vilify the Jews and eliminate them from their sacred texts before Hitler began to eliminate them from Europe. For Hitler, the problem with the Jews was not simply "biological", though of course that was a principal problem. Jackson argues that his real problem was that they believed in and influenced others to believe in "a supernatural deity that cares about all individuals" (Jackson 2021, p. 67)

Hitler's "philosophy" was rooted in his understanding of nature's rigid law of the survival of the fittest. The race to survive is the continuous battle for supremacy and survival would, quite properly so far as Hitler was concerned, be motivated by "egotism and hate." Only the people of "brutal will" would conquer and survive. If the German people were to reclaim their pride and expand their power, they would have to bow to nature's law rather than following the false trails laid by democracy and individualism. He would insist that:

"[M]an can defy the eternal laws of the will to conservation for a certain time but sooner or later vengeance comes. A stronger race will drive out the weak, for the vital urge in its ultimate form will time and time again, burst all the absurd fetters of the so-called humanity of individuals, in order to replace it with the humanity of Nature which destroys the weak to give his place to the strong."

(cited in Jackson 2021, p. 68)

For Hitler, Jackson argues, the Jews were resented not only as a source "pollution" of the Aryan race, but as the source of "moral monotheism." Hitler wanted not only to kill the Jews but destroy the influence of their God who called for the love of all humanity and especially for those who were weak and needy. Hitler, then, wanted not only to destroy the Jews but eliminate the influence of their sacred texts and traditions on Christianity in Germany and elsewhere. And, as stated above, far too many Christians did not recognize this until it was too late. "The Nazi Holocaust," Jackson writes, "was the terrible price Christianity [not to mention, of course, the Jews themselves] had to pay for the early church's own obscuring of moral monotheism in the Gospels by currying favor with Rome and vilifying the Jews. In trying to supersede Judaism, Christianity betrayed its deepest identity and ideals." (Jackson 2021, p. 32)

In the post-Shoah, era all of this slowly became clear. While both before and after the Second World War most Christian thinkers, even those more or less sympathetic to their Jewish contemporaries, continued to follow the old tropes of the "teachings of contempt", a few, and then a few more, began to reckon with their dreadful impact. Christian supersessionism had contributed not only to the deaths of uncounted numbers of Jewish lives throughout the history of the church, but now had contributed to the greatest crime in human history. And so, N. T. Wright is correct; Christian interpreters of the faith in general and of the Apostle Paul in particular were indeed looking at Christian texts, history, and traditions through the lenses provided by the Shoah. And they were right to do so. In what follows, I will consider the case of one figure who illustrates the dawning of a realization that came too late: Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

2. The Case of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

In 1998, Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain unveiled ten statues of modern martyrs in niches on the great west front of Westminster Abbey in London (Cannadine 2019, p. 354). Among the martyrs was the young German theologian/pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was murdered by the Nazis in the waning days of the Second World War because of his participation in the plot to assassinate Hitler. But Bonhoeffer had been a critic and resister throughout the Nazi era and was actually in prison well before the assassination attempt was made. Early on, his resistance was associated with the attempts by the Nazified “German Christians” to corrupt the Lutheran Church and other Christian bodies with Nazi ideology and to drive Christians of Jewish descent, both pastors and lay persons, from their churches. Later, Bonhoeffer would contribute to the assassination plot by using his ecumenical contacts to approach the allies on behalf of the plotters. But it was financial irregularities associated with his involvement with smuggling a group of Jews to Switzerland that resulted in his initial arrest and imprisonment (Pangritz 2019, p. 103). Nevertheless, Bonhoeffer, in spite of repeated attempts, has never been acknowledged by Yad Vashem as one of the “Righteous among the Gentiles” (Haynes 2006, pp. 5–18). Why would this be when his record appears to some to be so clear?

3. Which Bonhoeffer?

One of the problems in the study of the Bonhoeffer legacy is that Bonhoeffer has been mythologized by both the left and the right. There are, in fact, multiple Bonhoefers, many of them only tangentially connected with the historical figure. In the post-war years, Bonhoeffer filled the need for a Protestant hero of resistance to tyranny. This was especially important given the abject failure of the vast majority of Germans in general and German Christians in particular to offer any more than token resistance to the Nazi regime. Bonhoeffer’s record appealed to liberals and conservatives, “Mainline” and Evangelicals alike. By the left, Bonhoeffer has been lauded for his theology, especially his proclamation of a “religionless Christianity”. By the right, he was lionized as a proto-Evangelical culture warrior (see Haynes 2018). But perhaps the most important Bonhoeffer for both sides is the pro-Jewish campaigner and rescuer. Both left and right have needed this Bonhoeffer and elaborated his life story.

