

## CHAPTER 7

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# BONHOEFFER AND THE JEWS

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## INTRODUCTION

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DIETRICH BONHOEFFER was among the first theologians in 1933 to call for the Protestant church in Germany to join in solidarity with the Jews (cf. Bethge, 2000: 272). There were others like Friedrich Siegmund-Schultze, Elisabeth Schmitz, Wilhelm Vischer, and Karl Barth, all of whom had similarly opposed the antisemitic ideology and policies of the Nazi state and protested against the adoption of the 'Aryan paragraph' within the church. However Barth later confessed (on the occasion of the publication of Eberhard Bethge's biography of Bonhoeffer in 1967) that he had long since considered himself 'guilty' of not having expressed his solidarity with the Jews 'with equal emphasis during the Church struggle'. In particular, he noted that the *Barmen Declaration*, which he had drafted in 1934, omitted this issue entirely (Barth, 1971: 119; cf. Bethge, 1982: 58).

Bonhoeffer's attitude towards the Jews has been a controversial topic. While some have suggested that he was 'among the earliest and strongest on the Christian side to break fresh ground' for 'theology after the Holocaust' (Bethge, 1982: 45; cf. Gerlach, 1993: 420), others have argued that his theology reproduced the traditional Christian 'teaching of contempt' (Fleischner, 1975: 24; cf. Bethge, 1982: 47). Indeed, Franklin Littell famously concluded that 'the sad truth is that Bonhoeffer was much better than his theology' (Littell, 1996: 51).

In the context of such debate, William Jay Peck argued that Bonhoeffer's lived solidarity with the Jews can be understood as a sign of repentance for his earlier anti-Jewish theology and statements: 'Deeds must precede words. In theology deeds, examples, must display the message. Thus we might argue that Bonhoeffer intuitively sensed that his task was to overcome anti-Judaistic formulas in theology first with his life.' According

to this line of thinking, Bonhoeffer repented of his earlier theology 'in the only way in which he could take it back, by entering into solidarity with the victims of the Holocaust through his death' (Peck, 1981: 100). Indeed, Bethge himself suggested that 'there is no doubt that Bonhoeffer's primary motivation for entering active political conspiracy was the treatment of the Jews by the Third Reich' (Bethge, 1982: 76).

The debate around the tensions between Bonhoeffer's theology and action intensified following an unsuccessful attempt in 2000 to have him recognized as one of the 'righteous among the nations' at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem (Haynes, 2006: 15–18). Despite this failure, Richard Rubenstein has suggested that 'Bonhoeffer fully merits the accolade "righteous Gentile,"' arguing that paradoxically it was the same anti-Judaistic theological tradition that drove him into solidarity with Jewish victims of the Holocaust (Rubenstein, 2000: 41–4). And Stephen R. Haynes has suggested that decisions of Yad Vashem need not 'discourage us from speaking of Bonhoeffer the rescuer' (Haynes, 2006: 109).

## CONTEXT AND ACTION

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Eberhard Bethge observes that while Bonhoeffer grew up amidst assimilated and even baptized Jewish families in the Grunewald neighbourhood of Berlin and associated with Jews as a matter of course, yet the young Bonhoeffer 'did not establish links during the twenties with that Jewish revival' which has been so significant for contemporary religious and philosophical scholarship, 'centering around names such as Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, Eugen Rosenstock and Leo Baeck' (Bethge, 1982: 50–2). Bonhoeffer shared in a widespread Protestant ignorance of the theological thinking of his Jewish contemporaries: e.g. his treatment of the I–Thou (*Ich–Du*) relation in *Sanctorum Communio* (DBWE 1: 51–7) makes no reference to Martin Buber's earlier *Ich und Du* (Buber, 1923).

When the National Socialists came to power in 1933, Bonhoeffer sought ways to respond to this new government and its antisemitism. In this context, Victoria J. Barnett identifies four main areas of 'Bonhoeffer's activism and clear opposition to the Nazi anti-Jewish measures, as well as his commitment to help its victims' (Barnett, 2013: 221). These were: (1) his ecumenical activities and attempts to have European ecumenical leaders condemn Nazi measures; (2) his attempts in September of 1935 to mobilise the Berlin Steglitz Synod of the Confessing Church to condemn the Nuremberg laws and persecution of Jews; (3) his work on behalf of Jewish refugees, especially during his time in London (October 1933 to April 1935) and during his participation in the military conspiracy (e.g. Operation 7); and finally (4) his report with Friedrich Perels in October 1941 about Jewish deportations from Berlin (Barnett, 2013: 218–20). The question arises, then, as to whether these actions are more significant than the earlier theology.

## EARLY ACTIONS AND REACTIONS TO THE 'ARYAN PARAGRAPH' (1933)

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The boycott of Jewish businesses and the adoption of the 'Law for the Reconstitution of the Civil Service' with its so-called 'Aryan paragraph' in April 1933 provoked a number of reactions by leading figures in the Protestant church. Otto Dibelius, general superintendent of the Kurmark province of the Evangelical Church of the Old Prussian Union, justified the boycott of Jewish businesses in his weekly column 'Wochenschau': 'The government of the Reich has felt compelled to organize the boycott of Jewish businesses—in the correct perception that, because of the international relations of Jewry, the foreign agitation will probably cease the soonest when it becomes dangerous in economic terms' (cf. Pangritz, 2016: 163; translation mine). Even more radical were the German Christians, who campaigned for the application of the 'Aryan paragraph' to the Protestant church and were to win the church elections of 23 July 1933.

