

Did the Nazis rewrite the Bible?

Russell Grigg

In 1930s Germany, pro-Nazi Christians formed the German Christian movement, a liberal faction that was vigorously anti-Semitic. Their propaganda arm was the Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life, founded by Professor Walter Grundmann. Its major publication was a bowdlerized version of the New Testament, which deJudaized the text, and presented Jesus as an anti-Jew who had fought to destroy Judaism, dying as a victim in that struggle. The effect of this was to give Nazism religious and moral authority, although the Nazis regarded this rapprochement by a branch of the church with contempt.

Elimination of the Jews in Nazi Germany was not confined to the Holocaust. It also took the form of rewriting the New Testament to remove references to Judaism and to recast Jesus as an Aryan. This has been the subject of some sensational and substantially erroneous claims, notably by an *English Pravda* article of 10 August 2006, and the *Daily Mail* (UK) in a *Mail Online* article of 7 August 2007, both of which claimed (erroneously) that Hitler had ordered the rewriting of the whole Bible.

So what are the facts? Who did what and why? This article is based on *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* by Susannah Heschel,¹ Professor of Jewish Studies at Dartmouth College. Page numbers in brackets in this article refer to this book. In her book, Heschel describes how she discovered the existence of the Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life when she found several of its publications in the library of the Centre for the Study of Antisemitism, at the Technical University in Berlin (p. xi).

She goes on to say:

“A few members of the Institute were still alive in the 1990s and I was able to conduct useful interviews with them. Since three of the most active academic leaders of the Institute had also been professors of theology at the University of Jena, and many Institute members had been students of theology at Jena, I spent time working at the university’s archives, which were highly accessible and rich with documentation” (p. xi).

The German Church in the 1930s

In the 1930s, two doctrinally opposed factions emerged within the German Protestant Church.

1. The ‘German Christian’ Movement

The German Christian (*Deutsche Christen*) Movement was a group of liberal churches and theologians who, after Hitler came to power in 1933, were enthusiastically pro-Nazi, (figure 1) speaking of the ‘Führer Jesus’ and calling Hitler ‘God’s agent [*Beauftragter*] in our day’

(p. 67). Politically ambitious and anti-Semitic, they wanted a faith without anything Jewish in the Bible, and without converted Jews in the church. They were a faction within the Protestant church of Germany, rather than a separate sect. In time, they “claimed a membership of 600,000 pastors, bishops, professors of theology, religion teachers, and laity”, and “eventually attracted between a quarter and a third of Protestant church members” (p. 3).

The Movement gave the Nazi salute at rallies, placed a swastika on church altars or on a banner hanging from the church ceiling, until its use in churches was banned by the Nazis (p. 14). And, in support of the 1933 Nazi order to remove Jews from the civil service, sought to remove non-Aryans (i.e. baptized Jews) from positions within the church. This of course contravened the biblical teaching that Christians are ‘all one’ in Christ. Nevertheless, “German Christian leaders insisted that the Nazi racial laws took precedence and that baptism could not erase race” (pp. 3–4).

2. The ‘Confessing Church’

Within a year, German Protestant theologians opposed to this undermining of biblical authority and rewriting of Christian doctrine, and wanting to retain baptized non-Aryans (i.e. Christian Jews) in the church, split off in 1934 to form the so-called ‘Confessing Church’ (*Bekennende Kirche*). They ultimately attracted about 20% of Protestant pastors (p. 4). This group included some members who supported anti-Semitism as an intellectual ideology, i.e. the notion that Jews lived under a historic ‘curse’ for killing Christ, and some who had also absorbed the propaganda that Judaism was bad for Germany. However, it also included such notable anti-Nazi theologians and opponents of Hitler as Karl Barth, Martin Niemöller, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer; the latter was executed by the Nazis in April 1945, 23 days before Germany surrendered.

