



Hitler's Theologians: The Genesis of Genocide

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For almost twenty centuries...the church was the archenemy of the Jews—our most powerful and relentless oppressor and the worlds' greatest force for the dissemination of Anti-Semitic beliefs and the instigation of the acts of hatred. Many of the same people who operated the gas chambers worshiped in Christian churches on Sunday...The question of the complicity of the church in the murder of the Jews is a living one. We must understand the truths of our history.— Abraham Foxman, Anti-Defamation League ¹

Was Hitler Following the Teachings of Jesus?

Most Christians would say that Adolf Hitler was not a Christian because he did not follow the teachings of Jesus nor did he understand the meaning of the New Testament writings. Yet, in his own way, perverse though it was, he saw the genocide of the Jewish people as a “sacred” mission. Writing in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler said: “Today, I believe that I am acting in accordance with the will of the Almighty Creator: by defending myself against the Jew, I am fighting for the work of the Lord” [italics in the original].” In addition, there are those who would allege that it was not only Hitler’s personal “theology” but also two thousand years of anti-Semitism by the church in the name of Jesus that laid the foundation for the Holocaust.

Nazi anti-Judaism was the work of godless, anti-Christian criminals. But it would not have been possible without the almost two thousand years’ prehistory of ‘Christian’ anti-Judaism...—Hans Küng ²

It is a painful but inescapable truth that anti- Semitism, which seethes with hate, was spawned and nourished by Christianity, which reveres a Jewish prophet who preached love and compassion. . . .Two thousand years of Christian anti-Judaism...hardened hearts against Jews...This mind-set, deeply embedded in the Christian outlook, helps to explain why so many people were receptive to anti- Jewish propaganda. —Marvin Perry ³

From the standpoint of history, was it really Christian teaching that supplied the fuel for the crematoria? Did conservative Christian doctrine really pave the way for the poison that filled the showers? Is there anything in orthodox Christian theology that would lead Germany’s church leaders to advocate murdering six million Jews? Who were the heads of the church, the seminary instructors, and the spiritual leaders of Germany’s church in the 1930s? What “religion” were they really teaching? Could it be that a Germany that was leading the world in art, physics and literature—producing Mahler and Wagner, Uhlmann, Klaus Fuchs and Max Born—was sending the world down the road of genocidal mania? Could a Germany that was pioneering in the fields of theology, religious study and biblical scholarship be morally bankrupt? And how could those whose profession was to study God’s Word and lead pastors into God’s truth, based on the Hebrew Scriptures as well as the New Testament, condone or even advocate Hitler’s demonic course? Who were Hitler’s theologians? And what “Christianity” did they teach?

¹ Abraham Foxman, *Never Again: The Threat of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Harper-Rowe, 2004) pp. 74-75.

² Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian*, Edward Quinn, Transl. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976) p. 169.

³ Marvin Perry and Frederick Schweitzer, *Antisemitism: Myth and Hate from Antiquity to the Present* (New York: Palgrave, 2002) p. 3



Birth of the Modern Era

To understand the religious climate of a pre-Holocaust Germany (circa 1930s) it is helpful to re-visit the seventeenth century when the Modern Era dawned on Western Europe. The Age of Reason, also known as the Enlightenment and the Age of Rationalism,⁴ was a period in history when philosophers emphasized the use of reason as the best method of learning truth. Thinkers relied heavily on the scientific method to discover truth in all disciplines. Philosophers emphasized experimentation and careful observation.⁵ These modern thinkers believed that reason could be tested and was therefore reliable, but revelation (which claims to be God given) was beyond testing and therefore unreliable. Many believed that reason must “validate” the claims of the Bible for those claims to be true. John Locke (1632-1704) asserted that reason is “the candle of the Lord set up by Himself in men’s minds” and “must be our final judge and guide in everything.”⁶

The Age of Reason produced a generation of Bible scholars known as Rationalists. They argued that only through reason could we learn about God.

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834)

Friedrich Schleiermacher, called the founder of Liberal Protestantism, argued that God is unknowable. He taught that it is not possible to verify the historical events described in the Scriptures, such as the parting of the Red Sea, the Exodus from Egypt, or even the giving of the Ten Commandments. Therefore, according to him, faith is merely a “religious feeling.” He wrote, “...belief in God, and in personal immortality, are not necessarily a part of religion; one can conceive of religion without God, and it would be pure contemplation of the universe.”⁷ According to Schleiermacher, religious truth is subjective; it is not derived from the Scriptures but rather is relative to a person’s conscience. Consequently, religious principles of right and wrong are merely interpretations based on an individual’s perspective.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche carried reason’s critique of religion much further. In *Thus Spake Zarathustra* the protagonist proclaimed, “God is dead.” This was Nietzsche’s dramatic way of alleging that most people no longer believed in God. He lamented that civilization was left with a terrible void since religion no longer provided a basis for making moral choices. He put forth the idea of the *übermensch* (super human), who through his “will to power” could bring down false ideals and moral codes of his day. This *übermensch* could overcome nihilism by creating new or better ideals.

