The Nazi Christ:
A Portrait of the Third Reich’s Historical Jesus

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Abstract

This project pulls from the limited secondary literature on the German Christian Movement and Christianity in the Third Reich to form a cohesive picture of the historical Jesus according to National Socialism. Drawing on understandings of Jesus in Nazi origin narratives, textual revisions, and artistic representations, this paper finds that Christ under Hitler was a masculine, militaristic, anti-Semitic, and non-canonical figure. This portrait analysis poses a challenge to the delineated “No Quest” era of historical Jesus scholarship, suggesting that religious academia in this era was significant in the fact that it served as a socio-political mirror for a particular regime. This study further implies that all portraits of Jesus are polemical products that reflect the needs and objectives of a particular community, and that while these pictures may not be historically reliable, they are crucial to understanding the religious atmosphere of the people who composed them.
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Introduction

Albert Schweitzer’s monumental publication *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* (1906) is rarely absent from any theological scholar’s library. On the brink of a revolution that would cast Schweitzer’s Germany into political turmoil, he opens his comprehensive analysis of historical Jesus research with the notion that “each successive epoch of theology found its own thoughts in Jesus; that was, indeed, the only way in which it could make him live” (Schweitzer 4). Little did he know how accurately those words would resound in the years to come as religion and the cross of Christianity were twisted and manipulated to fit the mold of the anti-Semitic and nationalistic aims of a totalitarian state (Bergen). Indeed, in Schweitzer’s own words, “There is no historical task which so reveals a man’s true self as the writing of a Life of Jesus” (Ibid., 4). During the Third Reich era, renowned scholars and amateur propagandists alike worked tirelessly to strip the historical Jesus of any inconsistencies with Adolf Hitler’s political platform. Despite the explosion of historical Jesus research and publications during this time period, there exist very few analyses of the “morally bankrupt” portrait of the Germanic, Aryan Jesus as presented by the National Socialist party and German Christian movement (Head 56). This deficiency prompts two questions: what are the parameters of historical Jesus research, and what constitutes a study so offensive that it is completely omitted from the historical Jesus framework?

Contributing to the *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, Peter M. Head introduces “four eras” in New Testament research on the historical Jesus and the subsequent neglect of Nazi presentations of Christ in its contents. These research periods
are customarily divided into four sections: the first entitled the “Old Quest” era, ending with Albert Schweitzer’s comprehensive publication of “The Quest for the Historical Jesus,” roughly spanning 1800-1906 (Head 57). The second era, called “No Quest,” occurred during the time of Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann (1906-1950), in which the theological relevance of reconstructing the life of Jesus was dismissed (Ibid.). Beginning with Ernst Käsemann’s lecture at the University of Marburg in 1953 and extending to the early 1970’s, the “New Quest” followed the “No Quest” period, championed by both Käsemann and ‘post-Bultmannians,’ (Ibid.). Most recently a “Third Quest” has emerged, which is described by Head as “a newly confident movement which situates Jesus in his Jewish milieu” (Ibid.). Our study of the Aryan Jesus lingers appropriately in the second era, the so called “No Quest,” as its findings and publications are often dismissed as pseudo-scholarship, “entirely frivolous”, or at best polemical (Weaver, qtd. in Head 58).

In order to understand the theological atmosphere concerning “Life of Jesus” portraits in National Socialist Germany, we must have some conception of its antecedents in the previous era, also known as the “Old Quest.” Robert P. Ericksen, in his book *Theologians Under Hitler*, provides a concise summary of Albert Schweitzer’s *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* in order to set the stage for the “No Quest” era. Ericksen’s overview will be useful in recreating the German theological atmosphere leading up to the ascension of National Socialism.

Schweitzer begins his book with two similar theologians who wrote quasi-fictional accounts of Jesus’ origins. Karl Bahrdt (1741-1792) and Karl Venturini (1768-1849) both rewrote the life of Christ using the mystical Jewish sect called the Essenes to elucidate contradictions in the Gospel stories (Ericksen 7). In both speculations, the
Essenes used Jesus as a human tool to capture the audience with a revolutionary, prophetic message. Not only did the Essenes train Jesus, but they also used forms of magic and trickery to accomplish the “miracles” proposed in the Gospels, even to the point of faking Jesus’ death (Ibid.). Because Jesus’ disciples were not aware of these Essenes behind the scenes, each Gospel account was inaccurately produced with a blind eye to the trickery and manipulation (Ibid.). Schweitzer points out that Bahrdt and Venturini’s conspiracy speculations withstood the test of time and are still popular today in films like the 1965 “Passover Plot” (Ibid.).