In this context, Bonhoeffer's essay 'The Church and the Jewish Question'—finished on 15 April 1933 and published in the journal *Der Vormarsch* in June 1933—can be regarded as an exceptional expression of solidarity with the persecuted Jews. James Kelley has presented the most careful assessment to date of this essay and its relevance for post-Holocaust theology (Kelley, 1995: 89–126). The essay famously includes the oft-quoted claim that in certain situations it might become necessary 'to throw oneself between the spokes of the wheel,' in order to stop political oppression and to rescue people in danger (DBWE 12: 365; translation altered; cf. DBWE 16: 541, fn. 10). However, the essay contains a number of theological ambiguities. Most obviously, the term 'Jewish question' suggested that the Jews were a problem requiring a solution by some 'government intervention' (Haynes, 2006: 67; cf. 57–62).

As published, Bonhoeffer's essay comprises two main sections, preceded by a short introduction and framed with quotations from Martin Luther (see DBWE 12: 361, fn. 1). The quotations suggest that Luther himself was positive towards the Jews and opposed antisemitism (cf. Edwin H. Robertson, 1991: 127), an obvious apologetic distortion: for example, there are selective quotations from Luther's late 'Admonition against the Jews' (1546) to suggest that he advocated for toleration for those Jews ready to be christianized, whereas the text is truly an exhortation to expel the Jews.

Bonhoeffer introduces his essay by recalling the 'fact, unique in history, that the Jew is subjected to special laws by the state, solely on the basis of his race and regardless of the religion to which he adheres,' and then posing two questions corresponding to the content of the essay's two sections. First: 'How does the church judge this action, and what is the church called upon to do about it?', and second: 'What are the consequences for the church's position towards the baptized Jews in its congregations?' (DBWE 12: 362)

The second section of the essay, dealing with the question of how the church should treat its members of Jewish descent, was drafted first; indeed much of it had originally

been presented to a circle of young pastors in Berlin, where it had provoked heated discussion (Bethge, 2000: 272). Bonhoeffer makes clear at the outset that the state has no right to intervene on this issue: 'A baptized Jew is a member of our church. For the church, the Jewish question is therefore different from what it is for the state.' The difference is based on the fact that '[f]rom the point of view of Christ's church, Judaism is never a racial concept but rather a religious one . . . it means the "people Israel"', a people constituted by 'God's law'. Accordingly, 'being a Jewish Christian is a religious and not a racial concept.' Therefore, Bonhoeffer maintains that there were 'Gentile Jewish Christians and Jewish Gentile Christians'. The meaning of this paradoxical thought becomes clear when Bonhoeffer contends that 'Jewish Christians are not people of Jewish race who have been baptized Christians, but rather *Jewish Christians* in the church's sense are those who see their belonging to the people of God . . . as determined by their observance of a divine law.' In contrast, 'Gentile Christians . . . see no other prerequisites for their belonging to the people of God . . . than their being called to it by God, through God's Word in Christ' (DBWE 12: 368). Evidently, Bonhoeffer uses the Lutheran distinction between law and gospel to align Jewish Christianity with the law and Gentile Christianity with the gospel. In this perspective, Bonhoeffer's close friend Franz Hildebrandt, in spite of his Jewish mother, was not a 'Jewish Christian' but a 'Gentile Christian' because he himself affirmed the Lutheran distinction of law and gospel.

Bonhoeffer continues using this Lutheran distinction in a highly paradoxical way to blame the German Christians for implementing a 'modern Jewish Christian type'. In particular, he insists that the demand for 'racial uniformity among the members of a congregation' by adopting an 'Aryan paragraph' perverts the 'Gentile Christian' church of the gospel into a 'Jewish Christian' church of the law. While it would be acceptable that they '*withdraw* from the Gentile Christian congregation', Bonhoeffer regards it as 'ecclesially impossible . . . to exclude those persons in the congregation who belong to the Jewish race from the congregation on the grounds that they disturb the legalistic Jewish Christian claim' of the German Christians (DBWE 12: 368f.; translation altered). While nothing would preclude Christians of Jewish origin voluntarily forming their own congregation, a 'compulsory exclusion of Gentile Christian Jews who are already members in the Gentile Christian ethnically German church . . . would always mean a genuine church schism . . .' Simply by making 'racial uniformity a church law to be fulfilled as a requirement for fellowship in the church,' the '*excluding* church community' would constitute itself as 'a *Jewish Christian* community' (DBWE 12: 369; translation altered).

The issue, Bonhoeffer claims, is not whether 'church members of German descent can support fellowship in the church with Jews,' but rather 'whether or not the church is still church,' i.e. a church 'where Jew and German together stand under God's Word.' A person who 'feels unable to continue in church fellowship with Christians of Jewish origin' may leave this church but, Bonhoeffer says, such a one 'is bringing about the Jewish Christian idea of a religion of law, that is, he is lapsing into a modern type of Jewish Christianity' (DBWE 12: 370).

