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Bonhoeffer, the Jewish People and Post-Holocaust Theology: Eight Perspectives; Eight Theses

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Abstract

Over the years since his death, dozens of interpreters - scholars, novelists, dramatists, filmmakers and devotional writers- have offered a variety of perspectives on Bonhoeffer's relationship to the Jewish people. This article describes eight distinct, though overlapping and largely compatible, perspectives on this question. It then identifies the author's own view of this important relationship by presenting and developing eight theses. The author concludes that the desire to portray Bonhoeffer as a guide for post-Holocaust theological reflection is based less in Bonhoeffer's theological achievements than in the compelling nature of his witness and the dire need for Christian heroes from the Nazi era.

KEYWORDS: Bonhoeffer, Holocaust, Supersessionism, Post-Holocaust Theology, Jews, anti-semitism, resistance, rescue, witness people

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1. Introduction

Over the years since his death, dozens of interpreters – scholars, novelists, dramatists, filmmakers and devotional writers – have offered a variety of perspectives on Bonhoeffer's relationship to the Jewish people. In the first part of this article, I will describe eight distinct, though overlapping and largely compatible, perspectives on this question. In part two I will identify my own view of this important relationship by presenting and developing eight theses.

2. Perspectives

A. Irrelevance

The earliest perspective on Bonhoeffer and the Jews, usually implied rather than argued, was that Jews and Judaism had little relevance for understanding his legacy. Very simply, early studies of Bonhoeffer's life and theology tended to ignore the question of his relationship to the Jewish people. For instance, John D. Godsey's *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (1960) has no index entries for "Jews," "Israel," or "anti-Semitism."¹

B. Guide for Post-Holocaust Christianity

By the end of the 1970s, the view that Jews are irrelevant for understanding Bonhoeffer was difficult to detect in Bonhoeffer studies. Among some interpreters it was displaced by a perspective at the other end of the spectrum from irrelevance – the view that Bonhoeffer was a potential guide for post-Holocaust Jewish-Christian relations. Jewish scholars were among the first to articulate this view. In 1960

¹ John D. Godsey, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960).

Stephen S. Schwarzschild wrote that "Jews owe it to Dietrich Bonhoeffer to become acquainted with his theology" – not only because he was a martyr to Nazism but because his teachings "exhibit many marks of kinship with basic Jewish orientation," a fact not surprising since he "increasingly went back to what to him was the 'Old Testament' and thus drank from the same well from which Judaism is nourished."² By 1979 Pinchas Lapide was arguing that "from a Jewish perspective, Bonhoeffer is a pioneer and forerunner of the slow, step-by-step re-Hebraisation of the churches in our days."³

The image of Bonhoeffer as a paragon of post-Holocaust Jewish-Christian rapprochement has been encouraged more by Eberhard Bethge than by any other single individual. In 1980, in a seminal article titled "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Jews," Bethge wrote that Dietrich "established some presuppositions for new approaches to a post-Holocaust theology...."⁴ Within a decade this perspective had made a significant impact on Bonhoeffer scholarship, as can be seen in an article in the *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust* (1990) which declared that Bonhoeffer's "theological influence has been significantly instrumental in the post-Holocaust rethinking of Christian relationships with the Jewish people."⁵

² Stephen S. Schwarzschild, "Survey of Current Theological Literature: 'Liberal Religion (Protestant)'," *Judaism* 9 (August, 1960): 366-71; 366-367.

³ Pinchas E. Lapide, "Bonhoeffer und das Judentum," in Ernst Feil, ed., *Verspieltes Erbe: Dietrich Bonhoeffer und der deutsche Nachkriegsprotestantismus* (Munich: Kaiser, 1979), 116-130.

⁴ Eberhard Bethge, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Jews," in John D. Godsey and Geoffrey B. Kelly, eds., *Ethical Responsibility: Bonhoeffer's Legacy to the Churches*, Toronto Studies in Theology, vol. 6 (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1981), 43-96; 90.

⁵ John S. Conway, "Bonhoeffer, Dietrich," *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, ed. Israel Gutman (New York: Macmillan, 1990), 1: 230-31.

Echoing Bethge, Robert O. Smith has written recently of “reclaiming Bonhoeffer after Auschwitz.”⁶

C. Philosemite

Growing out of this view of Bonhoeffer and his legacy is a third perspective – that Bonhoeffer was a philosemite congenitally predisposed, it would seem, to come to the defense of vulnerable Jews. Novelists have been particularly effective at communicating this perspective. Denise Giardina’s historical novel *Saints and Villains* includes an early scene in which Dietrich and his twin sister Sabine are caught in a snowstorm while hiking through the Thüringer Wald. When a woman who shelters the teenagers remarks off-handedly that their hometown of Berlin contains “too many Jews,” Dietrich testily responds: “Why do you say that? Do you know any Jews?”⁷ Similarly, Michael van Dyke, author of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Opponent of the Nazi Regime*, portrays the young Bonhoeffer as innocent of the anti-Semitism that is endemic to his culture and class. Shocked to realize that his Tübingen fraternity does not accept Jews, the seventeen-year-old Dietrich reflects: “Could it be true that the Hedgehogs are truly haters of Jews Then he remembered the songs he sang in Hedgehog meetings about ‘Germany, pure and strong,’ ‘the blood of Christian men,’ and so forth... Suddenly it seemed like his entire world had come crashing down. He closed his philosophy book, laid his head down upon it, and began to weep softly.”⁸ In her novel *The Cup of Wrath*, Mary Glazener projects Bonhoeffer’s instinctive philosemitism into the Nazi era. As

he observes Nazi brown shirts preparing to attack a Jew who dares to sit on a “non-Aryan” bench, Bonhoeffer moves into action:

With three quick steps Dietrich passed the storm troopers, addressing the hapless victim as he went, “Ah, Johannes, have I kept you waiting? I’m terribly sorry. I was held up at the university.” He winked at the startled Jew, put his hand on his shoulder, and steered him to the path, where Hugo waited in obvious amazement. In a voice loud enough to be heard by the storm troopers, Dietrich said, “I’d like you to meet my cousin, Herr Councilor von der Lutz, of the Justice Department.” He tried to reassure the frightened man with a look, then turned to Hugo. “My friend, Herr Johannes Ertzberger.” Without a backward glance, Dietrich nudged them forward. Hugo, three inches taller than Dietrich, towered above the man walking between them.