Criticizing the Jewish Scriptures

By the late nineteenth century Liberal Protestant Bible scholars regarded the historical accounts of both Israel and the life of Jesus as inaccurate. In 1906 Albert Schweitzer published *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, arguing that we can know very little about the real Jesus. Jesus’ life, the New Testament and even the Torah were cloaked in mythology. Schweitzer claimed that historians needed to “demythologize”

⁴ James Creech, “Age of Reason,” in *World Book Encyclopedia* (Chicago, IL: World Book Inc., 2002), [CD-ROM Ed.].

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Quoted in Elie Kedourie, “Nationalism.” (Praeger University Series, 1961) p. 26



the Bible—strip away the miracles and ask questions such as “who really wrote these books?” He maintained that only an historical method rather than a religious one was needed to get a verifiable biography of Jesus. A scientific approach to the Bible was developed, known as the historical-critical approach. In this approach, readers attempted to reconstruct what they believed was the original text. Important to note is that this method denied divine inspiration, rejected miracles, and presumed that the biblical text we have is a composite of editions and alterations by various parties with varying and unique interests.

Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918)

Julius Wellhausen was born in Westphalia, Germany. He earned his doctorate in theology at the University of Göttingen. After teaching theology for twelve years, he resigned his position because he began to doubt the authority of the Scriptures to teach religious truth. In 1882, he took a position at the University of Halle, teaching Middle-Eastern and Semitic languages. He applied the historical-critical approach to studying the Jewish Bible. Wellhausen proposed the Documentary Hypothesis, which argued that Moses did not write the first five books of the Bible. Rather, Wellhausen suggested that the Pentateuch is a composite originating from four sources that he designated as J, E, P and D. J stood for Jehovah and referred to those documents in which God is identified by his four-letter name. E represented those documents in which God was referred to as Elohim. P stood for the Priestly source used to identify those parts of the Torah that Wellhausen believed had been added by the Jewish priesthood. Finally, D stood for Deuteronomy, referring to those portions of the text that were repeated in the final book of the Torah. Wellhausen believed that the D source possibly originated in the era of a late Judean king. According to his hypothesis, different groups added portions of text, with each redaction reflecting that source’s human agenda and version of Israel’s history.

The Documentary Hypothesis quickly spread among Bible scholars in Central Europe. It eventually crossed the Atlantic and debuted at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Rabbinic scholars immediately protested what they perceived as an attack on the holiest books in Judaism. Solomon Schechter, the founder of Conservative Judaism, stated his concerns in a 1903 seminary address titled “Higher Criticism— Higher Anti-Semitism.” Schechter believed that the Documentary Hypothesis would lead to an attack on Judaism and ultimately an assault on the Jewish people. Jewish historian Marc Zvi Brettler summarized Schechter’s comments, which in hindsight seem rather prophetic:

[He] equated Wellhausen’s approach with “professional and imperial anti-Semitism,” calling it an “intellectual persecution” of Judaism.⁸

The Evolution of Religion

As historical-critical tools sought to explain textual origins, new theories such as those put forth in Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* attempted to explain human origins in purely scientific terms. Darwin alleged that humans were evolved from more primitive animal species. Theologians adopted his language and began explaining religion in terms of evolutionary forces as well—the “Evolution of Religion.” They reasoned that if modern man evolved from more primitive species, many of which are now extinct, then perhaps modern religion evolved from primitive religions, such as Judaism. The

⁸ Marc Z. Brettler, *How to Read the Bible* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2005) p. 4.



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corollary, based on natural selection, was that the “primitive” religion should also become extinct to make way for more evolved religion. If the source of the Hebrew Scriptures was not divine, then Judaism and her Scriptures were merely the products of anthropological evolutionary forces, acted out in ancient Semitic societies.

In 1875, Professor Robert Smith of Edinburgh, Scotland delivered a series of lectures titled “The Religion of the Semites.” Smith outlined the primitive origins of the Jewish beliefs as follows:

We have seen that ancient faiths must be looked on as matters of institution rather than of doctrines or formulated beliefs, and that the system of an antique religion was part of the social order under which its adherents lived...broadly speaking, religion was made up of a series of acts and observances, the correct performance of which was necessary to secure the favour of the gods or avert their anger. ⁹

In *The History of Israel and Judah*, Wellhausen predicted that Judaism and the Jewish people would become extinct:

The...emancipation [i.e. assimilation] of the Jews must inevitably lead to the extinction of Judaism wherever the process is extended beyond the political to the social sphere. For the accomplishment of this centuries may be required. ¹⁰

Following this progression, Liberal Christianity would take center stage.

Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930)

Adolf von Harnack, born in Estonia, earned his doctorate at the University of Leipzig. He taught church history at the University of Giessen and later at the University of Berlin. Over time he became convinced that Jesus was not divine. The main focus of Liberal Protestantism is the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. As one of its proponents, von Harnack tried to show that Jesus was a progressive teacher, but not divine. According to his theories, the god of the Hebrew Scriptures was a tribal war god, jealous for his subjects’ worship and waging war on his enemies. The Jewish belief that God required an atonement for sin was dismissed as merely stemming from the primitive semitic belief in a tribal god who demanded blood to satisfy his wrath. Von Harnack maintained that the Christian teaching that Jesus’ death atoned for sin was Hebrew in origin, obsolete, and should be discarded. Von Harnack’s views are not original. In the second century, the Gnostic Marcion taught that the god of the New Testament had defeated the war god of the Hebrew Scriptures. Marcion and many Gnostics urged the church to reject the Jewish Scriptures. Von Harnack asserted that:

To reject the Old Testament in the second century perhaps was a mistake which the great Church refused rightfully...but to conserve it after the nineteenth century as a canonical text in Protestantism, was the result of a religious and ecclesiastical paralysis. ¹¹

⁹ Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, Lecture II (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1894) p. 28.

¹⁰ Julius Wellhausen, *Sketch of the History of Israel and Judah*, Third Edition (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1891) pp. 201-203.

¹¹ Adolf Harnack, *Marcion: Das Evangelium Von Fremden Gott*, (Leipzig, Germany: J.C. Hinrichs, 1921) p. 248.



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By 1930, Liberal Protestant church leaders in Germany had come to believe that the Jewish people, like their Bible, had served their purpose and therefore the Jewish roots of Christianity were to be denied as well:

We must emphasize with all decisiveness that Christianity did not grow out of Judaism but developed in opposition to Judaism. When we speak of Christianity and Judaism today, the two in their most fundamental essence stand in glaring contrast to one another. There is no bond between them, rather the sharpest opposition. (Reich Bishop Ludwig Muller, 1934)

Church leaders endeavored to remove all Jewish influence from German society in both the political and religious spheres. Alfred Rosenberg, publisher of *Der Stürmer*, (the weekly Nazi newspaper most notorious for its anti-Semitic cartoons) was the link between nineteenth century Liberal Protestantism and Hitler's twentieth century Aryan agenda. Doris Bergen, professor of history at Notre Dame explains:

Alfred Rosenberg dubbed the Old Testament a collection of "stories of pimps and cattle traders"; but the high school religion teacher and German Christian agitator Reinhold Krause earned sustained applause in November 1933, when he repeated that phrase at a rally of twenty thousand people.¹²

It was in this setting that Liberal Protestant pastors founded the German Christian Movement in 1932. They wanted to create a "Reich" or "state" church that all German Protestant Christians would rally around; their symbol was a Christian cross with a swastika in the middle. They did not hold to a high view of Scripture; conversely they were devoted to eradicating Old Testament readings from their worship services and they even altered the New Testament so as to excise references to the Jewish people or worse, demonize them. They did not want Jews to believe in Jesus either— they saw all Jews as a cancer to be excised. Point nine of the German Christian Movement's 1932 platform stated:

In the mission to the Jews we see a serious threat to our Volkstrum (race). That mission is an entryway for foreign blood into the body of our Volk...We reject missions to the Jews [because of]...the danger of fraud and bastardization [of the German race].¹³

In 1939, they issued the Godesberg Declaration, which said, "Christianity is the irreconcilable religious opposite of Judaism." The declaration also announced the establishment of the Institute for Research into and Elimination of Jewish Influence in German Church Life.¹⁴

Conservative Protestants Respond

Conservative Protestants maintained that both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament were inspired by God, and they were incensed by the platform of the German Christian Movement and their advocacy for altering the Scriptures. They contended there was nothing "Christian" about the German Christian Movement. They saw the movement's agenda as a collapse both of faith and Judeo-Christian morals. In 1934, theologically conservative pastors and theologians founded the Confessing Church, a

¹² Doris L. Bergen, *The Twisted Cross*. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996) p. 21.

¹³ Doris L. Bergen, "Old Testament, New Hatreds: The Hebrew Bible and Anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany," *Sacred Text, Secular Times: The Hebrew Bible in the Modern World*, Leonard Greenspoon and Bryan LeBeau, eds. (Omaha, NE: Creighton University Press, 2000) pp. 35-46.

¹⁴ Bergen, *The Twisted Cross*, p. 24.