The first part of the essay, likely added after the adoption of the 'Law for the Reconstitution of the Civil Service' on 7 April, asks how the church should behave in the

face of the new anti-Jewish state laws. On the basis of the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms (cf. DeJonge, 2016: 142–6), Bonhoeffer emphasizes that Protestant churches are ‘not encouraged to get involved directly in specific political actions of the state’ (DBWE 12: 362). Indeed, the church ought not to interfere with state action because ‘[h]istory is not made by the church but rather by the state.’ Bonhoeffer even concedes: ‘Without doubt one of the historical problems that must be dealt with by our state is the Jewish question, and without doubt the state is entitled to strike new paths in doing so.’ And he adds: ‘The church knows about the “moral” injustice that is necessarily involved in the use of force in certain concrete state actions. The church cannot primarily take *direct* political action . . . Even on the Jewish question today, the church cannot contradict the state *directly* and demand that it take any particular different course of action’ (DBWE 12: 363).

Nonetheless, Bonhoeffer emphasizes that the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms does not imply ‘that the church stand aside, indifferent to what political action is taken’ (DBWE 12: 363). Instead, he considers three levels of action the church has to take with respect to state policies. First, the church ‘can and must . . . keep asking the government whether its actions can be justified as *legitimate state* actions, that is, actions that create law and order, not lack of rights and disorder.’ Bonhoeffer emphasizes that ‘the church will have to put this question with the utmost clarity today in the matter of the Jewish question.’ Generally speaking, both situations of ‘*too little* law and order or *too much* law and order compel the church to speak.’ Referring to the situation of the Jews, he explains that there is ‘too little law and order wherever a group of people is deprived of its rights.’ Although Bonhoeffer regards ‘the concept of rights’ as ‘subject to historical transformations,’ he is convinced that ‘a step backward . . . would be the expression of a lawless state.’ On the other hand, ‘too much law and order . . . would mean the state developing its use of force to such a degree as to rob the Christian faith of its right to proclaim its message’ (DBWE 12: 364). Such claims undergird the criticisms Bonhoeffer makes of state interference in the church later in the essay.

A second level of church action in the face of state policies, Bonhoeffer says, involves ‘service to the victims of the state’s actions.’ This clearly refers to the situation of the Jews in the Nazi state. He continues: ‘The church has an unconditional obligation toward the victims of any societal order, even if they do not belong to the Christian community’ (DBWE 12: 364). This sentence makes clear that it would be a mistake to interpret Bonhoeffer’s essay as restricting solidarity solely to baptized Jews: church membership is irrelevant when solidarity with the victims of state policies is required.

The most revolutionary aspect of the essay, breaking with traditional Lutheran teaching, must be seen in the third possible level of church action in face of the state. Here, the task is ‘not just to bind up the wounds of the victims beneath the wheel but to throw oneself between the spokes of the wheel’ (DBWE 12: 365; translation altered). Bonhoeffer emphasizes that such church action moves beyond the limits of the framework of the two kingdoms and becomes ‘direct political action.’ This option should be taken only ‘if the church sees the state to be failing in its function of creating law and order.’ Again, Bonhoeffer speaks about two kinds of failure: first, where law and order atrophy and

groups of citizens are deprived of their rights; second, where there is a hypertrophy of law and order, whereby the state overreaches so as to disrupt the church and restrict its proclamation. The first refers to discriminatory laws against the Jews, the second refers to the threat of an 'obligatory exclusion of baptized Jews from our Christian congregations or a ban on missions to the Jews'. In either case, Bonhoeffer holds, 'the church would find itself in *statu confessionis*, and the state would find itself in the act of self-negation.' Even then, the church's conflict with the state would be 'the paradoxical expression of its ultimate recognition of the state', i.e. an attempt 'to protect the state from itself and to preserve it' (DBWE 12: 366).

With respect to the societal context, Bonhoeffer is convinced that 'the Jewish question poses the first two possibilities' of ecclesial action in face of the state 'as challenges of the hour, which it has a duty to meet.' Regarding the 'necessity for immediate political action by the church', however, he suggests that it should be 'decided by an "evangelical council" as and when the occasion arises' (DBWE 12: 366f.).

In spite of the fact that Bonhoeffer's essay must be read as a call for solidarity with the Jews in Nazi Germany (Bethge, 2000: 273; cf. Gerlach, 1993: 56), its theology is highly ambiguous. This can be seen from the handwritten headings Bonhoeffer applied to the two sections in the final draft typescript, headings not reproduced in the published version in 1933: '*Ahasver peregrinus*' [Wandering Ahasuerus] and '*Modernes Judenchristentum*' [Modern Jewish Christianity]. While the first heading suggests that Bonhoeffer regarded the Jewish history of suffering as a divine punishment because the Jews allegedly had crucified the Messiah, the second blames the German Christians for representing a modern type of Jewish Christianity, because they have reintroduced a new (racial) law into the church of the gospel. The sense of both headings can be traced back to anti-Judaistic Lutheran traditions (cf. Pangritz, 2013: 95–102).

The ambiguity of his position becomes obvious in the last paragraph of the first section, supplemented in the printed version of the essay. Here Bonhoeffer—with reference to Luther's *Table Talk*—emphasizes that '[t]he church of Christ has never lost sight of the idea that the "chosen people," which hung the Redeemer of the world on the cross, must endure the curse of its action in long-drawn-out suffering.' To be sure, in contrast to Luther Bonhoeffer does not think that it is the task of the authorities to execute God's wrath against the Jews: 'We know that no state in the world can come to terms with this enigmatic people, because God has not yet come to terms with it. Every new attempt to "solve" the "Jewish question" comes to grief because of the meaning of this people for salvation history, and yet such attempts have to be made again and again.' However Bonhoeffer is convinced that the history of Jewish suffering will only end 'in the final homecoming of the people Israel to its God'—that is, 'in Israel's conversion to Christ'. And this event, Bonhoeffer insists with reference to Gottfried Menken, will 'be the end of its people's sufferings' (DBWE 12: 367).

