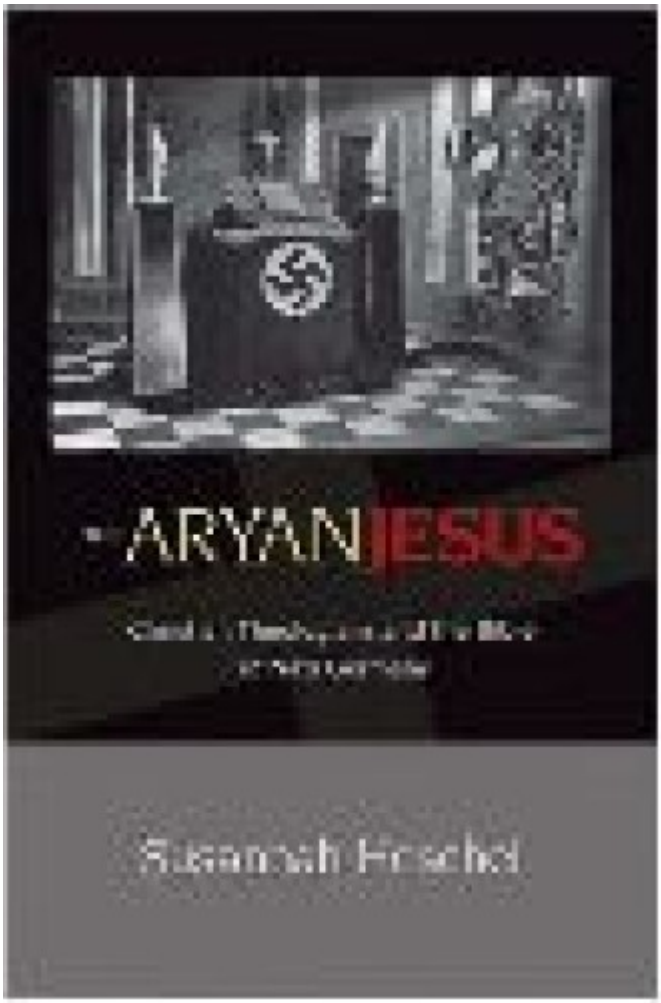
The Nazis' Jesus

By Henry Knight in the June 16, 2009 issue

In Review



The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany

Susannah Heschel
Princeton University Press

Jesus is Christianity’s burning bush. His presence beckons to his followers in each generation, calling them to stand before him fully present and attentive to the rule and realm of God brought near in each encounter with the neighbor.

Like the summoning bush of Moses, Jesus’ searing presence calls forth without being consumed by the transcending nature of the call. He declares with that presence, “Here I am. Where are you?” He remains who he is, Jesus of Nazareth, even as he manifests to subsequent generations the fullness of the One who calls us out of ourselves into full and responsible engagement with every other.

Susannah Heschel, professor of Jewish studies at Dart mouth, traces the docetic betrayal of this central affirmation of Christian truth. Her book is a meticulous case study of a theological institute based in Eisenach, Germany, during the Third Reich that was dedicated to ridding the German Protestant church of any and all Jewish influence. Heschel’s study examines the aims and purposes, leadership and influence of this organization, the Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life. Like her late father, Rabbi Abra ham Joshua Heschel, Susannah Heschel has provided a probing look at an important part of Jewish history while offering Christian readers an opportunity to better understand critical features of Jewish faith and the Jewish world.

Some may resist reading another book on the Holocaust. Reacting to the title, they may even presume that its findings would be obvious and that examining its contents is unnecessary. That would be a mistake—with regard to the general attitude about the Holocaust and how it relates to Christian identity, as well as to any misplaced assumptions linked to the phrase *Aryan Jesus*.

The discomforting truth is that the church in its many forms has unfinished business with the Holocaust. Heschel’s study focuses on significant aspects of that business. Probing beneath the surface of propaganda disguised as religious confession, she raises important questions about how Christians relate to the figure who stands at the center of their world.

Heschel examines the ways in which the Eisenach institute sought legitimacy within the Third Reich when many of the Reich’s leaders viewed the church with disdain and contempt. The institute and its cohorts drew on their own racist and nationalist attitudes to convince Nazi leaders that they were good Germans united in their commitment to rid Germany and the church of Jewish influence.

Eisenach theologians like Walter Grundmann, the institute's director, and the more widely known Gerhard Kittel emphasized a radical break between Jesus and Jewish life and culture. Any components indicating continuity between Jesus and the Judaism of his time and place, they contended, should be resisted as inauthentic. They viewed Judaism as a monolithic tradition existing in a singular form that Jesus opposed. Heschel, on the other hand, provides detailed historical evidence for why the discontinuities embodied by Jesus must be understood in the context of the diverse forms of Jewish life in which Jesus must have participated; Jesus shared assumptions and debated differences with others who shared the same richly textured world.

Heschel's carefully constructed historical portrait enables readers to ponder the dynamics that shaped the distortions of Christianity that characterized the institute and the world it represented. The pervasive insistence on Jesus' differentiation from all things Jewish is an ironic commentary on Christian belief in the uniqueness of Jesus. In this case, his uniqueness was configured at the expense of the world he shared with his own culture and people. Regrettably, this attitude has persisted in other periods of Christian history. Such an orientation builds its identity over against a Judaism that is monolithically constructed and construed as a negative other—a significant other, to be sure, but one with which Christians must always be at odds.

Heschel poignantly describes just how susceptible this kind of attitude is to radicalized hatred and violence. Her work offers historical confirmation that when an identity is constructed over and against an other, it violates the other that it requires for its own differentiation. In this way, Heschel's analysis gives historical credence to Regina Schwartz's work in *The Curse of Cain*, in which Schwartz argues that the seeds of violence are rooted in identities that are formed antithetically against an other with whom they contend for their claims to truth and fidelity.

In penetrating detail, Heschel recounts how the ideological prejudices of Nazi Germany consumed the historical person named Jesus and replaced him with a figure totally at odds with his own Jewish identity, in which and from which he expressed his distinctive perspective on God's ways with the world. The same dynamics are at work when white supremacists replace the Galilean Jesus with a white, European image of their own prejudices. But the historical reality that cannot be ignored is that Jesus of Nazareth was a Galilean Jew in critical dialogue with his own culture, people and times at the same time that he was directly challenging the culture of empire that was oppressively present in his world. Ironically, that latter

discontinuity was mocked by the institute's resolute attempts to demonstrate Jesus' continuity with the ideology that informed the Third Reich.

The Jewish world in which Jesus lived and acted was culturally, politically and religiously diverse. Any conflict he experienced with it could never have been with the Jews as a whole or with a monolithic Judaism, though he clearly did have conflict with particular Jews over things Jewish and with Romans over matters dangerously political. For the reader who believes that these historical touchstones in the life of Jesus can be safely presumed, Heschel's steadfast engagement with the Eisenach institute and its teachings is an unsettling reminder that this assumption is false.

The confessional task of letting Jesus be who and what he is remains a critical and a persisting concern. Jesus can never not be a Galilean Jew. But the temptation to leave him behind in pursuit of an ideologically configured Christ beckons to each generation that sets out to find him. *The Aryan Jesus* reminds us of what is at stake.