“We’d better hurry or we’ll be late for the matinee,” said Dietrich, and continued in the same vein until they were out of earshot of the SA men....[The Jew] said, with tears in his eyes, “Thank you. Thank you very much. Those men—there’s no telling ...”⁹

⁶ Robert O. Smith, “Reclaiming Bonhoeffer after Auschwitz,” *Dialog* 43/3 (Fall, 2004): 20.

⁷ Denise Giardina, *Saints and Villains* (New York: Fawcett, 1998), 12.

⁸ Michael van Dyke, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Opponent of the Nazi Regime*, Heroes of the Faith Series (Ulrichsville, OH: Barbour Publishing, 2001), 30.

⁹ Mary Glazener, *The Cup of Wrath: A Novel Based on Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Resistance to Hitler* (Macon, GA: Smith & Helwys, 1992), 140. Closely related to Bonhoeffer the philosemite is the image of Bonhoeffer the champion of minority rights. This portrayal of Bonhoeffer, which links his experiences in Harlem during 1930-31 with his opposition to the Aryan paragraph two years later, is captured by Elizabeth Raum: “On one evening, when a number of students, including Franklin Fisher and Dietrich Bonhoeffer went to dinner at a New York restaurant, the restaurant refused service to Fisher because he was black. Dietrich objected loudly and left the restaurant in protest, amazing the other students, who accepted such prejudicial treatment as normal....In an act reminiscent of his refusal to eat in a New York restaurant that would not serve Franklin Fisher, Dietrich declared that if

D. Pro-Jewish Resistor

A fourth perspective on Bonhoeffer and the Jews casts his resistance to Nazism as motivated by that regime's treatment of Jews. This perspective is evident in one of the earliest dramatic treatments of Bonhoeffer's life, Elizabeth Berryhill's *The Cup of Trembling* (1958). When Erich Friedhoffer (Berryhill's Bonhoeffer) retreats to the garden of his parents' home, he is ambushed by the sounds of *Kristallnacht*: "Out of the humming air, come sounds and voices. A crash of glass, as of a rock thrown through a window." Jewish voices cry, "Help us...please...help us..." but Friedhoffer replies, "No! I will not listen." "Brother, we seek you – we call you! Can you hear us? Can you hear us?" the voices plead. And Friedhoffer: "I cannot! Ask of me what you will...but I cannot kill!" Kneeling in the garden, the young Christian cries out three times: "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt." Erich then returns to the house and announces to his sister that he will join the conspiracy.¹⁰

A novelistic version of this conviction that Bonhoeffer's resistance was rooted in Nazi anti-Semitism may be found in Michael Phillips's *The Eleventh Hour*, in which Bonhoeffer confesses: "I have prayed and prayed for years about what should be our response as Christians to the Nazi evil....My conscience tells me that the Nazi evil against the Jews is of such magnitude that bringing force against it may be necessary....Fateful times and fateful decisions are upon us...Those of us with Jews in our family will not be allowed

his friend Franz Hildebrandt could not serve a German parish, then neither would he." See *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Called by God* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 44.

¹⁰ *The Cup of Trembling, A Play in Two Acts by Elizabeth Berryhill, Suggested by and with Material Derived from the Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Seabury, 1958), 52, 53.

the luxury of an easy answer."¹¹ Although these scenes do not correspond to any known episodes in Bonhoeffer's life, this view of Bonhoeffer as a resistor on behalf of Jews is routinely endorsed by scholars. Chief among them is Eberhard Bethge, who in 1980 wrote 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."¹² Renate Wind concurs, declaring that "beyond question the deprivation of rights and the persecution of the Jews which followed soon after the Nazi seizure of power were the decisive stimulus to his repudiation of the regime from the beginning and his fight against it."¹³ Friends and family members confirm this idea. Renate Bethge, in a letter to Yad Vashem, writes that "the fate of the Jews was Bonhoeffer's main reason for resisting the Nazis...."¹⁴ And Anneliese Schnurmann testifies that "one of the main reasons why Dietrich opposed the Nazis was their persecution of the Jews; it actually was the impulse which made him reject them."¹⁵

E. Victim of the Holocaust

A fifth perspective on Bonhoeffer and the Jews – one given credence in both popular and scholarly literature – is that Bonhoeffer was a victim of the Holocaust. In an on-line

¹¹ Michael Phillips, *The Eleventh Hour* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1993), 193.

¹² Bethge, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Jews," 76.

¹³ Renate Wind, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Spoke in the Wheel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 70.

¹⁴ Stephen A. Wise, "Answers To The Commission's Questions, By The Individual Supporters Of Recognition," document submitted to State Of Israel Commission For The Designation Of The Righteous At Yad Vashem, October 17, 2000.

¹⁵ Affidavit of Anneliese Schnurmann, March 19, 2001, shared with the author by Stephen A. Wise.

article, Macky Alston describes Bonhoeffer as “a non-Jewish martyr of the Holocaust, [who] gives Protestants a stake in the great tragedy of the 20th century, through the death of one of their own.”¹⁶ In *Saints and Villains* Giardina connects Bonhoeffer’s execution with the Jews’ fate by having their paths intersect in the final days of the war. While in transit to his execution site, Bonhoeffer passes:

... a caravan of Jews being driven on foot from Auschwitz and Treblinka to the Reich. Dietrich watches through a crack between the slats of the truck’s wooden sides as the scarecrow men, women, and children make their painful way, driven by armed guards like draft horses ready to die in the traces. The passing truck forces them from the road, and they do not look at it but stand with heads bowed taking what rest they can as they wait to be forced on.

“The absent ones,” Dietrich says.

And thinks he is better off on the road with them.¹⁷

For their part, scholars have encouraged such connections by referring to Bonhoeffer as one who died “in the Holocaust,” meeting his end “in a death camp” (Sidney G. Hall III); who “wrote from within the death camps of Nazi Germany” (R. Kendall Soulen); who did theology in “the Holocaust context” (Craig Slane); who was deported to a concentration camp for “anti-Nazi sermons” (Eva Fogelman); whose theology “points to the presence of the ‘suffering servant,’ indeed, of Jesus Christ himself, in the long lines of victims at the gas chambers in Nazi death camps” (Geffrey

¹⁶ Macky Alston, “The Challenge of Bonhoeffer” (2003), at http://www.gracecathedral.org/enrichment/reflections/ref_20060131.shtml.