While no doubt well intended, such emphasis on conversion and the Christian mission to the Jews still reflected and reaffirmed problematic Christian attitudes towards Judaism as deficient and at best tolerable as a precursor of Christianity (cf. Zerner, 1999: 196).

At this stage, Bonhoeffer combines traditional ‘teaching of contempt’ with a call for Christian repentance: ‘The church’s knowledge of the curse that weighs upon this people takes it far beyond any sort of cheap moralizing. Instead, it knows itself as the church that is unfaithful to its Lord over and over again, and that it shares in the humiliation that it sees in this outcast people, and full of hope it views those Israelites who have already come home, who have come to faith in the one true God in Christ . . . (DBWE 12: 367).

Taken as a whole, Bonhoeffer’s essay certainly calls for the church to intervene on behalf of the Jews, and yet a ‘theological anti-Judaism clearly undercuts his call to help the victims and even resist the state’ (Barnett, 2013: 225). Nonetheless, as one commentator notes, without ‘his problematic readings of his theological inheritance,’ Bonhoeffer ‘would have had no archimedean point with which to oppose Hitler and National Socialism’ (Rubenstein, 2000: 41).

## DISCUSSIONS IN THE CHURCH ABOUT THE ‘ARYAN PARAGRAPH’

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In the summer of 1933 Bonhoeffer repeated his warning against the impending introduction of an ecclesial ‘Aryan paragraph’. In a memorandum written in July of that year he states that ‘the Aryan paragraph in the form contained in the first program of the “German Christians” is a “*status confessionis*” for the Church’ and repeats his charge that the German Christians are putting the church of the gospel ‘under the Law’ and thus transforming it into ‘a Church of Jewish Christian type’ (DBWE 12: 372).

In the theses on ‘The Aryan Paragraph in the Church,’ drafted and discussed during the preparations for the Old Prussian General Synod of 5–6 September 1933, Bonhoeffer repeats the idea that ‘if the church excludes the Jewish Christians, it is setting up a law with which one must comply in order to be a member of the church community, namely, a racial law.’ Accordingly, he continues: ‘A church today that excludes Jewish Christians has itself become a Jewish Christian church and has fallen away from the gospel, back to the law’ (DBWE 12: 426). Problematically, by blaming the German Christians for being in reality ‘Jewish Christians,’ the attribute ‘Jewish’ is in effect being used as an invective. Consequently, Bonhoeffer’s insistence on the unity of ‘Jews’ and ‘Germans’ within the church simultaneously normalizes anti-Jewish prejudices among the ‘German church people’: ‘Here, where the Jewish Christian whom I don’t like is sitting next to me among the faithful, this is precisely where the church is’ (DBWE 12: 428).

In August 1933 Bonhoeffer participated in the attempt to formulate a Lutheran confession against the German Christians, the so-called Bethel Confession. The first draft of its article ‘The Church and the Jews’ (cf. Busch, 2003: 47–50) had been contributed by the Reformed theologian Wilhelm Vischer (cf. Carter, 1987: 81, 255) and was then revised on the basis of discussions between Vischer, Bonhoeffer, and Georg Merz. Detailed

comparison of Vischer's original draft with the 'August version' (reproduced in DBWE 12: 416–24) shows the latter text represented a compromise between Bonhoeffer's Lutheran and Vischer's Reformed approaches (cf. Pangritz, 2015: 71–94).

While Vischer approached the question from the perspective of the doctrine of predestination according to which Israel is God's chosen people whom God remains faithful to in his 'world politics' (Busch, 2003: 45), Bonhoeffer aimed to give the text a more Lutheran shape. As Merz later recalled, Bonhoeffer's work on the text was 'completely in favour of "the Lutheran way"' (Carter, 1987: 152); he had insisted on inserting the distinction between 'law and gospel' into the chapter, a move that led to the problematic definition of Jewish Christians as 'legalistic' (DBWE 12: 420). The resulting polemical comparison of the 'Aryan paragraph' as a 'racial law' with the alleged 'legalism' of Jewish Christianity is scarcely serviceable since the 'Aryan paragraph' was not a 'religious', but a political law, the purpose of which was not to prevent a 'legalistic' heresy, but to exclude Christians of Jewish descent from the church.

When the Bethel Confession was considerably altered again before its final publication later in 1933, Bonhoeffer and Vischer both refused to sign. According to Bethge it was chiefly the fact that 'Vischer's chapter on the Jewish question' was 'watered down' that prevented Bonhoeffer from agreeing with the final version (Bethge, 2000: 303).

After the 'brown' synod of the Old Prussian Church (5–6 September 1933) adopted an 'Aryan paragraph', the Pastor's Emergency League was founded to demonstrate solidarity 'with non-Aryan colleagues.' The League arose out of a protest filed with the church authorities, drafted and signed by Bonhoeffer and Martin Niemöller. Their appeal contended that while according to the church's confession the teaching office was only tied to authorized vocations, 'the Aryan clause of the new Church Civil Service Law has given rise to a legal situation that directly contradicts this fundamental principle of the confession .... We therefore demand the repeal of this law' (Bethge, 2000: 306–9). Bonhoeffer wrote to Barth about this matter, seeking advice regarding the practical consequences of a '*status confessionis*' (cf. DBWE 12: 164–6). In reply Barth recommended assuming 'a highly active, polemical position of waiting', instead of breaking with the state church and forming a 'Free Church' as Bonhoeffer himself had suggested (in DBWE 12: 168).