Given all this interest, Bonhoeffer has been the subject of many biographies both popular and scholarly. But perhaps the Bonhoeffer best known by many Christians is the Bonhoeffer of Christian novelists and filmmakers. In these novels and films, his life has often been heavily fictionalized and frequently distorted beyond recognition:

“A portrait of Bonhoeffer the pro-Jewish crusader is elaborated in great detail in Denise Giardina’s critically acclaimed biographical novel *Saints and Villains*. If the Bonhoeffer fashioned by Michael Philips in *The Eleventh Hour* is the quintessential evangelical, Giardina’s Bonhoeffer is the consummate liberal. He smokes cigarettes, engages in premarital sex, is a committed pacifist, and is influenced by ecumenical contacts in other countries and denominations.”

(Haynes 2006, p. 10)

But whatever their differences, Haynes suggests, such books insist on Bonhoeffer’s friendship with and work on behalf of the suffering Jews. Both Mainline and Evangelical Christians have celebrated Bonhoeffer as a resister and rescuer. So why has Yad Vashem refused to admit him to the pantheon of Gentiles who worked for and even died on behalf of Jews? When it comes to the Jews, it turns out that the real Bonhoeffer is both more interesting and more troubling than the fictional one!

4. Bonhoeffer and the Church Struggle

Christians willing to acknowledge the reality and perversity of historic Christian anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism were thin on the ground in the decades leading up to the Second World War, as they had been in the many centuries before. John Gager cites George Foote Moore, James Parkes, and A. Lukyn Williams as the lonely examples of scholars from the English-speaking world who exposed the church's polemical distortions of Judaism (Gager 1985, p. 14). Even some of the great heroes of German resistance to the Nazis could only at best damn the Jews with faint praise. Consider these words from Martin Niemoeller from 1937:

“Today is the tenth Sunday after Trinity, a day which has for centuries been dedicated in the Christian world to the memory of the destruction of Jerusalem and the fate of the Jewish people: and the gospel lessons for this Sunday throw a light on the dark and sinister history of this people which can neither live nor die because it is under a curse which forbids it to do... Even Cain receives God's mark, that no one may kill him; and Jesus' command 'Love your enemies!' leaves no room for exception. But we cannot change the fact that until the end of days the Jewish people must go its way under the burden which Jesus' decree has laid upon it. 'Behold your house is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth till ye shall say Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord.'”

(cited by Davies 1969, p. 14)

This sermon was preached well after the promulgation of draconian anti-Jewish legislation by the Reich. And yet all that Niemoeller can muster on behalf of the Jews is a grudging admission that even enemies should be loved and that, like Cain, they should not be killed!

The dominance of this theological anti-Semitism was the backdrop for the church struggle which pitted Nazified “German Christians”, who wanted to ban people of Jewish descent from the church, however long their families had been Christians, against the “Confessing Church.” As Matthew D. Hockenos notes, this conflict was personal for Bonhoeffer: “His friend and fellow pastor, Franz Hildebrandt, had a Jewish mother. His twin sister's husband, Gottingen University law professor Gerhard Liebholz, was also at risk of losing his position thanks to his Jewish ancestry.” (Hockenos 2019, pp. 54–55). In response to this crisis in 1933, Bonhoeffer penned “The Church and the Jewish Question,” taking the fight to the “German Christians.”

5. The Church and the Jewish Question

Bonhoeffer is at pains, in good Lutheran fashion, to reassure the state that the church does not intend to step on its toes. At the same time, he reserves the right of the church to raise questions if the state is failing to do its duty by permitting “too little law and order” or producing “too much law and order.” (Bonhoeffer 1958, p. 220). Too much law and order has the state intervening in the church's sphere “to such an extent that it deprives Christian preaching and Christian faith... of their rights.” (Bonhoeffer 1958, pp. 220–21). Bonhoeffer explains that “too little law and order” occurred when the state “intervened in the character of the church and its proclamation, e.g., in the forced exclusion of baptized Jews from our Christian congregations or in the prohibition of our mission to the Jews.” (Bonhoeffer 1958, p. 221). Here, the state has clearly stepped out of its proper role into the role of the church, its gospel and its mission.

Bonhoeffer continues the statement with a blunt restatement of the traditional “teachings of contempt.” The Jews “nailed the redeemer of the world to the cross” and “must bear the curse for its action through a long history of suffering.” The Jews are “both loved and punished by God” but the church anticipates a “homecoming” when the Jews will finally give up their “fearful

stubbornness” and turn to Christ. “The conversion of Israel,” he asserts, “is to be the end of the people’s period of suffering.” God is not finished with this “mysterious people” (Bonhoeffer 1958, pp. 222–23). All of this means that the state has no right to tell the church to eliminate converted Jews from its membership since their conversion anticipates the time when all Jews will be converted and the church triumphant. He then accuses the “German Christians” of falling into “Jewish Christianity”, that is a legalistic and compromised form of Christianity (Bonhoeffer 1958, p. 225). By doing this, Bonhoeffer is following in a long line of Christians who used supposed Jewish errors to smear their Christian opponents.