¹⁷ Giardina, *Saints and Villains*, 480.

Kelly, 1999).¹⁸ Other scholars have been careful to speak of Bonhoeffer’s *solidarity* with suffering Jews. According to Bethge, Bonhoeffer entered into “deep solidarity” with the victims of the Holocaust; and Robert Willis adds that Bonhoeffer was able “to enter into the reality of Jewish suffering and maintain solidarity with it.”¹⁹

While Jewish scholars have tended to dispute the characterization of Bonhoeffer as a Holocaust victim, at least one has encouraged it. Pinchas Lapide writes that this “exemplary man of God” became “a blood witness for the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob...” His prison writings resemble “those we have acquired by the thousands from Bergen-Belsen, from Auschwitz, and from Treblinka.”²⁰

F. Ambiguous Legacy

Developing alongside these positive perspectives on Bonhoeffer and the Jews are a few that are more cautious in their assessment. One stresses the ambiguity of Bonhoeffer’s post-Holocaust legacy. In 1967 Emil Fackenheim gave seminal expression to this view:

¹⁸ Sidney G. Hall III, *Christian Anti-Semitism and Paul’s Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 48; R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 17, 18. Craig J. Slane, *Bonhoeffer as Martyr: Social Responsibility and Modern Christian Commitment* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004), 95; Eva Fogelman, *Conscience and Courage: Rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust* (New York: Anchor, 1994), 170; Geffrey B. Kelly, “Bonhoeffer and the Jews: Implications for Jewish-Christian Relations,” in Geffrey B. Kelly and C. John Weborg, *Reflections on Bonhoeffer: Essays in Honor of F. Burton Nelson* (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 1999), 133-166; 162.

¹⁹ Bethge, “Bonhoeffer and the Jews,” 80.

²⁰ Lapide, “Bonhoeffer und Judentum,” 126.

Clear-sighted witness, apostle of Christian self-exposure to the secular world and himself martyr to his cause, Bonhoeffer nevertheless failed wholly to grasp...the monstrous evil of the actual world about him. This painful truth, in retrospect inescapable, cannot escape his Jewish reader. In a concentration camp filled with Jews subjected to every imaginable form of torture, Bonhoeffer writes that Protestants must learn about suffering from Catholics. No mention is made in the *Letters and Papers from Prison* of Jewish martyrdom.²¹

Other scholars to express doubts about Bonhoeffer's pro-Jewish credentials include Stephen S. Schwarzschild, who in 1965 wrote that it is time to "make clear the ambiguity of the best of Protestant Christians in a decisive hour...and to warn against any facile, simplistic interpretation of the phenomenon of Dietrich Bonhoeffer."²² In 1981 Stanley Rosenbaum added that it is sad to search Bonhoeffer's works in vain for references to Jews that are not "ignorantly patronizing or dogmatically conversionist..." Since Bonhoeffer assumed "Judaism died giving birth to Christianity," according to Rosenbaum, it is "painfully apparent that the only interest a Bonhoeffer Christian can have in Judaism is the individual conversion of its erstwhile adherents."²³ James Rudin opined in 1987 that even when Bonhoeffer "turned to the Hebrew Scriptures for strength and

comfort, [he] always saw those Scriptures as a prelude to the coming of Jesus, the Christ."²⁴

G. Better than His Theology

The view that Bonhoeffer's thinking about Jews and Judaism is riddled with ambiguity has given rise to another perspective on Bonhoeffer and the Jews – that the man was superior to the theologian. As Ruth Zerner wrote in 1975,

... while retaining certain traditional Christian images of the cursed Jews, Bonhoeffer refused to allow them to reinforce any fear of action. His thinking on Jews and their Bible may appear to us ambiguous, problematic and tentative in the light of post-Holocaust Christian re-thinking of theology regarding the Jews, but his final actions were unmistakably heroic.²⁵

In the years since, scholars such as Franklin H. Littell and Craig Slane have echoed this view of Bonhoeffer's legacy. Littell refers to "the sad truth...that Bonhoeffer was much better than his theology;" and Craig Slane writes that "Bonhoeffer's death as a martyr accomplished something his theology alone could not...[an] answer to the anti-Semitic knot he was never able fully to disentangle intellectually."²⁶ This perspective represents a sort of happy compromise – it acknowledges the anti-Judaism in some of Bonhoeffer's

²¹ Emil L. Fackenheim, "On the Self-Exposure of Faith to the Modern-Secular World: Philosophical Reflections in the Light of Jewish Experience," in *The Quest for Past and Future: Essays in Jewish Theology* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1968), 278-305; 284.

²² Stephen S. Schwarzschild, "Bonhoeffer and the Jews," *Commonweal* 83/3 (November 26, 1965): 253-4.

²³ Stanley R. Rosenbaum, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Jewish View," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 18/2 (Spring, 1981): 301-307; 305.

²⁴ A. James Rudin, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Jewish Perspective," paper presented at the Evangelische Akademie Nordelbien, June 17, 1987, in the Bonhoeffer Archive, Burke Library, Union Theological Seminary, New York.

²⁵ Ruth Zerner, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Jews: Thoughts and Actions, 1933-1945," *Jewish Social Studies* 37/3-4 (1975): 235-250; 250.

²⁶ Franklin H. Littell, *The Crucifixion of the Jews: The Failure of Christians to Understand the Jewish Experience* (Macon: Mercer University Press/Rose Reprints, 1986 [1975]), 51; Craig J. Slane, *Bonhoeffer as Martyr*, 249.

early writings, but claims that he more than compensated for this offense by later risking his life to rescue Jews.