The Institute

The research arm and propaganda organ of the German Christian Movement was its Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church

Life (*Institut zur Erforschung und Beseitigung des jüdischen Einflusses auf das deutsche kirchliche Leben*). This served Nazi anti-Semitism by a program of deJudaizing the Bible (essentially regurgitating the 2nd-century heresy of Marcionism, see box on p. 101), and giving anti-Semitic theological training to clergy and laity via its many lecture tours and seminars, scholarly books, and popular pamphlets, all defaming Judaism. It was established in Wartburg Castle in May 1939, but later moved to Eisenach (the city where Luther translated the Bible), into buildings owned by the church of Thuringia (p. 68).

Professor Walter Grundmann

The Academic Director and visionary behind this Institute was Walter Grundmann (1906–1976), Professor of New Testament and Völkische Theology at Jena University, and a member of the Nazi party from 1930. In his keynote address at the inauguration of the Institute he

“... rejected a biblical salvation history leading from Abraham to Moses to the prophets and finally to Jesus. The Old Testament, he insisted, has no monopoly on salvation history ... Church doctrine, he asserted, had arbitrarily omitted the religious insights of figures such as Zarathustra in creating a falsely exclusive salvation history linking the Old and New Testaments” (p. 89).

Grundmann’s appointment at Jena University was signed by Hitler by order dated 5 October 1938, sent from the Reich Ministry of Education (p. 224, footnote 82). However, Heschel presents no evidence (nor does she claim) that Hitler was involved with establishing the Institute or appointing its personnel, or that he ordered any ‘Nazi Bible’ project. Grundmann was clearly the main instigator of this and of the Institute itself, which by 1942 had 180 members—mostly professors of theology, teachers, pastors, bishops, and church superintendants (p. 99). It was not financed by government, but by donations from supporting churches, individual church leaders, and sale of its publications (p. 96).

Its goal was to redefine Christianity as a Germanic religion, whose founder, Jesus, was not just a non-Jew, but was an anti-Jew, a proto-Nazi (p. 71), who had fought to destroy Judaism, dying as a victim in that struggle. According to Grundmann, the Bible needed to be



Figure 1. The German Christian movement called Hitler ‘God’s agent in our day’.

purified, and restored to its pristine condition—purged of its Jewishness which was due to the distortions of history. “Protestants had to overcome Judaism”, he declared, “just as Luther had overcome Catholicism” (p. 2).

Churchgoers were reassured that the Institute was promoting a return to the anti-Jewish Christianity practised in the days of Jesus (p. 116). However, beyond this, the Institute provided a scholarly and religious mantle that gave Nazism religious and moral authority (p. 16).

Relationship to the ‘Final Solution’

Concerning the actual killing of the Jews, Heschel writes:

“Removing all positive Jewish references from Christian texts, denouncing Jews as enemies of Jesus’s followers, and describing Judaism as a

degenerate religion is not the same act as dropping Zyklon B into a sealed chamber filled with Jews. One cannot prove that the Institute’s propaganda helped cause the Holocaust. However, the effort to deJudaize Christianity was also an attempt to erase moral objections to Nazi antisemitism. Institute sponsored research, by describing Jesus’s goal as the eradication of Judaism, effectively reframed Nazism as the very fulfillment of Christianity ... Institute publications were not as widely disseminated as the propaganda issued by the Reichsminister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, or the publications of Julius Streicher, who was hanged at Nuremberg for editing *Der Stürmer*, a weekly antisemitic propaganda rag. Yet ... propaganda coming from the pulpit calls forth far deeper resonance than that spoken by a politician or journalist” (pp. 16–17).

Heschel further comments:

“By manipulating the theological and moral teachings of Christianity, Institute theologians legitimated the Nazi conscience through Jesus. Antisemitism was the glue that joined the various theological methods and impulses and also brought passion to religion. As the German Christian Friedrich Wieneke once remarked, ‘Not what we think, but rather what God wants, is decisive.’ The problem was that they failed to distinguish between God and Hitler” (p. 66).

Die Botschaft Gottes

The Institute's most notorious publication was its deJudaized version of the New Testament, released in 1940, titled *Die Botschaft Gottes* (The Message of God; figure 2). This was a book of some 304 pages, comprising a Foreword signed by Walter Grundmann and four others, which said that they had chosen parts of the New Testament that shed new light for them, then 276 pages of text, plus 20 pages of Index.