It is difficult to see how this statement is an improvement on the harsh statements of Niemoeller mentioned above. And it seems likely that statements like these prevented Bonhoeffer’s recognition as one of the “righteous among the Gentiles” Stephen Haynes writes:

“In the summer of 2000, Yad Vashem again refused to honor Bonhoeffer with the designation ‘righteous among the nations.’ in the process [Mordecai] Paldiel [director of Yad Vashem’s Department for the Righteous Among the Nations] revealed what many had long suspected--that Bonhoeffer’s candidacy was troubled by his words as well as his putative actions. ‘On the Jewish issue,’ Paldiel wrote, ‘the record of Bonhoeffer is to publicly condone certain measures of the Nazi state against the Jews (save only baptized Jews), and to uphold the traditional Christian delegitimation of Judaism, coupled with a religious justification of the persecution of Jews.’ Paldiel went on to assert that while Bonhoeffer’s condemnations of Nazi anti-Jewish measures were uttered ‘in private and among trusted colleagues; his denunciations of Judaism and justification of the initial anti-Jewish measures were voiced in writing.’”
(Haynes 2006, p. 17)

These damning words seem to be borne out, as illustrated above, by Bonhoeffer’s early writings on the “Jewish question” during the church struggle. But many Bonhoeffer scholars have argued that as time went on Bonhoeffer’s perspective began to change. The increasingly violent measures against the Jews not only shocked and appalled him but began to remake his supersessionist theology. Is Bonhoeffer an example of a Christian theologian who because of, at least, the beginnings of the Shoah, began to rethink his long held “teachings of contempt” and his supersessionist theology, or is this a comforting scholarly illusion?

6. The Later Bonhoeffer and the Jews

As the crisis for the church in Germany deepened, the Confessing Church launched in 1935 an illegal seminary in Finkenwalde, a small village some 250 kilometers northeast of Berlin. As Bonhoeffer’s recent biographer Charles Marsh describes it:

“Among the twenty-three in Finkenwalde’s first class was a slender, gentle young man, a minister’s son named Eberhard Bethge... Bethge, who hailed from a rural backwater in Saxony... had studied at Wittenberg for a time, but having been expelled for voicing support for the Confessing Church, he needed to complete his ordination process elsewhere. Finkenwalde was one of the few options... Within a few weeks [Bethge and Bonhoeffer] would become inseparable, and Bonhoeffer would think of Bethge as ‘my daring, trusting spirit.’”
(Marsh 2014, pp. 235–36)

Bethge would not only become Bonhoeffer’s best friend and closest collaborator, but he would also become a member of the Bonhoeffer family when he married Bonhoeffer’s niece Renate

Schleicher. Many of the most important letters from prison and collected in *Letters and Papers from Prison* were addressed to Bethge. After the war, Bethge would become Bonhoeffer's literary executor and biographer. His biography *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage* came out in English in 1970.

In 1995, Bethge published a short collection of essays entitled *Friendship and Resistance: Essays on Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. In the essay "One of the Silent Bystanders", Bethge explores Bonhoeffer's response to the vicious pogrom of 9/10 November 1938, the so-called *Kristallnacht*, the night of broken glass (Bethge 1995, pp. 58–71). Five years had passed since Bonhoeffer weighed in on the "Church and the Jewish Question." The Nazis had consolidated their power in Germany, remilitarized, in violation of the Versailles treaty, and begun to claim territory they thought was naturally theirs. In 1936, Hitler's troops had entered the Rhineland, again in violation of the treaty. The French and British did nothing. Hitler would also offer support to Franco and the nationalists in the Spanish Civil War. In February 1938, Hitler annexed Austria to the Reich after threatening invasion. And in the fall of the same year, the world held its breath as the Sudetenland crisis unfolded. Once again, the British and French caved to Hitler's demands and war was avoided at great cost, of course, to Czechoslovakia.

The situation of the Jews in Germany had only gotten worse. Within a week of taking power, the Nazis had banned the Jews from serving in government posts. In 1936, the Nuremberg Racial Purity Laws were promulgated, preventing sexual relationships and marriages between Jews and "Aryans". Jews were also declared no longer to be citizens of Germany. The same year, they were banned from all professional jobs. In the summer of 1938, Jews were required to have a large letter J imprinted on their passports. And although Bonhoeffer could not have known it in early November 1938, the invasion of Poland and the beginning of World War II was less than a year away. But Bethge argues that Bonhoeffer was under no illusions as to the fate of Germany and its Jews.