Responding to a proposal from Bonhoeffer, when the World Alliance met in Sofia, Bulgaria, in late September 1933, it resolved to deplore 'the fact that the State measures against the Jews in Germany have had such an effect on public opinion that in some circles the Jewish race is considered a race of inferior status.' In particular, it protested 'against the resolution of the Prussian General Synod and other Synods which apply the Aryan clause of the state to the Church, putting serious disabilities upon ministers and church officers who by chance of birth are non-Aryan' (cf. Bethge, 2000: 315). The impact of these activities became evident at the National Synod in Wittenberg on 27 September 1933 where, even as it elected the German Christian candidate, Ludwig Müller, as Reich bishop, it did not discuss the issue of whether the 'Aryan paragraph' should be applied to the church (cf. Barnes, 1999: 119).



## FAILED REACTIONS TO THE ‘NUREMBERG LAWS’ AND NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE OLD TESTAMENT (1935)

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Bonhoeffer was disappointed that the treatment of the Jews in the racist ‘Nuremberg Laws’ of 16 September 1935 did not become an issue at the Old Prussian confessing synod in Berlin-Steglitz later that same month. In this context the memorandum ‘On the Situation of German non-Aryans’ by Elisabeth Schmitz, earlier attributed to Marga Meusel (Bethge, 2000: 488; cf. Gerlach, 1993: 143–5), should be mentioned (Schmitz, 1999: 218–61). In her memorandum, completed in mid-September 1935, Schmitz urges the Confessing Church to uncompromising solidarity with the persecuted Jews:

The fact that there can be people in the Confessing church who dare assume that they are entitled, even called, to preach God’s justice and mercy to the Jews in the present historical situation when their present sufferings are our crime, is a fact that must fill us with icy fear. Since when has the evil-doer had the right to pass off his evil deed as the will of God?

(Schmitz, 1999: 246; translation in Bethge, 2000: 488f.).

According to Bethge this passage ‘clearly presses toward a renunciation of the mission to Jews’ (Bethge, 1982: 73), and the fact that ‘Bonhoeffer sent a copy of the memorandum to his friend Julius Rieger in London’ may indicate that he identified himself with Schmitz’s position (Bethge, 2000: 489).

Also relevant here is Bonhoeffer’s famous statement that ‘only the person who cries out for the Jews may sing Gregorian chants’ (cf. Bethge, 1982: 71; translation altered). As this statement has only been handed down orally, however, it is difficult to reconstruct its original context or precise meaning. Bethge came to date the remark to late 1935 and so argued that it should be interpreted as a reaction to the ‘Nuremberg Laws’ and to the failure of the Steglitz synod to protest (Bethge, 1982: 71).

During Bonhoeffer’s directorship of the Confessing Church seminary in Finkenwalde, a shift in his theological evaluation of the Old Testament law is apparent. Arising from lectures given at Finkenwalde, *Discipleship* interprets God’s grace as ‘costly grace,’ i.e., grace with ethical consequences (DBWE 4: 45). Likewise, faith in Christ and obedience to God’s law are drawn closely together: ‘*Only the believers obey, and only the obedient believe*’ (DBWE 4: 63). Christ is thus not separated from the law, but is the one who ‘sets the law of the Old Covenant into force’ and brings it to ‘fulfilment’ (DBWE 4: 116–18). Here, a christological hermeneutic renders the Old Testament law a witness to Christ. Notably, although Bonhoeffer’s declaration that ‘the disciples are bound to the Old Testament law’ (DBWE 4: 116) is provocative within a Lutheran context (cf. Bethge, 2000: 565), his ‘refusal to relinquish the law does not ensure a positive assessment of its

role in Judaism' (Haynes, 2006: 90). Indeed, the polemics against the alleged hypocrisy of the Pharisees continues in *Discipleship* and *Ethics* indicating that 'attention to the Old Testament as Scripture... does not by itself represent an opening to Judaism' (Haynes, 2006: 86).

## THE KRISTALLNACHT POGROM, THE DEPORTATIONS OF THE JEWS, AND ETHICS (1938–43)

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The persecution of the Jews in Nazi Germany reached a new nadir with the *Kristallnacht* pogrom on 9–10 November 1938. Bonhoeffer, then teaching in remote Pomerania, travelled to Berlin to get more detailed information. When his candidates in Köslin discussed the event with him a few days later, he had 'turned in a most decisive way against making any connections between the event and a curse on the Jews because of the crucifixion of Christ,' virtually rejecting 'any punishment theory' (Bethge, 1982: 74f.). It seems that it was at this time that Bonhoeffer underlined the verse in Psalm 74:8—'they burned all the meeting places of God in the land'—in the Bible that he 'used for prayer and meditation... and wrote beside it "9.11.38"' (Bethge, 2000: 607).