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movement broad enough to include Lutheran, Reformed and United churches of Germany. Committed to resisting the downward tide of the German Christian Movement, their theological underpinnings can be found in the Barmen Declaration written largely by Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth. This statement not only affirmed the key doctrines of the Christian faith, but also served as a protest against the Liberal Protestant Church that embraced Hitler's ideology. The declaration repudiated any other doctrine as false that made the church "an organ of the State" or that gave religious status to "ruling powers."

Notable Lutheran leaders such as Martin Niemoller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer also had a hand in crafting the Barmen Declaration. These theologians were devoted to belief in the inspiration and authority of both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. They were opposed to Hitler and his perversion of the Scriptures.

Conservative German church leaders such as Bonhoeffer publicly denounced Hitler and even plotted his assassination. As a result, he and many in the Confessing Church were executed. But the resistance was not limited to theologians and church leaders.

Yad Vashem contains the records of over 18,000 individuals deemed "Righteous Gentiles." These men and women risked their own safety and that of their families to oppose the Nazis and save Jewish lives. One of the most well-known among them was Corrie ten Boom, whose story was told in the book *The Hiding Place*. She and her family held to a conservative Christian theology and their faith led them to risk hiding Jews in their home. Eventually they ended up in a concentration camp. Others, like Diet Eman, joined the underground and fought in the Dutch resistance, risking their lives to stop Hitler and save our people from his evil.

Making Sense of it All

In looking back at the theology that marked the Modern Era, it becomes apparent that era ended with the Holocaust. Most historians conclude that the Holocaust was the lid on its coffin. After all, the Modern Era failed to lead humanity to a higher level but instead brought it to the depths of degradation. And Liberal Protestantism, which rejected the foundational beliefs of Christianity and instead embraced Hitler's ideology, was part and parcel of that failure. Richard Harries, Bishop of Oxford, in his popular work *After the Evil—Christianity and Judaism in the Shadow of the Holocaust*, points out that Hitler's ideology "was not only not Christian, it was anti-Christian."¹⁵

Though Hitler used Christian jargon to spout his venom, his actions opposed the teachings of both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. He certainly couldn't embrace the promise made to the first Jew, Abraham:

I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse. (Genesis 12:3)

Nor could Hitler acknowledge the words of the psalmist that the Jewish people would be set apart as God's prized possession:

¹⁵ Richard Harries, *After the Evil* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2003) p.14.



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For the Lord has chosen Jacob to be his own, Israel to be his treasured possession. (Psalm 135:4)

Nor could he admit that the New Testament makes God's commitment to the Jewish people clear:

Theirs [the Jewish people] is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! (Romans 9:4-5)

So what was Hitler's personal theology? Did he see himself as the *übermensch* (superman) espoused by Nietzsche 75 years earlier, the precursor of the master race? Some, like William Shirer, have indicated that Hitler was influenced by Nietzsche's philosophy. Writing in *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, Shirer, points out: "Hitler often visited the Nietzsche museum in Weimar and published his veneration for the philosopher by posing for photographs of himself staring in rapture at the bust of the great man." Michael Kalish in his research paper, "Friedrich Nietzsche's Influence on Hitler's Mein Kampf," makes a convincing case for this connection as well:

The underlying themes in Nietzsche and Hitler's philosophies are the importance of impulses and action for self-preservation, the danger of the clever Jew (i.e. the slave who has revaluated strong as evil and weak as good), and the prophesy of a new type of man that will question the Jewish values and return the glory of the blond beast.¹⁶

Hitler did not follow the biblical teachings of Christianity; nor did he emulate those theologians who held to the authority of the Scriptures. Instead, he burlesqued Christian teachings, twisting them to his own purposes. By using language that sounded familiar to Christians, he was able to pose as an adherent to the religion when in actuality he was a self-proclaimed pagan: "I am myself a heathen to the core."¹⁷

Hitler took advantage of a time in which people had learned to measure the Bible according to their own thoughts and perspectives, rather than the other way around. God was deemed unnecessary to religion. Reason and science, both important disciplines, were revered beyond anything that true reason or science would suggest or even tolerate. And science and reason proved to be cruel gods that produced heartless followers.

Hitler's theologians got it wrong. Their theology was fatally flawed. They denied the truth of the Hebrew and New Testament Scriptures. They denied that the Jewish people were special to God. They denied that Y'shua the Jew was God's way of salvation for all people. In their revised Bible, John 4:22, which originally read, "Salvation is from the Jews," was changed to read, "Jews are our misfortune,"¹⁸ What a sad irony! In the end, Hitler's theologians tragically missed the mark by denying the very people whom God chose to use to bring redemption, the Messiah Y'shua.

¹⁶ <http://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/marcuse/classes/133p/133p04papers/MKalishNietzNazi046.htm>

¹⁷ Harries, op.cit., p.14.

¹⁸ Sussannah Herschel: "Nazifying Christian Theology," Church History, Dec. 1994, Vol. 63, p.595.



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