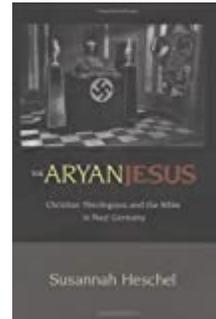




**Susannah Heschel.** *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008. 339 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-12531-2.



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## Purification

Susannah Heschel's superbly researched book, *The Aryan Jesus*, presents the reader with a new perspective on Christian antisemitic actions under the Third Reich. In this work, Heschel introduces us to the Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life, which opened its doors in Eisenach on May 6, 1939, under the academic direction of Walter Grundmann. At the inaugural speech, Grundmann, a professor of New Testament at the University of Jena, spoke of the need to rid Protestantism of its connections to Judaism, as Martin Luther had rid Protestantism of Catholicism. The institute's goal, from its very inception, was to "purify" Protestantism, the Bible, and especially Jesus. Protestant Christianity was to be redefined as an Aryan religion with Jesus as the first man to battle the "pernicious" influence of the Jews. Heschel's work, which represents years of intensive archival research, yields fruitful information that will help scholars of the Third Reich address the German Christian movement, with the institute representing one major area of their efforts to realign the Christian Churches into one Germanic, nazified Church.

The institute's work, beginning in 1939 and continuing throughout the war years, echoed Nazi propaganda. As Hitler's regime initiated the deportations, ghettoization, and mass murder of Jews, the institute provided a soothing balm for many German Christian consciences. Grundmann's center published countless papers, held numerous conferences, and revised hymnals as well as parts of the Bible. With each publication, German Christians were told that Jews were the aggressive enemies of the German people, just as they had been the mortal enemies of Jesus and his followers. Throughout its existence, the institute lent a moral credibility to National Socialist teachings on racial antisemitism and its many members used their institute connections to solidify their reputations as leading scholars of theology. Even it was disbanded, institute members were, generally speaking, allowed to continue their professional pursuits, despite the contribution their writings and rhetoric had made to a general climate of acceptance of the murderous regime.

The first step for the institute in 1939 was to eradicate Jesus's Jewish-ness. In perhaps the ultimate ex-

pression of supersession, institute members worked diligently to “prove” that Jesus of Galilee was not of Jewish descent, but was, in fact, the first antisemite and a proto-Nazi. Using the works of earlier writers such as Ernest Renan, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, and Friedrich Anderson (of the *völkisch* movement), the institute’s members were able to “purify” Jesus by transforming him into a heroic, Aryan idealized figure, devoid of “Jewish” qualities or characteristics. Assyriologists also joined in debates about Jesus’s Jewish origins; many of them argued that Galilee had been inhabited by a mixed population of both gentiles and Jews, and deemed Jesus a Galilean rather than a Jew. As Nazi antisemitic policies intensified, the institute took its twisted ideas and cooperated in the effort to erase all that was Jewish from Germany and from Christianity.

Next on the institute’s list of purification was the eradication of all traces of “Jewishness” in hymnals, the Bible, the catechism, and liturgical materials. Though this task was daunting, members were tireless in the conviction that they were working for the higher cause of the German *Volk*. Grundmann and his colleagues dedicated themselves to proving to Hitler that the German Christian churches could be politically useful in their ability to rally support for the Nazi cause. As the war progressed, institute members continued to stress that Germany was engaged in a life-or-death struggle against degenerate, demonic Jews. In this physical and spiritual war, the New Testament was the first element to be de-Judaized. Any sympathy for Jews had to be eliminated; Jesus emerged as a heroic, manly fighter who triumphed over a horrible death prepared at the hands of his enemies, the Jews. Despite wartime paper shortages and rationing, this “de-judaized” Bible sold over 200,000 copies. Worship also became an object of revision. Services became celebrations without supplication; hymns were militaristic, racist, and freed from “Jewish elements.” Even in the days before the invasion of the Soviet Union, Heschel notes, institute member Pastor Heinz Dungs stated publicly that “Germans were engaged in a final solution of the Jewish question and could no longer tolerate a Jewish-Christian spirit at prayer” (p. 118).

As Grundmann and his colleagues rooted out all that they thought was Jewish, they also began to incorporate Teutonic myths and rituals as harbingers of Christianity. In this way, Christianity and Teutonic ideals were depicted as compatible and united in their desire to re-

move all traces of Judaism and Jewishness from Germanic life. The antisemitic rhetoric of institute members only escalated as the fortunes of war turned against Germany. Its scholars now used inflammatory language, blaming the outbreak of war on the Jews and laying the problems of the war-torn world at the feet of the Jewish population. Anything condemned as degenerate, depraved, or destructive was linked to a Jewish conspiracy for world domination. The theologians proclaimed that Germans were engaged in an apocalyptic struggle to free the world from Jewish corruption.

Grundmann was the driving force behind the institute’s success. Heschel traces his early life and development as a theologian. His ability to convince others to join the institute is also a testament to the level of anti-Judaism already present in the minds of so many leading German theologians of the day. Heschel argues, quite convincingly, that many of members were attracted to National Socialism specifically because its antisemitism overlapped with their own preexisting racism. Heschel also uncovers the astonishing ways in which institute members, including Grundmann, evaded punishment at the end of the war by arguing that as experts on Judaism, they had not been engaged in antisemitic work. In these arguments, the institute’s work was portrayed as having defended the Christian church against all forms of attack (including from the Nazi government). Members wrote letters of exoneration for one another during denazification. Grundmann’s rehabilitation was remarkable; by 1954, he was flourishing as a trainer of religion teachers in Eisenach and as a secret informer for the Stasi.

Heschel’s work is beautifully written and densely packed with countless examples of the ways in which the institute’s theologians used their own anti-Judaic theology to support the regime’s antisemitic policies, to which they lent considerable support. Once the war had ended, most, if not all, institute members successfully hid behind the claim that churchmen were resisters against Nazism by definition. Beyond its information about the intellectual connections between Christian theology and Nazi ideology, then, Heschel’s book also reveals how willingly the postwar world accepted that misrepresentation of the institute’s history. She successfully exposes the truth behind the “purification” of Protestantism. The book will be essential reading for all scholars of the Third Reich and the role of religion in the National Socialist state.

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