In a circular letter to the Finkenwalde students written a few days later, Bonhoeffer inserted the sentence: 'In the last few days, I have thought much about Ps. 74, Zech. 2:8, Rom. 9:4–5, and 11:11–15. That leads deeply into prayer' (DBWE 15: 84). According to Bethge this combination of biblical quotations indicates Bonhoeffer's reaction, 'stimulating a complete theology of Israel in contrast to the time, and communicating his own involvement as well' (Bethge, 1995: 65). In other words, the experience of the *Kristallnacht* pogrom was a turning point for Bonhoeffer, one which eventually led him to join the military conspiracy against Hitler (cf. Bethge, 1982: 75f.).

Because of the nature of the conspiracy, there are very few references to the Jews in Bonhoeffer's later writings. Nonetheless, what references there are confirm that his theological perspective regarding Jews had changed after 1938. This is apparent in Bonhoeffer's love for the Psalms as the 'Prayerbook of the Bible', and his suggestion that Psalm 119 expresses 'joy in the law' (DBWE 5: 164). Although he continued to read the Old Testament christologically, two manuscripts of his *Ethics* are also revealing with respect to Jewish–Christian relations.

In 'Heritage and Decay', drafted in 1940 and revised in the autumn of 1941, Bonhoeffer appears to have abandoned the theology of curse in favour of a more 'Barthian' perspective grounded in election (DBWE 6: 103–33). Originally, Bonhoeffer wrote that the historical fact of the appearance of Jesus Christ 2,000 years ago joins us to a heritage that reaches back even 'before the appearance of Jesus Christ into the people Israel', so that 'Western history is by God's will inextricably bound up with the people Israel.'

Revising the text in 1941 he noted in the margin that the inextricable bond between the history of the West and the people Israel is to be understood 'not just genetically but in a genuine, unceasing encounter' (DBWE 6: 105; translation altered). Bonhoeffer wanted to avoid the view that the church is related to Israel only historically. Rather, Christians should engage in an ongoing dialogue with Jews because, as Bonhoeffer says—citing Romans 11:22, 'see the kindness and the severity of God'—'the Jews keep open the question of Christ; they are the sign of God's free, gracious election and of God's rejecting wrath.' At the end, he draws out the present significance: 'Driving out the Jew(s) from the West must result in driving out Christ with them, for Jesus Christ was a Jew' (DBWE 6: 105; translation altered). This passage is one of the most important in Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* for Jewish-Christian relations (cf. Peck, 1973: 158), not least because it overcomes the ambiguities of 'The Church and the Jewish Question': the idea of 'a genuine, unceasing encounter' between Christians and Jews seems to renounce the earlier call for a continuing Christian mission to the Jews.

The editors of the critical edition of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* note that it was during the night of 16/17 October 1941 that 'the mass deportation of Jews from Berlin residences began' (DBWE 6: 105, fn. 9). Against this background, Bonhoeffer's marginal additions can be seen as a response to the deportations. This becomes even more compelling given that in late October 1941 Bonhoeffer and Friedrich Justus Perels wrote two reports for Hans von Dohnanyi 'On the Mass Deportation of Jewish Citizens' and 'On the Evacuation of "Non-Aryans"' (DBWE 16: 225–7; 227–9). Dohnanyi planned to share the reports with certain generals close to the conspiracy who would be 'pressed into action if and when the worst actually happened' (Bethge, 1982: 81f.).

Bonhoeffer's 1941 revisions of 'Heritage and Decay' should also be understood in relation to Barth's influence: in part, they relate to the 'doctrine of Israel' that Barth had developed in his doctrine of God as a paraphrase of Romans 9–11 (Barth, 1942: 215–336). Here Barth uses Rom. 11:17–22—the same verses that Bonhoeffer refers to in his margin comments—to provide a christological basis for solidarity with the Jews. Barth writes:

Whoever has Jesus Christ in faith cannot wish *not* to have the Jews. He must have them *along with* Jesus Christ as His ancestors and kinsmen. Otherwise he cannot have even the Jew *Jesus*. Otherwise with the Jews he rejects Jesus Himself. This is what is at stake . . . when it has to be demanded of Gentile Christians that they should not approach any Israelite without the greatest attention and sympathy  
(Barth, 1942: 318f.; translation mine).

Bonhoeffer's very wording invokes Barth's doctrine of 'God's gracious election' (*Gottes Gnadenwahl*), a term purposed to overcome the traditional understanding of double predestination: when God in his mercy chooses 'reprobation, perdition and death' for himself in Jesus Christ, no human being can be regarded as lost (Barth, 1942: 177). Therefore, the Jews cannot be regarded any longer as rejected, as had been the case in traditional teaching. When Bonhoeffer appeals to 'God's free, gracious

election' in relation to the relationship of the Christian West to the Jews he is drawing on Barth in this way.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, when Bonhoeffer revised his manuscript in autumn 1941 (cf. DBWE 6: 471 [Appendix 2]) Barth's discussion of Israel in *Church Dogmatics* II/2 had not yet been published (cf. Haynes, 2006: 184, fn. 91). Indeed, it was only when Bonhoeffer visited Barth in Switzerland in May 1942 that he accessed the page proofs (DBWE 16: 276). Nonetheless, it is likely that Bonhoeffer had already spoken with Barth about the situation of the Jews in Germany during earlier visits in spring and September 1941 (DBWE 16: 219). And he likely knew of Barth's statement on the occasion of the *Kristallnacht*, in the speech 'The Church and the Political Question of Today' (December 1938), that '[w]hoeever rejects the Jews and persecutes them, rejects and persecutes the one who died for the sins of the Jews and only thereby for our sins' (Barth, 1948: 89f.). Bonhoeffer also may have been aware of Barth's speech, 'Our Church and Switzerland in present times' (November 1940), in which he uses language anticipating Bonhoeffer's margin notes in 'Heritage and Decay'. There, Barth claims that the 'most inward core of the world empire ascending today' consists of

hate against and rejection [*Verstoßung*] of the Jews . . . . However, the Son of Man, who was the Son of God, was a Jew . . . . The very fact that we cannot reject [*von uns stoßen*] God's salvation, that has come precisely to the Jews and from the Jews to us, makes it impossible for us to conform to the present world empire. On the same grounds we cannot participate in all the remaining inhumanities of this world empire  
(Barth, 1948: 175; translation mine).