The Gestapo had closed down the Seminary at Finkenwalde in 1937. Many pastors in the Confessing Church had already been arrested and imprisoned. Bonhoeffer and Bethge continued to teach and prepare students for ministry in spite of the illegality of their efforts. In November of 1938, Bonhoeffer was teaching in two small communities: "in Koslin, not far from the Baltic" and in "the little village of Gross-Schlönwitz." (Bethge 1995, p. 60). In such remote villages, the events of 9/10 November were not reported until the next day. According to Bethge, this led Bonhoeffer to engage in "one of those code-laden telephone conversations with [his] parents' house in Berlin" and that in turn led to his travelling "the 300 km to Berlin" to obtain more accurate information (Bethge 1995, p. 60). Bonhoeffer has been chastised for not making a public statement in the wake of the events of 9 November. Bethge argues that there was little opportunity for him to do so. Not only was he living a furtive underground existence, he had no pulpit or "position to reflect publicly in a sermon or in parish notices." (Bethge 1995, p. 61). So how did Bonhoeffer respond to what had occurred?

Bethge recounts that upon his arrival back in Koslin on 14 November, he found the students engaged in a vigorous discussion of the pogrom. One of the students, Gottfried Maltusch, later reported that:

"A great discussion now arose among us about this deed, and how to assess it. Meanwhile Dietrich Bonhoeffer had returned. Some of us spoke of the curse which had haunted the Jews since Jesus' death on the cross. Bonhoeffer rejected this with extreme sharpness. He utterly refused to see in the destruction of the synagogues by the Nazis a fulfillment of the curse on the Jews. This was a case of sheer violence. 'If the synagogues burn today, the churches will be on fire tomorrow.'"
(Bethge 1995, p. 62)

As noted earlier, Bonhoeffer himself had rather glibly referred to the curse in his early writing. But now Bethge suggests he had “sharply turned on the suggestion that it was possible here to argue theologically in terms of God’s anger.” (Bethge 1995, p. 62). Bethge goes on to suggest that Bonhoeffer was “moving toward a theology of Israel of a sort that scarcely anyone else at that time was thinking or talking about.” (Bethge 1995, p. 63). Later scholars are not so sure Bonhoeffer had quite gotten that far, but additional evidence suggests that it is fair to conclude that Bonhoeffer was at least a “transitional figure”. He was beginning to grasp the implications of what Bethge describes as “the centuries-old notions of divine curse, punishment and replacement” of the Jews entailed. Nazi violence against the Jews, their synagogues and Torah scrolls had shaken him and caused him to begin to reconsider at least some of the “teachings of contempt”.

After the war, Bethge found some pencil notations in Bonhoeffer’s Bible that suggested his reaction to the events of 9, 10 November 1938. Beside Psalm 74:8, Bonhoeffer had written ‘9.11.38’ “with an exclamation mark and several lines”. The passage reads as follows:

“They said to themselves, ‘We will utterly subdue them’; they burned all the meeting places of God in the land. We do not see our emblems; there is no longer any prophet; and there is no one among us who knows how long. How long, O God, is the foe to scoff? Is the enemy to revile your name forever? Why do you hold back your hand; why do you keep your hand in your bosom?”
(Bethge 1995, p. 66)

According to Bethge, this is the only time Bonhoeffer included a date or marginal note in his Bible. And it was not the only time he would allude to Psalm 74. Later in the same month, Bonhoeffer addressed a “circular letter” to his students. Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels had forbidden such letters in 1937, so they circulated as personal letters from Bonhoeffer written and signed in his own hand. A cryptic line in the letter of 20 November 1938 suggested to Bethge that Bonhoeffer was contemplating a “theology of Israel in contrast to that of the time”: “During the last few days I have been thinking a lot about Psalm 74, Zechariah 2:8, Romans 9:3f, and 11:11–15. This really makes one pray.” (Bethge 1995, p. 66)

Bonhoeffer had earlier used Zechariah 2:8 to refer to the Confessing Church, but here it seems clear he uses it with reference to the suffering Jews of Germany, who are “the apple of God’s eye.” Romans 9:3f refers to Paul’s passionate concern for the people of Israel. He states, “theirs is the adoption, theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises.” For Paul, these were, as noted above, *present* possessions of the Jewish people, not something they had lost. Romans 11:11–15 strikingly suggests that Israel has *not* been ultimately rejected but continues to be holy. Israel, in fact, continues to be God’s people regardless of the failure of most to respond to Messiah Jesus. This does not necessarily suggest that Bonhoeffer had left off his older, more traditional supersessionist views. It rather indicates that in the wake of the violence of the Nazis, Bonhoeffer was beginning a process of reevaluation of his understanding of Jews and Judaism. In 1940, “he formulated a confession of guilt, the product of a maturing process which began with praying Psalm 74 and the note in his circular letter of 1938.” The confession contained among other things:

“The church confesses to having seen the irrational use of hatred, violence, the physical and spiritual suffering of innumerable innocent people, oppression, hate and murder, without having raised its voice on their behalf, without having found a way to hasten to their aid. It has become responsible for destroying the lives of the weakest and most defenseless brothers of Jesus Christ.”
(Bethge 1995, p. 69)

What are we to make of all this? Stephen Haynes has written skeptically of Bonhoeffer's value for developing a post-holocaust theology. According to Haynes, Bonhoeffer's view of the Jews "as a people uniquely related to God and to Christians--is both the glory and the bane of his post-Holocaust legacy. It led him", he continues, "to claim the Old Testament for Christians when doing so was scandalous. It kept in sight for him the church's obligation to the 'weakest and most defenseless brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ' and motivated him to speak out for the despised who were 'the apple of God's eye.'" In spite of this, his actions were still rooted in "a theological tradition that claimed to understand Jewish identity and Jewish destiny better than the Jews themselves." (Haynes 2006, p. 145). Nevertheless, as Bethge noted, Bonhoeffer made these moves while very few, if any, German Christians were making anything like them. He was perhaps unique in identifying what the replacement of the Jews by the church implied even if in the end he does not appear to have overcome his supersessionism.

Bonhoeffer is important because it appears that even before the gruesome outcome of Hitler's "final solution", he had become aware of how Christian theology had and was continuing to be used to justify violence against Jews as Jews. When Jews were deemed to be under a curse, to deserve their fate for rejecting Christ, to be scattered and persecuted for their stubborn disobedience, it was easy to claim that even the Nazi's depredations were the Jews' own fault—as Bonhoeffer's own students had done. Many Bonhoeffer scholars have speculated on where Bonhoeffer's thought would have taken him. Would he have joined some of the "holocaust theologians" in rejecting supersessionism in its entirety? Would he have been instrumental in developing a new Christian theology of Jews and Judaism? It is, of course, impossible to know. Bonhoeffer was soon to be caught up in a brutal war and a conspiracy to kill Hitler and bring it to an end. He was imprisoned before the attempted coup and would perish within days of the war's end.

I have used Bonhoeffer as a case study because it appears to me that many contemporary Christians find themselves where Bonhoeffer found himself during the war. The Nazi's violence against the Jews and the church's justification of it had challenged him to reconsider the traditional "teachings of contempt" that had shaped his understanding of Jews as Jews. And yet, as far as we know, he had not moved from that realization to considering the full implications of supersessionism, the replacement of Jews by the church, and the supposed loss of Israel's covenant with God. The problem was for Bonhoeffer, as it is for contemporary Christians, that the "teachings of contempt" are rooted in supersessionist theology and the "canonical narrative" that R. Kendall Soulen argues was bequeathed to the church by the towering figures of Justin Martyr and Irenaeus (Soulen 1996, pp. 25–56). The Christian Old Testament in this "canonical narrative" is only important in pointing to Jesus the Christ. For Soulen, Justin and Irenaeus preserved the Hebrew Scriptures for Christians by ultimately rendering Israel's history with God "largely irrelevant for deciphering God's enduring purpose for creation" (Soulen 1996, p. 55). The result was and is:

"The evisceration of the God of Israel in Christian theology. When the question is put: is the God of Israel irrevocably bound to creation, Christians have traditionally answered with a resounding yes. But when the question is put: is the God of Israel irrevocably bound to the people of Israel, Christians have equivocated...The upshot is a vision of the God of Israel that is internally ordered to the disappearance of the Jewish people. Yet Christians have rarely sensed any contradiction in this idea."
(Soulen 1996 p. 55)

All this raises a troubling question. Given the centrality of the "canonical narrative" in the understanding and interpretation of the Christian faith, how will Christianity itself be sustained without the foundational work of Justin and Irenaeus? Are the only options for Christians traditional supersessionism a bland relativism, or the abandonment of Christian faith altogether? Even

“softer” forms of supersessionism that have Jews converted to Christianity rather than damned in the age to come still result in the erasure of both Jews and Judaism. As one of my Jewish friends noted, such anticipated end of days conversions echo the forced conversions of the Middle Ages.