H. Christian Rescuer

This eighth perspective – that Bonhoeffer was a Christian rescuer of Jews has gained a great deal of momentum in recent years. Conservative Christians are particularly drawn to the image of Bonhoeffer the rescuer. Ralph Reed, former head of the Christian Coalition, opines that Christian support for Israel is linked to the tradition of those like Corrie ten boom and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “who sacrificed their own lives while resisting Nazi tyranny and protecting Jews from the Holocaust.”²⁷ And a review of *Bonhoeffer: Agent of Grace* published in *Christianity Today* describes the film as the story of “a Christian theologian who gave his life to save Jewish people....He became an advocate for the rights of Jews in Nazi Germany, and helped save many Jewish lives.”²⁸

This view is sanctioned by the German Embassy in London, which claims that on his return to Germany in 1939 Bonhoeffer “resumed his struggle against the Nazi regime, not only protesting against the exclusion of people of Jewish origin from Church offices, but risking his own life by smuggling Jewish fellow-citizens across the border to safety.”²⁹ It is also supported by scholars such as Geoffrey Kelly and Burton Nelson, who write that Bonhoeffer

²⁷ See Charles Colson, “Earning a Second Look: The New Christian Internationalism,” *BreakPoint* (July 17, 2002), at http://acct.tamu.edu/smith/ethics/Christian_International.htm, December, 2006.

²⁸ Cheryl Heckler-Feltz, “Agent of Grace Gains Prestige,” *Christianity Today* (August 7, 2000), <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/132/44.0.html>, August, 2005.

²⁹ <http://www.london.diplo.de/Vertretung/london/en/Startseite.html>, June, 2006.

“struggled passionately on behalf of rescuing Jews.”³⁰ In fact, no less an expert on Bonhoeffer than Clifford Green has endorsed this view. Writing on “Bonhoeffer’s Legacy” for the PBS website, Green claims that after outgrowing traditional Christian anti-Jewish attitudes, Bonhoeffer “became an advocate for and rescuer of Jews in Nazi Germany, and ended his life sharing the same fate as the victims of the Holocaust.”³¹

Ironically, however, this perspective is explicitly rejected by the Jewish organization dedicated to researching such claims – Yad Vashem, the Israeli agency that bestows the title “Righteous among the Nations” on bona fide Christian rescuers. Despite being nominated for this designation several times since the early 1980s, and despite Stephen A. Wise’s energetic campaign since 1998, Bonhoeffer continues to be denied the honor. Mordechai Paldiel, director of Yad Vashem’s Department for the Righteous Among the Nations, has stated unequivocally that Bonhoeffer was not among those “non-Jews who specifically addressed themselves to the Jewish issue, and risked their lives in the attempt to aid Jews.” While he opposed Hitler on church-state issues, Paldiel claims, his imprisonment and execution stemmed from “involvement in the anti-Hitler plot of July 1944, and not, to the best of our knowledge and the known record, to any personal aid rendered to Jews.”³²

In the summer of 2000, when Yad Vashem again refused to honor Bonhoeffer with the designation “righteous among the nations,” Paldiel revealed what many had long suspected

³⁰ Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, *The Cost of Moral Leadership: The Spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 118.

³¹ <http://www.pbs.org/opb/bonhoeffer/legacy>, August 2005.

³² Marilyn Henry, “Who, Exactly, is a ‘Righteous Gentile’?” *Jerusalem Post* (April 22, 1998), at <http://www.lexis-nexis.com>, April 2003.

– that part of the problem with Bonhoeffer’s candidacy is his essay “The Church and the Jewish Question” (April, 1933), which has given Jewish admirers of Bonhoeffer pause since it was first published in the 1960s. “On the Jewish issue,” Paldiel wrote, “the record of Bonhoeffer is to publicly condone certain measures by the Nazi state against the Jews (save only baptized Jews), and to uphold the traditional Christian delegitimization of Judaism, coupled with a religious justification of the persecution of Jews.” Paldiel went on to assert that while Bonhoeffer’s condemnations of Nazi anti-Jewish measures were uttered “in private and among trusted colleagues; his denunciations of Judaism and justification of the initial anti-Jewish measures were voiced in writing.”³³

In 2003 the Center for Jewish Pluralism of the Reform Movement, represented by Mr. Wise, sued Yad Vashem before the Supreme Court of Israel for access to protocols from discussion of Bonhoeffer’s case. Yad Vashem, whose privacy was upheld by the court, reiterated in a press release that its decision (which, it revealed, had been unanimous) was based on its view that Bonhoeffer’s

... assistance towards the Jews was limited to speaking up for Jewish converts who belonged to the Christian church that were being persecuted by the Nazis because of their Jewish roots. This was not a case of saving them, but of protecting their rights as Christians. Moreover, Bonhoeffer did not oppose the Nazis per se, but a faction within the church that sought to negate the rights of

converts. There is no proof that he was involved in saving Jews.³⁴

Ironically, the more Paldiel has elaborated on Yad Vashem’s decision in Bonhoeffer’s case, the more clouded has become Bonhoeffer’s image as a friend of the Jews.

3. Theses

Given the bewildering variety of perspectives on Bonhoeffer and the Jews that have found expression in popular imagination and scholarly opinion, what can we legitimately say about this aspect of Bonhoeffer’s legacy? I offer the following theses as an attempt to navigate between the pitfalls of undeserved condemnation and wishful thinking.

- A. Bonhoeffer’s career under Nazism presents us with a model of authentic Christian behavior toward Jewish “brothers and sisters” who are vulnerable and under attack.

Examples of this authentic Christian action on behalf of Jews include:

- treasonous discussions with Paul Lehmann in 1933 concerning the transfer of information about

³³ Cited in Richard L. Rubenstein, “Was Dietrich Bonhoeffer a ‘Righteous Gentile’?” Paper presented at the AAR/SBL annual meeting, Nashville, November 20, 2000.

³⁴ While concluding that he “did not save any Jews,” the Yad Vashem press release acknowledged that Bonhoeffer referred a convert to the care of his brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi for inclusion in “Operation-7” and in 1937 assisted in the emigration of the Leibholzes. He was arrested and executed for his opposition to the Nazi regime. Wise is referred to as “a person who did not know” Bonhoeffer, whose support is based on the fact that “following the war he became a symbol of pure Christian resistance to the Nazis and paid with his life.” See press release dated October 2, 2003 at http://www1.yadvashem.org/about_yad/press_room/press_releases/Court.html, August, 2005.

conditions in Germany to American rabbi Stephen Wise

- refusal to seek a church post in Berlin in 1933 for fear of “betraying [his] solidarity with the Jewish Christian pastors...”³⁵
- energetic attempts to inform delegates to the World Alliance meeting in Sofia, Bulgaria in September, 1933 of the “Jewish Question” in Germany, culminating in a resolution deploring “state measures against the Jews in Germany” (this action led to Bonhoeffer being placed under observation by both church and state authorities)
- an unsuccessful campaign at the National Synod in Wittenberg the same month to place the “Jewish Question” on the church’s agenda
- condemnation of the Confessing Church after the 1935 Steglitz Synod for its failure to transcend a limited concern for Jewish Christians
- repeated admonitions to “speak out for those who cannot speak” (Proverbs 31:8)
- aid to Jewish-Christian refugees in London between 1933 and 1935

³⁵ In a letter of October 24, 1933 regarding a post at Lazarus Church in Berlin, Bonhoeffer wrote: “I knew I could not accept the pastorate I longed for in this particular neighborhood without giving up my attitude of unconditional opposition to *this* church, without making myself untrustworthy to my people from the start, and without betraying my solidarity with the Jewish Christian pastors....” See Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian, Christian, Man for His Times: A Biography*, rev. and ed. Victoria J. Barnett (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2000), 232.