This perspective also has ethical implications in that it entails the recognition that the traditional 'teaching of contempt' had had disastrous consequences, including the deportation and extermination of the Jews. This led Bonhoeffer to acknowledge that a 'reversal of the traditional theory of rejection' is necessary (Klappert, 1982: 97; translation mine). In this respect Bonhoeffer even goes beyond Barth. His phrase about the 'Jews' keeping 'open the question of Christ' (DBWE 6: 105) is revolutionary. As Kelley boldly interprets the passage:

According to this view, the Jews' questioning what Christians believe is the essential other side of their faith. The impossible expulsion of the Jews would destroy Christianity itself, since Christ himself was a Jew. It would also remove 'the sign' of the necessary dialogue of commitment and doubt which is essential to faith  
(Kelley, 1989: 89).

<sup>1</sup> This is reinforced in the original German. The English 'driving out the Jew(s) from the West' has been used to translate '*Verstoßung d. Juden aus dem Abendland*' (DBW 6: 95). While the translation obviously alludes to the expulsion of the Jews, Bonhoeffer does not just speak of *Vertreibung* (i.e. 'expulsion' or 'driving out'). Rather, he uses the term '*Verstoßung*', which clearly places these historical events in a theological perspective. In particular, Luther had earlier used the verb *verstoßen* in his translation of Rom. 11:1, which the New English Bible translates: 'Has God rejected his people? I cannot believe it!' If Bonhoeffer's term '*Verstoßung*' had been rendered into English as 'rejection', this would more clearly signal that he sees the deportations as a consequence of the 'teaching of contempt'.

This perspective should not simply be dismissed because it allegedly reproduces the ‘witness-people myth’ (Haynes, 2006: 69–95, 145–7). What Haynes calls the ‘witness-people myth’ will remain indispensable as long as the Bible has any relevance to theology, because it is closely related to the conception of Israel as God’s Chosen People. Theologically, it makes a difference whether the Jews are denigrated as a people cursed by God in accordance with the traditional ‘teaching of contempt,’ or whether they are respected as the people of the unbroken covenant.

A second manuscript from Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics* also displays developments in his understanding of the Jewish–Christian relationship. The text ‘Guilt, Justification, Renewal,’ drafted in 1941 (cf. DBWE 6: 134–45, 471 [Appendix 2]), contains a confession of guilt for ‘what the Christian individual . . . and what his church has wrongly done or failed to do in the situation of Nazi Germany.’ Bonhoeffer organizes the confession along the lines of the Ten Commandments. Regarding the prohibition against killing, he writes:

The church confesses that it has witnessed the arbitrary use of brutal force, the suffering in body and soul of countless innocent people, that it has witnessed oppression, hatred, and murder without raising its voice for the victims and without finding ways of rushing to help them. It has become guilty of the weakest and most defenseless brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ (DBWE 6: 139).

The editors of the critical edition of *Ethics* point out that ‘[t]he phrase about the “brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ” was added later in order to make the reference, especially to the Jews, unmistakably clear’ (DBWE 6: 140, fn. 25). According to Bethge, this was ‘the first reference in the circles of the Confessing Church to Jews (in general) as brothers [and sisters] in the full sense, just when they were on their way to destruction.’ He further suggests that Bonhoeffer wanted to show his ‘deep solidarity with the victims of the Holocaust’ but also a ‘self-imposed restraint’ by speaking this way, observing thereby ‘a certain respect for distance . . . Only if atoned for, only if accepted by “those brothers”, may permission be granted to say indeed “our brothers”’ (Bethge, 1982: 80f.).

Bethge’s conclusion may be overdrawn, but it is nonetheless true that while writing this confession Bonhoeffer had entered into solidarity with Jews through ‘concrete actions’ (Bethge, 1982: 81), as indicated in the two reports about the deportations of Jews from Berlin mentioned above (DBWE 16: 225–9). In his essay on “Personal” and “Objective” Ethos, probably written in 1942, Bonhoeffer asked whether ‘the church [is] merely to pick up the victims, or must the church take hold of the spokes of the wheel itself?’ (DBWE 16: 541). Although the Confessing Church remained unwilling to enter into direct political action, Bonhoeffer sensed that it was time ‘to throw oneself between the spokes of the wheel’ (DBWE 12: 365; translation altered). Relevant here is Bonhoeffer’s involvement in ‘Operation 7,’ a successful attempt to smuggle a number of people of Jewish descent into Switzerland (cf. Meyer, 1993: 70–82); financial irregularities related to this operation eventually led to Bonhoeffer’s arrest and imprisonment (cf. Barnes, 1999: 125).

## THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON JEWISH SUFFERING, 1943/4

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Given the conditions of imprisonment, it is unsurprising that no statements regarding the Jews can be found in Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Nevertheless, attempts have been made to interpret some of these writings—especially those where suffering is reflected upon in theological terms—in a way that has far reaching implications for the Jewish-Christian relationship. Though speculative, some of these interpretations should be taken seriously.

First, we need to recognize Bonhoeffer's intensified orientation towards the Old Testament. On the second Sunday in Advent 1943, he writes to Eberhard Bethge: 'I notice more and more how much I am thinking and perceiving things in line with the Old Testament.' Alluding to the ineffability of God's name according to Jewish tradition, he continues: 'Only when one knows that the name of God must not be uttered may one sometimes speak the name of Jesus Christ . . . Only when one accepts the law of God as binding for oneself may one perhaps sometimes speak of grace . . . Whoever wishes to be and perceive things too quickly and too directly in New Testament ways is to my mind no Christian' (DBWE 8: 213). Bonhoeffer's call for a 'religionless Christianity' in 'a world come of age'—i.e. a Christianity 'that has to detach itself from privilege and triumphalism' (Barnett, 2013: 234)—has to be understood in line with the Old Testament: 'That's the way it is in the Old Testament, and in this sense we don't read the New Testament nearly enough in the light of the Old' (DBWE 8: 367).

Writing 'Thoughts on the Day of Baptism' for his godson in May 1944, Bonhoeffer claims that, preoccupied with its survival, the church 'has become incapable of bringing the word of reconciliation and redemption to humankind and to the world', such that one day 'Christian thinking, talking, and organizing must be born anew'. Until that time the 'Christian cause will be a quiet and hidden one, but there will be people who pray and do justice and wait for God's own time'. And the sermon ends by quoting Proverbs 4:18, emphasizing the justice of the law: 'The path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day' (cf. DBWE 8: 389f.).

While simply 'acknowledging the necessity for Christians to retain the Old Testament . . . and to learn from it how to understand the revelation in Jesus Christ is not tantamount to appreciation for . . . Judaism' (Haynes, 2006: 105), Bonhoeffer further relates his rediscovery of the Old Testament to 'the Israelites': 'That the Israelites *never* say [!] the name of God aloud is something I often ponder, and I understand it increasingly better' (DBWE 8: 189). Here, the present tense of 'say' seems to indicate that Bonhoeffer is thinking of contemporary Jews. In any case, while in his earlier reading he found 'Christ in the Old Testament,' by the end, Bethge claims, 'he tried to understand Christ only from the Old Testament' (Bethge, 1982: 88). In the letter of 18 July 1944, just two days before the failed coup d'état, we read: 'That is "μετάνοια" . . . allowing oneself to be pulled into walking the path that Jesus walks, into the messianic event, in which Isa. 53

is now being fulfilled!' (DBWE 8: 480) Bringing together the messianic passion and contemporary events, Bonhoeffer here suggests that Isaiah 53 is 'now' being fulfilled 'in the representative suffering of Israel for the nations' such that, in this way, the Jews really 'keep open the question of Christ' (Bethge, 1982: 84f.). Given that Jewish tradition identifies the suffering servant of God with the very people of Israel, Bethge suggests that perhaps Bonhoeffer 'was nearer to Jewish tradition than he knew himself' (Bethge, 1982: 87; cf. Klappert, 1982: 117–20). When, finally, in his 'Outline for a Book' from August 1944, Bonhoeffer criticizes the Confessing Church as a 'Church defending itself' with 'no risk taking for others' (DBWE 8: 500) he once again invokes Prov. 31:8 ('Speak out for those who cannot speak') to suggest that 'the church is church only when it is there for others' (DBWE 8: 503). As Klappert comments, this means concretely that the 'Church for others' involves 'showing solidarity above all with the *Jews*' (Klappert, 1982: 98; translation mine).

## CONCLUSION

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Bonhoeffer was not the only one to demand ecclesial solidarity with the Jews in the years of the Nazi rule in Germany. Rather, he was part of a network of theologians who were concerned about the so-called 'Jewish Question' and who felt it necessary to revise the theological tradition in this respect. Indeed, the theological anti-Judaism inherent in the Lutheran tradition had initially made it difficult for Bonhoeffer to overcome the 'teaching of contempt'. As we have seen, the traditional conviction that the Jewish people had been rejected by God and the Lutheran distinction between law and gospel rendered his essay 'The Church and the Jewish question' theologically ambiguous, making a recognition of the continuing relevance of God's covenant with Israel as God's chosen people very difficult. It is only in the manuscript 'Heritage and Decay' in his *Ethics* that Bonhoeffer displays a more positive theological understanding of God's election of Israel:

Christian humanism alone... does not explain Bonhoeffer's decision to join the resistance.... Bonhoeffer's path to resistance was accompanied by a deep-seated conviction that Jewish suffering held unique significance for Christians and called for a singular response (Haynes, 2006: 140).

Although Bonhoeffer's vision of Jews as a mirror of election and judgment in his *Ethics* is still 'rooted in the same mythological structure from which curse theology emerged' (Haynes, 2006: 101), whether the witness of this people is seen as a sign of God's wrath or interpreted messianically makes for a crucially important difference. It seems that in his *Letters and Papers from Prison* Bonhoeffer finally had come to the intuition that the fate of the Jews in Europe represented a challenge that required a revision of the christological centre of Christian theology in light of the Old Testament. Indeed, 'for Bonhoeffer the Jew is always brother before being other' (Haynes, 2006: 142).

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