It had about 60% fewer words than the German Luther New Testament and contained no Old Testament books. So the question of whether Esther (with its account of judgment on the enemies of the Jews) was 'expunged' does not apply—it, along with the rest of the Old Testament, was simply ignored. It was not named a Bible, nor yet Hitler's Bible. There is no evidence that Hitler had anything to do with it.

The text was divided into four sections (pp. 109 ff.):

1. Jesus the Saviour—a life of Jesus based on excerpts from each of the synoptic Gospels (reducing much of Matthew with its fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy in Jesus), and reorganized to present Jesus as a warrior, not a servant, or meek, or the Lamb of God.
2. Jesus the Son of God—a somewhat condensed version of the Gospel of John to show the theological significance of Jesus' actions.
3. Jesus the Lord—brief excerpts from various Epistles concerning hope, comfort, community of God, etc.
4. The Emergence of the Christian Community—based on Acts, Paul's Epistles (without his Jewish biography), Paul's mission to the Gentiles, and his break with the Judaizers of Palestine.



Figure 2. CMI's good friend, Dr Werner Gitt,¹³ was able to track down and scan a copy of *Die Botschaft Gottes* for us via the Library of the Technical University of Braunschweig, Germany.

Jewish references were retained only where they were deemed negative to Judaism. Omitted were the genealogies of Jesus from Matthew and Luke, Mary's hymn, Zechariah and Anna, the Wise Men, Herod's killing of the children, and the flight to Egypt. The baby Jesus was brought to the temple to bring him to God, but was merely given a name, not circumcized. In the Sermon on the Mount, "kingdom of heaven" became "God comes to you", and there was no blessing for the merciful. The Sabbath became "holiday".

In John chapter 4, reference to Jesus being "a Jew" in v. 9 was changed to "who comes from Judea", in v. 22, "salvation is from the Jews" was omitted, and in v. 25, "Messiah (called Christ)" was changed to "Promised One".

The text associated Jesus with Galilee. Liberal German theologians had taught since the early 1900s that Galilee was supposedly populated by racially Aryan Gentiles in the 8th century BC following the Assyrian conquest of Israel, thereby refuting Jesus' identity as a Jew (p. 57). In his own book, *Jesus der Galiläer*, Grundmann advocated that Mary was not a Jew, and that Jesus had an illegitimate father: a Roman soldier named Panther [or Panthera] (p. 155). This was, in fact, an ancient libel from Celsus and anti-Christian Jews attacking Jesus' legitimacy ('*ben Panthera/Pandera*').

However, in *Die Botschaft Gottes* the Gospel was clearly presented in Jesus' discussion with Nicodemus, especially in John 3:16.

The trial, death, and burial of Jesus are given prominence with a number of descriptive verses from all four Gospels. However, there are no verses in Section One from Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24 or John 20 describing the events associated with the empty tomb. The guards, the angels, Christ's appearances to the two Marys, and to the disciples in the upper room, and to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus are not included (see figure 3).

Then under the heading of 'His Victory' and the sub-heading of 'The Disciples Confirm the Resurrection' just one Resurrection appearance is given—that of Jesus appearing to the disciples as they were fishing (John 21:1–4, 7–9, and 12–13). This is followed by the restoration of Peter in John 21:15–17, and finally the Great Commission is included from Matthew 28:16–20.

By the end of 1941, 200,000 copies of *Die Botschaft Gottes* had been sold or distributed. Heavily subsidized, Section One sold for 30 Pfennig, the full edition for 1.50 RM (Reichsmark) (which was not enough to recoup printing costs). Copies were sent to soldiers who were members of the German Christian Movement, some churches used it in services and Bible studies, and some presented it to young people on confirmation (p. 111). Conversely, some pastors and scholars in the Confessing Church spoke or wrote pamphlets against it. After the War, most copies were destroyed, with only a very few still known to exist.