- sheltering at Finkenwalde of Willy Sussbach, a young pastor of Jewish origin who had been attacked by the S.A.
 - aiding his sister Sabine and her Jewish husband Gerhard Leibholz in emigrating to Switzerland in 1938
 - work on a report detailing Nazi deportation of Jews from Berlin in 1941³⁶
 - a deeply negative reaction to a fellow prisoner’s anti-Semitic remark.³⁷
- B. Bonhoeffer risked his personal safety to aid Jews who were threatened with deportation. Thus, Christians (and Jews) are justified in thinking of him as a “Christian rescuer.”

³⁶ In Berlin in September, 1941 Bonhoeffer witnessed Jews wearing the yellow star and became aware that an elderly friend of the family was being evacuated to Theresienstadt. “The first day Dietrich Bonhoeffer collected all the facts he could confirm, to pass them on to sympathizers in the army command. [Friedrich Justus] Perels helped him get information from elsewhere in the Reich. By 18 October 1941 they had completed a report describing what was happening in Berlin, and mentioning similar proceedings in Cologne, Düsseldorf, and Elberfeld. On 20 October a more detailed report was concluded, and warned that further deportations were expected on the nights of 23 and 28 October....Perels and Bonhoeffer gave the reports to [Hans] Dohnanyi to pass on to [General Major Hans] Oster and [Colonel-General Ludwig] Beck, in the hope that the military would either agree to intervene or accelerate its preparations for revolt” (Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 745-6).

³⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, enlarged edition, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 194-5. See also Ruth Zerner’s “Chronicle of Compassion and Courage,” in “Church, State, and the Jewish Question,” in John de Gruchy, ed., *A Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 190-205; 197.

The basis for considering Bonhoeffer among the Christian rescuers is his participation in “Operation-7,” a scheme devised by Bonhoeffer’s brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi and the *Abwehr*’s Admiral Wilhelm Canaris to supply fourteen German Jews with false papers and spirit them across the border to neutral Switzerland during August and September of 1942. Bonhoeffer aided the operation by calling on his ecumenical contacts to arrange visas and sponsors for the rescuees.³⁸ Bonhoeffer’s involvement in “Operation-7” has been painstakingly documented by Stephen A. Wise in a series of petitions to Yad Vashem that seek to demonstrate that Bonhoeffer risked “life, freedom, and safety” to protect Jews (a direct appeal to Yad Vashem’s requirements). Wise’s twenty-six page petition filed in 1998 included an affidavit from an “Operation-7” rescuee and a newly found copy of the indictment charging Bonhoeffer with trying to help an imprisoned Jewish professor.

While it is certainly Yad Vashem’s prerogative to deny him recognition as a Righteous Gentile, the evidence indicates that Bonhoeffer, unlike the vast majority of his co-religionists, was committed to aiding Jews with whom he was acquainted in an effort to keep them from becoming racial victims of the Nazi state.

C. Bonhoeffer recognized – and was among the first German Protestants to do so – that the church’s task was not simply to resist application of the “Aryan Paragraph” in the ecclesiastical realm, but to condemn Nazi measures against the Jewish people as such.

This point is debated; for some – including Jewish scholars Stephen Schwarzschild, Emil Fackenheim and Irving Greenberg – Bonhoeffer’s bold opposition to the German Christians is diminished by his apparently exclusive concern for baptized Jews. For others – including non-Jewish scholars Eberhard Bethge, Clifford Green, Robert Willis, and Geoffrey Kelley – it is precisely Bonhoeffer’s inclusion of Jews *qua* Jews in the church’s realm of obligation that distinguishes his contribution to the church struggle. On this point it is wise to give Bonhoeffer the benefit of the doubt, for two reasons: First, scholars in the latter group are more familiar with the relevant evidence; second, on this question Bonhoeffer contrasts so radically with social and theological milieus, a fact that is clear even in “The Church and the Jewish Question,” where Bonhoeffer affirms that “the church has an unconditional obligation to the victims of any ordering of society, even if they do not belong to the Christian community.”³⁹

D. In “The Church and the Jewish Question” (April, 1933), Bonhoeffer invoked the Christian witness-people tradition to illuminate Jewish suffering in the light of salvation history.

The relevant paragraph follows:

Now the measures of the state towards Judaism in addition stand in a quite special context for the church. The church of Christ has never lost sight of the thought that the “chosen people,” who nailed the redeemer of the world to the cross, must bear the curse for its action through a long history of suffering [quotation from Luther’s

³⁸ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 814-17.

³⁹ *No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures and Notes, 1928-1936, from the Collected Works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Volume One*, ed. Edwin H. Robertson, trans. Edwin H. Robertson and John Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 225.

Table Talk on the scattered and insecure state of the Jews]....But the history of the suffering of this people, loved and punished by God, stands under the sign of the final homecoming of the people of Israel to its God. And this homecoming happens in the conversion of Israel to Christ [quotation from S. Mencken on the church's hope that at the end of time Israel will penitently depart "from the sins of its fathers to which it has clung with fearful stubbornness to this day..."]. The conversion of Israel, that is to be the end of the people's period of suffering. From here the Christian church sees the history of the people of Israel with trembling as God's own, free, fearful way with his people. It knows that no nation of the world can be finished with this mysterious people, because God is not yet finished with it. Each new attempt to "solve the Jewish problem" comes to nothing on the saving-historical significance of this people; nevertheless, such attempts must continually be made. This consciousness on the part of the church of the curse that bears down upon this people, raises it far above any cheap moralizing; instead, as it looks at the rejected people, it humbly recognizes itself as a church continually unfaithful to its Lord and looks full of hope to those of the people of Israel who have come home, to those who have come to believe in the one true God in Christ, and knows itself to be bound to them in brotherhood.⁴⁰

To fully gauge the significance of this rather striking passage, its roots in the western theological tradition must be understood. For nearly nineteen hundred years before Bonhoeffer wrote these words, Christians had perceived Jewish life as unassailable proof of God's existence and immanence, Jewish history as a unique witness to divine providence, and the Jew's destiny as a mystery comprehensible only in the light of divine election and

⁴⁰ Ibid., 226.

reprobation. Particularly when Jewish survival was at stake, Christians had relied on these foundational ideas to explain God's mysterious dealings with this chosen but disobedient people.