7. Toward of Non-Supersessionist Faith

A famous consultation on the Holocaust was held in New York City in 1974. Scholars, Jewish and Christian, reflected on and argued about the meaning and impact, theological and otherwise, of the murder of 6 million Jews by the Nazis and their collaborators. One memorable confrontation was between Roman Catholic theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether and the distinguished Jewish historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi. Ruether’s paper was a scathing indictment of the Catholic Church’s treatment of the Jews throughout its history. Yerushalmi found himself in the unusual position of suggesting that Ruether had rather overstated her case! Although, he would suggest, things were very often very dark indeed in the church’s treatment of the Jews, there had been patches of light (Yerushalmi 1977). But he had a greater concern:

“My point concerns Ruether’s presentation as a whole. If what she has related here is a summary of the history of Christianity vis-a-vis the Jews, then I see my hope dwindling. If the entire theological and historical tradition forged by Christianity is one of anti-Semitism, then the only hope lies in the radical erosion of Christianity itself. It would mean that in order to achieve a more positive relationship to Jews and Judaism Christians must, in effect, repudiate their entire heritage. But that, in turn, does not impress me as a very realistic expectation... To Christians generally I should like to say: I hope that the condition of our dialogue is not our mutual secularization.”
(Yerushalmi 1977, p. 106)

Does rejecting supersessionism require Christians to reject Christianity as a whole? I think not. But I also think a good deal more work needs to be done for ordinary Christians to grasp the implications of supersessionism and for Christian thinkers to forge new ways of thinking about and engaging the Hebrew Scriptures, the Jewish people, and their own faith in Messiah Jesus. To that end, I make the following modest suggestions, none of them new, for a way forward for Christians.

1. Jews and Judaism must be received, studied, and understood *on Jewish terms*. Jews are a people, a tradition, and a faith separate from, though historically linked with, Christianity. Jews and Judaism should not be understood only as a “witness people” who, on the one hand, pointed to Jesus, and on the other hand, demonstrated the sad outcome of rejecting him. Jews are to be understood as more than characters in the Christian story.
2. The fact that Jews and Christians worship the same God, share the same Scriptures (TANAKH for Jews, Old Testament for Christians) means that both traditions share the moral expectations and the prophetic passion of the One God for justice, mercy, and peace. This is the “moral monotheism” of Timothy L. Jackson. Christians and Jews share the responsibility for and can act in concert to care for what the Jew Jesus called “the least of these”.
3. Christians, as Peter Schafer puts it, “sprang from the loins of ‘Judaism’” (cited in Jackson 2021, p. 144). This suggests that both Christians and Jews share the purpose of the One God to bless all people, all God’s creation. Jews and Christians have common work in caring for the least (as noted above) as well as the common work of blessing both peoples and places beloved of God. They are partners in God’s work of continuing creation and redemption.
4. Jews and Christians alike, although both communities have their own internal arguments about its nature and significance, anticipate the eventual rule of God over God’s creation. The Jew Jesus preached the Kingdom of God, the reign of God, a message consistent with

the expectations of many Jews of his own day of many Jews today. This common expectation further shapes the common work of both Jew and Gentiles, however differently each community may expect that kingdom to be realized.

5. What, finally, is to be done about Christian use of the Hebrew Scriptures and the “canonical narrative”? I would argue that Christians do not need to colonize the Old Testament in order to have it function as Christian Scriptures. Old Testament scholar Peter Enns has suggested that Christians should look at the Hebrew Scriptures not as *Christo-centric*, but as *Christo-telic*. Jesus, for example, is one way to understand the “Suffering Servant” of Isaiah—but not the only way. The way the gospel writers used the Hebrew Scriptures should not be taken to mean that they expected their use exhausted the significance of the text in question or limited or eliminated further applications and understandings. Christians are thus able to see things in the Hebrew Scriptures that Jews do not see or acknowledge while not suggesting their readings are the only ways to read the text in question. This way of reading has the effect of loosening the stranglehold of Soulen’s “canonical narrative” without rejecting it entirely. The Christian reading of a text does not need to drive out a Jewish reading of the text. Both Christians and Jews are called to read texts “midrashically”, creatively, without the expectation that their particular readings are the only ones.

What would a Christianity that followed such a list of suggestions look like? What would a non-supersessionist Christianity entail?

8. A Non-Supersessionist Christianity

Supersessionism has undoubtedly done immense damage not only to the Jewish people but to Christians and Christianity as well. The challenge suggested above is to develop a non-supersessionist Christianity that does not, as Yerushalmi feared, render Christianity obsolete. Scott Bader-Saye has worried about “the tendency among [post-holocaust theologians] ... to reject or minimize central Christian claims about the identity of God.” As a result, “Christian particularity is too often sacrificed in order to find common ground with Judaism, and all too often this has meant a denial of Jewish particularity as well.” (Bader-Saye 1999, p. 77). The sticking point in the conversation, according to Bader-Saye, is Christology. Rosemary Ruether, Paul van Buren and Clark Williamson, among others, have sought to save Christianity from its anti-Judaism by rethinking traditional Christology to remove the offense of Christian particularity. For Ruether, this has meant “interpreting Jesus as the paradigmatic expression of the experience of eschatological hope. The resurrection symbolizes the face that followers of Christ reaffirm their hope in God’s kingdom by remembering Jesus.” Ruether goes on to affirm “that other paradigms such as the exodus, will provide the same symbolic and evocative function for other religions.” Bader-Saye concludes that “this construal does no favor to the Jews, for it relativizes Jewish claims of chosenness as much as it does Christian claims about Christ.” (Bader-Saye 1999, p. 78)