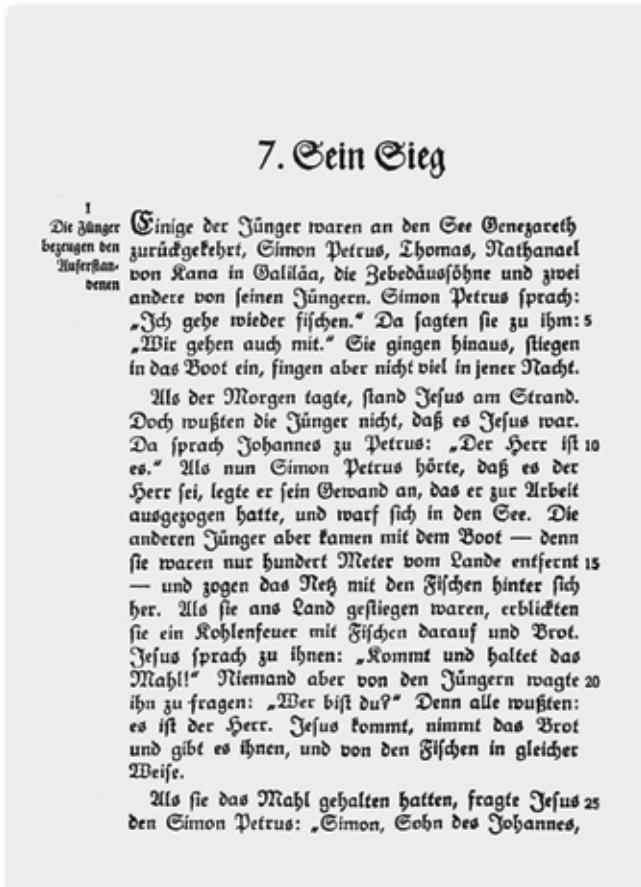


Figure 3. Page 94 in Section One of *Die Botschaft Gottes* contains one reference to the Resurrection of Jesus, namely His appearance to the disciples as they were fishing. Details associated with the empty tomb, and other appearances of Christ are not included.

Other Institute publications

A sanitized hymnbook

A sanitized New Testament needed a sanitized hymnbook. A committee examined 2,300 hymns and denounced 1,971 as being Jewish in language or thought, or dogmatic, sentimental, tasteless, self-denigrating, or poetically unacceptable (p. 117). In June 1941, a new hymnal was published called *Great God We Praise You!* (*Großer Gott wir loben dich!*), the result of a joint project “by members of both the German Christians and the Institute” (p. 117). It contained 284 hymns for church liturgy (plus a few for family use). Only 150 of them were from the 500 hymns in German Lutheran hymnals and all but 22 of these were altered (p. 118).

The remaining 134 items included ‘völkisch’ verse referring to the Führer and asking for God’s “strong hand” on “our Volk and Fatherland” (p. 118). Words from the Old Testament such as Psalm, Jehovah, and Immanuel were removed, but other well-known OT phrases such as “Praise the Lord, O My Soul”, were retained. In Luther’s famous

song, *A Mighty Fortress*, the words “Lord of Hosts” were changed to “knight in shining armour” and it was re-titled “Holy Fatherland” (p. 124).

A baptismal hymn was “Tender Child of German Blood”, which echoed the denatured baptismal formula: “We baptize you that you may be consecrated and brave in life, faithfully committed to the Volk in a new time in truth” (p. 124). Over 200,000 hymnals were printed and sold to churches or sent to soldiers on the front (p. 125). The hymnal’s illustrations included drawings of soldiers with rifles, a soldier in full uniform greeting his wife and children, and a knight in full armour with sword and lance, surrounded by flames.

A ‘non-Christian’ catechism

After the New Testament and hymnal, the third item to be Nazified was the catechism. This was done by a commission chaired by Walter Grundmann, and published by the Institute in 1941. The title was *Germans with God: a German Catechism* (*Deutsche mit Gott: Ein deutsches Glaubensbuch*). Note the absence of the word ‘Christian’. It referred to Jesus as the saviour of the Germans. Heschel provides the following translation:

“Jesus of Nazareth in the Galilee proves in his message and behavior a spirit that is in opposition to Judaism in every way. The struggle between him and the Jew became so bitter that it led to his deadly crucifixion. Thus Jesus cannot have been a Jew. Until this very day the Jews persecute Jesus and all who follow him with unreconcilable hatred. In contrast, Aryans in particular found in Jesus Christ the answer to their ultimate and deepest questions. So he became the savior of the Germans” (p. 126).