What has come to be known as the Christian *witness-people myth*⁴¹ was articulated in a systematic way by Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE) and acknowledged by virtually every subsequent Christian theologian concerned with understanding Jewish fate following the appearance of the Messiah. Augustine maintained that after the death of Christ Jews exist as living witnesses to God's sovereignty. For Augustine, and for the generations of subsequent believers who embraced his solution to the problem of Jewish existence *post Christum*, God wills Jewish survival "in unbelief" as mundane testimony to the transcendent realities of grace and punishment. Embodying reprobation and preservation simultaneously, the Jews are unique witnesses to God's mysterious providence.

In Augustine's paradoxical portrayal of the witness people, Jews are killers of Christ, yet remain the people of God; their religion is superseded, yet they are not "cast off"; they are dispersed, but carry "books" (the Christian "Old Testament") that testify to Christ; they are witnesses to divine judgment who nevertheless disseminate awareness of God's providence; they are adherents of a lifeless religion whose tragic ignorance will be redeemed when they convert to Christ *en masse* in the eschatological future. Although never officially adopted by the church, witness-people theology animated Christian discourse for fifteen hundred years after Augustine's death and was quite in evidence at the dawn of the Nazi era.

⁴¹ See Stephen R. Haynes, *Reluctant Witnesses: Jews and the Christian Imagination* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1995).

Among the features of this passage from "The Church and the Jewish Question" that bring to mind the witness-people tradition are its style, structure and tone. The *style* of this extract invests an aura of mythic unreality to Bonhoeffer's description of the "chosen people," a personified theological abstraction whose import is to be gauged solely on this people's "saving-historical significance." This distinctive style is particularly evident when the segment is contrasted with the rest of the tract, which is characterized by precise and sequential argumentation.

The passage also evinces a paradoxical *structure*. The reprobationist and preservationist dimensions of witness-people theology that reach in parallel lines back to Augustine are juxtaposed in Bonhoeffer's description of "this people, loved and punished by God." From the perspective of the essay's participation in the witness-people myth, the crucial affirmation is not that Jews "bear the curse," but that the church must view their "long history of suffering" through the paradoxical lens of reprobation and preservation. They are, indeed, "the 'chosen people,' who nailed the redeemer of the world to the cross."

Finally, this paradoxical portrayal of Jewish destiny resonates with the *ambivalence* that is the leitmotif of the witness-people tradition, an ambivalence symbolized in the crucial "but" that serves as the passage's verbal hinge. Like the witness-people myth itself, Bonhoeffer's description of Jewish existence incorporates positive and negative judgments upon "Jews" and "Judaism" while infusing both with profound ambiguity.

What ought to concern us, then, is not Bonhoeffer's regrettable words so much as the images they propagate and the unconscious level at which they are communicated. Scholarly analysis of "The Church and the Jewish Question"

has encouraged us to view Bonhoeffer's appeal to the witness-people tradition as an excrescence of his main argument, to separate these "theologically tainted assertions" from the "specific core" of his essay, to "chip off" the traditional teachings of contempt toward Jews in order to uncover gleaming treasures. But because Bonhoeffer's witness-people theology resonates so deeply in the Christian imagination, it simply will not be "neutralized"; rather, it threatens to distort the way Christian readers interpret the rest of Bonhoeffer's argument. His authorial voice may speak in favor of the rights of Jews; but this voice is in danger of being overwhelmed by mythological speculation on the divine necessity of Jewish suffering.

E. Bonhoeffer invoked the witness-people myth not because he was "Lutheran" (although Luther was an important conduit for witness-people theology), but because he was a Christian theologian seeking to grasp the mystery of Jewish suffering in a situation of crisis.

For understandable reasons, Bonhoeffer scholars have tended to downplay the blatant anti-Judaism in "The Church and the Jewish Question" and *The Bethel Confession*.⁴²

One scholar refers to Bonhoeffer's invocation of the curse that bears down on the Jews as "unfortunate" (Edwin H. Robertson); another asks that it be "mercifully forgotten" (Walter Harrelson); one argues that the paragraphs in which Bonhoeffer describes the "quite special context" for the church's interpretation of the state's measures towards Judaism are "definitely not the central theme of the paper" (Eberhard Bethge); another concludes that, unfortunately,

⁴² On Bonhoeffer's role in the confession, see Stephen R. Haynes, *The Bonhoeffer Legacy: Post-Holocaust Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 74-80.

Bonhoeffer's initial observations on the Jews in Germany "repeated ages-old stereotypes" (Geffrey B. Kelly); one contends that although the passage contains "all the ingredients of traditional Christian Antisemitism," these are "morally . . . neutraliz[ed]" by Bonhoeffer's discussion of unjust state actions (Robert Willis); others claim that the essay's objectionable language can be separated from its primary thrust (Geffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson); and one laments that the trees of Bonhoeffer's "Christian anti-Jewishness" have obscured the "forest of [his] contribution to Christian political responsibility" (Robert O. Smith).⁴³

Furthermore, scholars who venture an explanation for the perplexing anti-Judaism in Bonhoeffer's writings from 1933 are either vague – he was inexplicably "bound to a certain problematic view regarding Judaism" (Josiah Ulysses Young III), dismissive – his words represent "the all-pervasive anti-Semitism of his era" (Robert F. Koch), or misleading – he "recalled the scriptural curse in order to warn the church of his day against incurring a similar curse through its failure to oppose Hitler's racist policies" (Ann W. Astell).⁴⁴ To this latter

⁴³ Edwin H. Robertson, "A Study of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Jews, January–April, 1933," in Yehuda Bauer, et al., eds. *Remembering for the Future: Working Papers and Addenda, Volume 1: Jews and Christians during and after the Holocaust* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1989), 121-29; 128; Walter Harrelson, "Bonhoeffer and the Bible," 115–39, in *The Place of Bonhoeffer: Problems and Possibilities in His Thought*, ed. Martin E. Marty (New York: Association Press, 1962), 141 n27; Bethge, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Jews," 60; Kelly, "Bonhoeffer and the Jews," 135; Willis, "Bonhoeffer and Barth on Jewish Suffering: Reflections on the Relationship between Theology and Moral Sensibility," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 24/4 (Fall, 1987): 598-615; 607; Kelly and Nelson, *The Cost of Moral Leadership*, 21; Robert O. Smith, "Reclaiming Bonhoeffer after Auschwitz," 209.