Although Bader-Saye has concerns about Kendell Soulen’s Christology, he is much happier with his reconstruction of the biblical story. It does not eliminate Israel’s history and particularity but rather argues that “the Gospel is the story of the God of Israel’s victory in Jesus over the powers that destroy.” (Soulen 1996, p. 156). Salvation is neither gnostic nor deracinated from Israel’s scriptures and history, but “*the good news about the God of Israel’s coming reign which proclaims in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection the victorious guarantee of God’s fidelity to the work of consummation, that is, to fullness of mutual blessing as the outcome of God’s economy with Israel, the nations, and all creation.*” (Soulen 1996, emphasis his). The expectation that God will consummate God’s purposes for God’s creation in accordance with Israel’s Torah is sustained and extended. The New Testament itself is clear that this consummation does not eliminate or replace Israel or its Covenant in the divine economy but rather includes both Israel and the Gentiles. Paul insisted that the new community of Jesus followers were not part of any new thing,

but rather grafted into the old trunk of Israel (Romans 11:17). One of Paul's disciples would argue that Christ is the one who breaks down the walls between Jew and Gentile, the one whom makes peace between them (Ephesians 2:14). The problem, of course, is that all this unity could appear to be on exclusively Christian terms!

The point, however, is that the New Testament does not see the ministry of Jesus as a cesura in the purposes of God. Christ's work is about the consummation of God's purposes for Israel and the entire creation. It does not eliminate or exclude Israel but brings the Gentiles into the "economy of mutual blessing between God and the house of Israel and therefore between God and the nations as well." (Soulen 1996 p. 159). All of this, however welcome, does not eliminate the challenge of Christology, let alone the question of the doctrine of the Trinity! And perhaps that is as it should be. David Novak argues that ending Christian supersessionism "does not mean, of course, that the rival assertions of Judaism and Christianity will be overcome.... {T}hese rival assertions must remain with us until the end when God will overcome all human rivalries." (Novak 2005, p. 10). Eliminating Christology, ironically, runs the risk of making dialogue rather beside the point. Elsewhere Novak contends:

"One result of this process of liberalization in Judaism, as developed by some American Reform thinkers, was to see the de-Christologized Jesus as an important teacher of this delegalized Jewish teaching. He could now be the basis for Christians who had risen above traditional Christian dogma to relate to Jews who had risen above traditional Jewish dogma... 'Liberal' Jews and 'unprejudiced Christians' can find common ground together when Jesus is seen as superlatively human (contrary to traditional Judaism) and less than divine (contrary to traditional Christianity) ... If this de-Christologized Jesus is accepted, it makes a break with both Judaism and Christianity to such an extent that the dialogue between them becomes a new monologue."
(Novak 1989, pp. 79–80)

For Novak, for there to be genuine dialogue and common blessing, Jews need to come to the conversation as Jews and Christians as Christians. The differences are not to be minimized or brushed aside but respectfully acknowledged. Rejecting supersessionism for a Christian need not mean rejecting Christian faith or even traditional forms of Christianity any more than dialoguing with Christians requires Jews to set aside Torah. So, what does it entail?

I would suggest the following marks of a non-supersessionist Christianity, a Christianity that is neither reductionist nor triumphalist.

1. It is a Christianity that accepts that God's eternal Covenant with the Jewish people is still in force and that the Christian Church has not replaced Israel in the divine economy.
2. It is a Christianity that honors the Jews' reading of their own Sacred Scripture and story, recognizing Christian readings are not final and definitive but part of an ongoing conversation. Christians, as noted above, are not to replace Jews in their own story any more than they are to replace them in the divine economy but to live with both stories.
3. It is a Christianity that recognizes that within the New Testament, the fulfillment of God's promises to the Jews, the Gentiles, and the entire creation is the foundation of Jesus' teachings and the early church's preaching. The gospel does not represent a break with God's purposes but an extension of them.
4. It is a Christianity that anticipates God's fulfillment will include both Israel and the Gentiles and that God will accomplish this, as David Novak suggests, by putting an end to all rivalries.
5. It is a Christianity that shares with the Jewish people the task of being a blessing to the world. This blessing involves a partnership that extends the love of God, the will of God, and the grace of God to everyone.