The revised catechism also

“... omitted traditional doctrinal positions regarding miracles, virgin birth, incarnation, resurrection, and so forth, in favor of positioning Jesus as a human being who struggled on behalf of God and died not only as a martyr, but also a ‘victor’ on the cross, despite being a victim of the Jews” (pp. 126–127).

This catechism (not any ‘Nazi Bible’ as has been reported) contained 12 revised Commandments in place of the Old Testament Ten. Translated, they read:

1. Honour God and believe in him wholeheartedly.
2. Seek out the peace of God.
3. Avoid all hypocrisy.
4. Holy is your health and life.
5. Holy is your well-being and honour.
6. Holy is your truth and fidelity.
7. Honour your father and mother—your children are your aid and your example.
8. Keep the blood pure and the marriage holy.
9. Maintain and multiply the heritage of your forefathers.

10. Be ready to help and forgive.
11. Honour your Führer and Master.
12. Joyously serve the people with work and sacrifice.

Notice what is missing. Perhaps divine prohibitions of murder, theft, and covetousness were deemed inappropriate for a ‘survival-of-the-fittest’ ideology that was then engaged in the ongoing pillaging of Europe.

Just how many churches adopted this catechism is not clear. However, Heschel sums up the total effect of all this activity as follows:

“The institute shifted Christian attention from the humanity of God to the divinity of man: Hitler as an individual Christ, the German Volk as a collective Christ, and Christ as Judaism’s deadly opponent” (pp. 164–165).

Reaction of the Nazis

The Institute’s perverse attempt to marry Christianity to Nazism was not reciprocated by the Nazis, who were deeply suspicious of all things Christian,² and prohibited the display of Nazi regalia inside churches. The Nazis tolerated the Institute, “though its efforts were at times mocked” (p. 148), and they kept it under secret surveillance by the intelligence arm of the SS (p. 149).³ In March 1943, they confirmed their lack of sympathy for Grundmann by drafting him into military service on the dreaded Eastern Front (p. 161).

At the end of the war, Grundmann was captured and was incarcerated in a Soviet prisoner of war camp. He was released on medical grounds in October 1945, and was among the first to return home. The Thuringian church closed the Institute that year (pp. 249–250).

Grundmann then campaigned for rehabilitation, mostly by soliciting letters of personal testimony in his favour from previous like-minded pro-Nazi ‘Christians’, who continued to support each other after the war. He disingenuously “presented himself as an objective scholar who had fallen victim to Nazi attacks as a result of his efforts on behalf of Christianity and his scholarship” (p. 253). In the 1950s, having gone through a ‘soft’ de-Nazification (i.e. without being held to account), he was appointed rector of the Thuringian seminary in Eisenach, which was now part of East Germany. From 1956 he served the communists as a secret informer for Stasi (the State Security Service of East Germany), supplying information about his opponents in the Confessing Church (pp. 256 ff.). He went on to publish various commentaries on the Gospels, which attained significant popularity.

Grundmann, Darwinism, and *Mein Kampf*

The Germany that Grundmann grew up in was impregnated with Darwinism. Translations of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* had been published in Germany in 1860,

Nothing new under the sun (Ecclesiastes 1:9)

Grundmann and his allies (see main text) were regurgitating the 2nd-century heresy, Marcionism. This was founded by Marcion of Sinope (modern-day Sinop, Turkey), a very wealthy man who detested the God of the Old Testament and denied the true humanity of Christ.

Marcion purged most of the Bible: the entire Old Testament, all the Gospels except Luke, retained 10 letters of Paul, and removed all references to Judaism and Jesus’ childhood. The early church denounced him as a heretic, returned a huge donation he had made, and in response, affirmed the Canon of Scripture to recognize what was truly authoritative.