⁴⁴ Josiah Ulysses Young III, *No Difference in the Fare: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Problem of Racism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 137; Robert F. Koch, "The Theological Responses of Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer to Church-State Relations in Germany, 1933-1945" (Ph. D. Dissertation, Northwestern University, 1988), 239; Ann W. Astell,

category belongs the explanation that Bonhoeffer's anti-Judaism is "predictable" since he was under the influence of traditional Lutheran theology (William Jay Peck, Edwin H. Robertson, Stephen A. Wise, Geffrey B. Kelly, Stephen Plant, and David H. Jensen, among others).

Without doubt, Bonhoeffer was deeply influenced by Martin Luther. But to refer to his invocation of anti-Jewish images and concepts as "Lutheran" ignores their deep roots in the Christian tradition and gives the mistaken impression that Bonhoeffer was appealing to a peculiarly Lutheran doctrine that might be identified and repudiated. Because Bonhoeffer alluded to an intellectual stream that was much older than German Lutheranism, it is simply inadequate to blame his anti-Judaism on a failure "to recognize the anti-Jewish biases of his own Lutheran heritage."

F. *Kristallnacht* (November 9-10, 1938) represented a personal epiphany for Bonhoeffer, and was probably the turning point in his decision to join the active conspiracy against Hitler.

Many scholars perceive a marked change in Bonhoeffer's apprehension of Jews and Judaism in the wake of *Kristallnacht*. Bethge contends that Bonhoeffer's response to the pogrom became the "decisive impetus in his life" and marked a "decisive point" in his thinking. He argues that Bonhoeffer realized almost immediately that "this day of persecution might determine his vocation and his fate." Evidence for this claim includes pencil marks in Bonhoeffer's Bible, the more significant because they represent the only "note in his Bible giving a date or key word for something

"Reading the Bible with Holocaust Survivors and Rescuers: A New Biblical Spirituality," *Interpretation* 56/2 (April 2002): 181-192; 184.

contemporary.”⁴⁵ Vicki Barnett argues that the true turning toward the resistance occurred in the fall of 1939 as Bonhoeffer gained knowledge of the atrocities against the Jews after the invasion of Poland. His work for the resistance, she notes, involved carrying that information to his ecumenical contacts abroad.⁴⁶

While it is difficult to judge matters that are by definition private, it is reasonable to regard *Kristallnacht* as the event that put anti-Jewish persecution at the forefront of Bonhoeffer’s consciousness and made him willing to risk himself to alleviate it. Bethge points to a sentence inserted in a circular letter written by Bonhoeffer on November 20th, which suggests that the theologian was engaged in serious reflection in the wake of *Kristallnacht*:

During the last few days I have been thinking a great deal about Psalm 74, Zechariah 2:12 (2:8 “he who touches you touches the apple of his eye!”), Romans 9:3f (Israel, to whom belongs the sonship, the glory, the covenant, the law, the services, the promises), Romans 11:11-15. That takes us right into prayer.⁴⁷

Referring to the citation from Rom 9, Bethge writes that in 1938 Bonhoeffer read and taught “about this text in order flatly to contradict the church’s centuries-old teaching of the rejection of the Jews, being so moved that he asks how church teaching could so long have completely forgotten this statement from Paul about the continuing existence of

Judaism.” As for Zec 2:8, Bethge notes that although less than a year earlier Bonhoeffer had applied this text to the church’s persecution, he now interprets it “unambiguously and exclusively in terms of its validity for the Jews, leaving no room for a theology of punishment....”⁴⁸ What is lacking, as I discuss below, is evidence that Bonhoeffer’s response to widespread anti-Jewish violence was accompanied by qualitatively new perceptions of the Jewish people and their destiny.

- G. While there is discernible growth in Bonhoeffer’s understanding of Judaism and solidarity with Jews, there is no documentary evidence that Bonhoeffer ever repudiated the anti-Judaism he expressed in 1933. Furthermore, his later writings suggest that he never escaped the gravitational pull of the witness-people tradition.

The persistence of Christian anti-Judaism in Bonhoeffer’s thought is evident in *Discipleship* (1937), where he writes:

God’s beloved people had been ill-treated and laid low and the guilt belonged to those who had failed to minister to them in the service of God. The Romans had not done this, but the chosen ministers of the Word, and their misuse of that Word. There were no longer any shepherds in Israel. No one led the flock to fresh waters to quench their thirst, no one protected them from the wolf. They were harassed, wounded and distraught under the dire rod of their shepherds, and lay prostrate on the ground. Such was the condition of the people when Jesus came.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Eberhard Bethge, “One of the Silent Bystanders?: Bonhoeffer on November 9, 1938,” in *Friendship and Resistance: Essays on Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 58-71; 64.

⁴⁶ See Victoria Barnett, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Relevance for Post-Holocaust Christian Theology” in this issue.

⁴⁷ Bethge, “Bonhoeffer and the Jews,” 75; and “One of the Silent Bystanders?,” 65-7.

⁴⁸ Bethge, “One of the Silent Bystanders?,” 66.

⁴⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly & John Godsey, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol 4 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 184.

Yet, following Bethge, many scholars see a “clear repudiation” of punishment theology in the fact that after 1933 Bonhoeffer no longer spoke or wrote of a divine curse hanging over the Jews.