6. It is a Christianity that lives in solidarity with the Jewish people who still live under threat and danger. In his response to Ruether, Yerushalmi declared, “I do not welcome a collective mea culpa from Christendom. It tends toward a kind of masochism, behind which may lurk an eventual sadism. I do not want Christians to brood on the guilt of their forebears and keep apologizing for it. I do not want to encounter Christians as confessor and penitent... Be it known to you... that not by your ancestors, but by your actions will you be judged. For my people, now as in the past, is in grave peril of its life.” (Yerushalmi 1977, pp. 106–7).

9. Conclusions

This certainly does not resolve all the tensions—not should it. But it paves the way for more than dialogue. In *Mordecai Would Not Bow Down*, Timothy L. Jackson argues that Jews and Christians are not only bound inextricably by a common history, but by God’s common purpose:

“I judge Judaism to be the Father of Christianity the Son, yet such that the Son is of one substance (*homoousion*) with the Father. As I contended in my introduction, Jews are the tribe that, with God’s grace, would redeem groups from tribalism, even as Jesus is the individual who, with God’s grace, would redeem individuals from individualism. Torah is God’s perfect means of deliverance of all Jews; the Christ is God’s perfect means of deliverance of each Gentile... Christian efforts to put Judaism in a narrative that ‘completes’ or ‘surpasses’ [Judaism] actually write it off as inferior or mistaken, thus (like the *Deutsche Christen*) giving aid and comfort to anti-Semites. The lessons of Paul’s interactions with God is that supersessionism is unnecessary, even impossible, as the lesson of Job’s interactions with God is that theodicy is unnecessary, even impossible. We can only rely on the integrity and holiness of a Father willing to address us amid and according to our multiple needs and afflictions, personal and social.”
(Jackson 2021, p. 145)

This calls both Jews and Christians, given our histories, to an awkward partnership, acknowledging our worship of the one God and also acknowledging that God’s mysterious capacity to work with both Jews and Gentiles in a unique but intimately and deeply connected way. This is, of course, something Jews have been much more willing to contemplate than Christians and that too is a byproduct of supersessionism. But perhaps a chastened, post-Christendom church and a Jewish community continually under threat of destruction can discern that for Christians and Jews, a new trail involving neither mutual secularization or empty relativism has been opened for our common exploration and our common hope.

References

- Bader-Saye, Scott.** 1999. *Church and Israel after Christendom*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Bethge, Eberhard.** 1995. *Friendship and Resistance: Essays on Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans.
- Bieringer, Reimund, and Didier Pollefeyt,** eds. 2012. *Paul and Judaism: Cross currents in Pauline Exegesis and the Study of Jewish-Christian Relations*. London: T & T Clark.
- Boccaccini, Gabrielle, and Carlos M. Segovia,** eds. 2016. *Paul the Jew: Rereading the Apostle as a Figure of Second Temple Judaism*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich.** 1958. *No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures and Notes from the Collected Works*. Translated by John Bowden. London: William Collins Son & Co, vol. I.
- Cannadine, David,** ed. 2019. *Westminster Abbey: A Church in History*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Davies, Alan T.** 1969. *Anti-Semitism and the Christian Mind: The Crisis of Conscience after*

Auschwitz. New York: Herder and Herder.

Fredriksen, Paula. 2008. *Augustine and the Jews: A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Gager, John G. 1985. *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Haynes, Stephen R. 1995. *Reluctant Witnesses: Jews and the Christian Imagination*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.

Haynes, Stephen R. 2006. *The Bonhoeffer Legacy: Post-Holocaust Perspectives*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Haynes, Stephen R. 2018. *The Battle for Bonhoeffer: Debating Discipleship in the Age of Trump*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Hockenos, Matthew. 2019. Bonhoeffer and the Church Struggle. In *The Oxford Handbook of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jackson, Timothy P. 2021. *Mordecai Would Not Bow Down: Anti-Semitism, the Holocaust and Christian Supersessionism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Marsh, Charles. 2014. *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Nanos, Mark D., and Magnus Zetterholm, eds. 2015. *Paul Within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Novak, David. 1989. *Jewish Christian Dialogue: A Jewish Justification*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Novak, David. 2005. *From Supersessionism to Parallelism in Jewish Christian Dialogue*. David Novak Talking with Christians. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Pangritz, Andreas. 2019. Bonhoeffer and the Jews. In *The Oxford Handbook of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Soulen, R. Kendall. 1996. *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Wright, Nicholas Thomas. 2013. *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2 vols.

Yerushalmi, Yosef Hayim. 1977. Response to Rosemary Ruether. In *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era?* Edited by Fleishner Eve. Hoboken: KTAV Publishing House.

John E. Phelan taught at North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago, Illinois, for twenty-five years after serving two churches as pastor. Phelan is also the author of several books, including *All God's People* and *Separated Siblings: An Evangelical Understanding of Jews and Judaism*. He has been involved in Jewish-Christian dialogue for many years.

Source: Religions 2022, 13(1), 59; <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13010059>.