1863, 1867, 1876 and 1916, and his *Descent of Man* in 1875. Also, Darwinism had become enormously popular in educated German circles due *inter alia* to the writings of Ernst Haeckel, famous (or rather infamous) for his forged embryo drawings.^{4,5} Hitler imbibed this Darwinist philosophy of the strong eliminating the weak, and regurgitated it in his autobiography, *Mein Kampf* (meaning ‘My Struggle’). For example, Hitler wrote,

“He who does not wish to fight in this world, where permanent struggle is the law of life, has not the right to exist.”⁶

“The stronger must dominate and not mate with the weaker, which would signify the sacrifice of its own higher nature. Only the born weakling can look upon this principle as cruel, and if he does so it is merely because he is of a feebler nature and narrower mind; for *if such a law did not direct the process of evolution* then the higher development of organic life would not be conceivable at all [Emphasis added].”⁷

“If Nature does not wish that weaker individuals should mate with the stronger, she wishes even less that a superior race should intermingle with an inferior one; because in such a case all her efforts, *throughout hundreds of thousands of years, to establish an evolutionary higher stage of being [i.e. referring to recent human evolution]*, may thus be rendered futile [Emphasis added].”⁸

As a passionate pro-Nazi, who regarded Hitler as ‘God’s agent’, Grundmann undoubtedly would have read *Mein Kampf*, as some 6 million copies had been sold by 1940. He would therefore have been aware that Hitler’s aim of eliminating everything Jewish from Germany, including the Jewish population, was an outworking of the theory of evolution, aka social Darwinism. Way back in 1941, Grundmann may or may not have thought his way through to the ultimate truth that the atheistic, long-age theory of

evolution is a direct negation of the short-age creation worldview of Genesis. In Genesis, God declares that all human beings are made in His image (Genesis 1:27), and so, Darwin, Hitler, and Grundmann to the contrary, one race is neither superior to nor inferior to another. We are, in fact, all related in that we have all descended from Adam and Eve, as the Apostle Paul expounded to the men of Athens (Acts 17:26). Likewise, the Genesis account of the Fall into sin and the result thereof tells us that death is not the process that produced mankind from the animals but is the penalty for sin (which Christ paid for us on the Cross).

If Grundmann had realized this, it surely would not have bothered him, as his aim was “the removal of the Old Testament from the Christian Bible on the grounds that the Old Testament was a Jewish book” (p. 13), and “The Old Testament was simply eliminated from German Christian religious worship ...” (p. 106). And again,

“By 1942 ... The Institute’s campaigns had succeeded in creating such widespread hostility to the Old Testament that Heinrich Weinmann, a pastor on an Institute commission, wrote that ‘today one does not dare to bring something from the Old Testament to the Volk’” (p. 141).

In this connection, we should note that the result is always the same. Whether consciously or unconsciously, when church leaders, seminaries or denominations espouse evolution, whether theistic or atheistic, it is always an attack on the historicity and authority of Genesis, with accompanying undermining of Christian faith and belief.

Relevance for us today

Reviews of Heschel’s *The Aryan Jesus* include comments like:

“One comes away from her account wondering how such apparently intelligent and learned Christian scholars could have been so foolish and craven.”⁹

“... many intriguing points are made about ... the consequences of learned theologians spouting nonsense in Forties Thuringia.”¹⁰

“... all they did was to serve as useful fools to the secular Nazi regime and failed to do anything for Christianity.”¹¹

When what God has said in His inspired Word, the Bible, is disregarded by those who claim to be Christians, there is no logical limit to the errors or indeed the blasphemy to which this opens the door—even to lending a hand to those who practise genocide, as outlined above.

Today many pastors and theologians think they are doing the church a favour by substituting theistic evolution for recent creation in Genesis, and by denying that the biblical accounts of the Flood and Babel are part of Earth’s true history. However, such persons have no authority

to tamper with the Word of God in this way, any more than the liberal German Christians had to deJudaize it. Without exception, all attempts to marry Christianity to the worldview of unbelievers contravene biblical authority, and subvert the faith of Christians.

At the same time it cuts no ice with atheists and agnostics. Just as the Nazis whom Grundmann was trying to impress treated him with disdain, so, too, many antitheists have nothing but contempt for Christians who do not believe their own Holy Book.¹²

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13. Author of *In the Beginning was Information*, and several other books.

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