Bethge makes much of Bonhoeffer’s citation of Rom 9 in the wake of *Kristallnacht*, with its emphasis on “the continuing existence of Judaism.” Yet chapters 9-11 of Romans contain the very musings on the fate of “Israel” *post Christum* that nurture the roots of the witness-people myth. Although possessing “the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises,” Israel has “stumbled over the stumbling stone...” (9:32) “...Through their stumbling salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous” (11:11). “They have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened. For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they have not submitted to God’s righteousness” (10:2-3). “As regards the gospel they are enemies of God...; but as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (11:28).

Thus Bethge’s attempt to demonstrate that Bonhoeffer was groping toward a new “theology of Israel” in the shadow of the November pogrom paradoxically illuminates the fact that he was unable to renounce the witness-people myth. For while *Kristallnacht* may have pushed Bonhoeffer to explicitly reject the notion that a divine curse pursued the Jews through history, it does not appear to have dissuaded him from perceiving Jewish travail through the prism of salvation history.

The lingering effects of this perception are evident in *Ethics*, the very text to which scholars turn for literary evidence of a substantially new theological apprehension of Jewish life on Bonhoeffer’s part. Two passages from *Ethics*

are commonly cited in this connection. In a section of the book titled “Heritage and Decay,” Bonhoeffer writes:

The historical Jesus Christ is the continuity of our history. Because Jesus Christ was the promised Messiah of the Israelite-Jewish people, the line of our forebears reaches back before the appearance of Jesus Christ into the people of Israel. Western history is by God’s will inextricably bound up with the people of Israel, not only genetically but in an honest, unceasing encounter. The Jews keep open the question of Christ; they are the sign of God’s free, gracious election and of God’s rejecting wrath: “see the kindness and the severity of God” (Rom. 11:22). Driving out the Jew(s) from the West must result in driving out Christ with them, for Jesus Christ was a Jew.⁵⁰

A second *Ethics* extract cited as evidence of a transformation in Bonhoeffer’s “theology of Israel” appears in the midst of his confession of the church’s guilt:

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

⁵⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West and Douglas W. Stott, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 6 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 105. Also salient for an evaluation of Bonhoeffer’s ethics in terms of their implications for a Christian theology of Israel is *Ethics*’ portrayal of Jews and Judaism. Particularly interesting are seventeen references to “Pharisees” or “pharisaism” that span six of the book’s thirteen essays, most brief allusions in which “Pharisee” is shorthand for hypocrite, “pharisaism” for arrogance. See Haynes, *The Bonhoeffer Legacy*, 98-9.

them. It has become guilty of the lives of the weakest and most defenseless brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ.⁵¹

Bethge asserts that inasmuch as the language of displacement, punishment, and mission is conspicuously absent from this passage, it signifies a “cardinal point in the meaning of Bonhoeffer for Jewish-Christian relationships after the Holocaust.” Perhaps at this point, one sees “something like a breakthrough for a coming theology after the Holocaust.”⁵² But the excerpt in question reiterates a controlling assumption of witness-people theology – the conviction that God’s providential action in history is transparent in the existence, wandering, and suffering of the Jewish people. Further, the reference to Paul’s ruminations on Jewish existence *post Christum* in Rom 11, the affirmation that Jews simultaneously signify divine grace and divine wrath, and the claim that “the Jew...is [a] sign” unmistakably echo the witness-people tradition.

The declaration that “the Jew keeps open the question of Christ,” while no doubt an expression of Bonhoeffer’s “ongoing search for a theological foundation upon which to establish his racial-ethical concern for Jews,”⁵³ resonates with the functional view of Jewish survival that has characterized witness-people theology since the time of Augustine. In the witness-people tradition, Jewish persistence operates as both natural and special revelation. Jews’ survival testifies to divine providence, while Jewish suffering following Jesus’ crucifixion is a “sign” pointing to Christ.

Bonhoeffer indicates that he remains within the intellectual confines of this tradition inasmuch as the Jews

⁵¹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 139.

⁵² Bethge, “Bonhoeffer and the Jews,” 81.

⁵³ Slane, *Bonhoeffer as Martyr*, 107.

“keep open the question of Christ” by bearing witness to the dialectic of grace and judgment it is their destiny to reflect. Even if the declaration that “driving out the Jew(s) from the West must result in driving out Christ with them” is interpreted as an allusion to the deportation of German Jews and a reminder of the bond between Judaism and Christianity that was badly obscured during the Nazi era, Bonhoeffer’s linkage of Jewish fate and Christian hope indicates that he continued to view Jewish suffering christologically.

To the extent that it manifests witness-people thinking, the relationship between Jews and Christians articulated in *Ethics* is formally continuous with “The Church and the Jewish Question.” In 1933, “the suffering of this people, loved and punished by God” is illumined by “the sign of [its] final homecoming”; in 1940, the Jew is a “sign of the free mercy-choice and of the repudiating wrath of God.” Although intended to oppose the Nazi vision of a *Judenrein* Europe, Bonhoeffer’s image of the Jew as a mirror of election and judgment is rooted in the same mythological structure from which curse theology emerged. Far from revolutionary, these comments in *Ethics* could have been written by Augustine, the early Luther, or Karl Barth, all of whom believed that Jews survived as testimony to the messiah they rejected.

Jews and Christians alike have perceived traces of a new way of seeing Jews and Judaism in Bonhoeffer’s prison letters.⁵⁴ And we do not know what theological revisions may have begun in the silent period after Bonhoeffer was transferred from Tegel prison. But we do not possess any documentary evidence that he recognized his reliance on the witness-people tradition or sought to escape its grasp.

⁵⁴ See Haynes, *The Bonhoeffer Legacy*, 101-05.

H. Thus, Bonhoeffer is not a sufficient or even a reliable guide for Christian post-Holocaust theological reflection.

Without question, Bonhoeffer has exercised a positive influence on post-Holocaust Christian-Jewish relations, particularly from the Christian side. It was Bonhoeffer's legacy that placed Eberhard Bethge on a path of reconciliation between Jews and Christians in Germany,⁵⁵ and it has been a factor behind the willingness of American Lutherans to revisit their tradition.

Yet the desire to portray Bonhoeffer as a guide for post-Holocaust theological reflection is based less in Bonhoeffer's theological achievements than in the compelling nature of his witness and the dire need for Christian heroes from the Nazi era. Bonhoeffer's post-Holocaust legacy can aid us primarily in interpreting the varieties of flawed human response to Nazi anti-Semitism, and remind us of the inevitable gap between praxis and reflection in situations of crisis.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 2-7.