In the nineteenth century, Heinrich Paulus (1761-1851) proposed a less conspiratorial take on the historical Jesus. During a long career at Heidelberg University, Paulus used his assured rationalism to suggest natural explanations for the supernatural occurrences in Jesus’ life (Ericksen 7). From a premature burial to earthquakes displacing the tombstone, Paulus relied heavily on coincidence to make his theory plausible. Karl August von Hase (1800-1890) also used the same natural explanations of miracles to formulate his picture of Jesus, although Schweitzer notes that he did so with more hesitancy than Paulus, distrusting rational theology to an extent (Ibid.).

David Friedrich Strauss (1808-1874) diverted from natural explanations of Jesus’ legacy to instead focus on the mythological elements of the Gospel stories (Ericksen 7). He proposed that early Christianity was distorted by the Greek philosophy that followed, and he used this notion to interpret the three Synoptics as mythology by comparing them in Thomistic Form (Ibid., 8). Bruno Bauer (1809-1882) borrowed Strauss’ analytical, literary approach to the Gospels (Ibid.). He was led to believe that the Gospel writers were merely authors who used Jesus as a vehicle to express their own religious views.
Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John therefore are works of art, with John as the most developed and Mark as the least (Ibid.). These intellectuals paved the way for the popular method of historical-critical reason in the field of biblical studies (Ibid., 9).

Schweitzer concludes his analysis by suggesting two alternatives for Jesus research during this time period: thoroughgoing skepticism and eschatology (Ericksen 9). Thoroughgoing skepticism is credited to William Wrede (1859-1906), who is known for his speculation that Mark created the Jesus story in order to reinforce Christian dogma, since the authenticity of Christ’s messiahship cannot be proven (Ibid.). Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965) himself takes credit for thoroughgoing eschatology, proposing that Jesus was merely a prophet who erred in foretelling the coming of the Messiah and therefore died a martyr’s death to take on the pain of his error (Ibid., 9-10). It is at the end of this “Old Quest” era in historical Jesus research that we find theologians, clergymen, and lay people situated during the rise of National Socialism in Germany.

Let us reiterate Head’s criticism that the “No Quest” era following Schweitzer’s analysis abandoned any possibility of historical Jesus research at the adoption of its title (Head 57). Head elaborates by giving N.T. Wright’s justification in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*: “Unlike the nineteenth-century quests…‘scholarship after Schweitzer saw him as Jewish, and therefore not particularly relevant’” (Wright 798, qtd. in Head 57). However, Dr. Clive Marsh of the University of Leicester insists from a historical perspective that “labeling this period that of ‘No Quest’ is at best misleading, and at worse a sinister abdication of moral responsibility” (Marsh qtd. in Head 58). Scholar W. P. Weaver concurs in *The Historical Jesus in the Twentieth Century*, questioning the validity of omitting Nazi presentations of Jesus. Weaver inquires whether “the bitter anti-
Semitism of the Nazi period was in some degree a consequence of the previous, massive de-Judaizing of Jesus on the part of (generally Christian) scholars?” (Weaver qtd. in Head 58). This rise of dissonance among intellectuals concerning the offensive mislabeling of the “No Quest” period calls for a return to the analysis of the National Socialist portrait of Jesus. As we go about reconstructing this era of “pseudo-scholarship,” we will test the validity of the historical Jesus in the Third Reich in three areas of theological propaganda: Originary Narratives, Textual Revisions, and Artistic Presentations. Drawing on these three facets, we will then construct a synoptic-like portrait of Jesus in the context of National Socialism and assess its validity in historical Jesus research.

Jesus reconstructed in the context of alternative origin narratives delineates the National Socialist objective to liberate Christ from his binding Jewish roots, thereby justifying the discrimination and extermination of the Jewish community in Germany. We will explore how this supersessionist tendency affected scholars of racial theory, linguistics, history, theology, and geography in recreating Jesus’ heritage. The most pointed of these attempts, as we will find, were made in the fields of Assyriology and Far Eastern spirituality, coming to the forefront of academia by the turn of the twentieth century.

The next section, textual revisions, provides an analysis of how National Socialist theologians articulated party propaganda through existing religious doctrine and canon. As we will find, much of the sacred scripture was expunged due to its inability to merge with nationalistic ideals. The remaining text was stripped of any consistencies to the point where even well-known New Testament passages were obscured with neo-pagan, Germanic ideals that refuged Jesus’ role in Christianity’s origins. This portion of the
paper also addresses literary parallels and community catechisms identified in texts during the Third Reich.

While art during the Third Reich was subject to extreme surveillance and limited to romantic realism, these conditions were conducive for remolding Jesus visually in accordance with principles of racial purity, militarism, and masculinity. The most prominent artistic revisions in the field of theology still preserved today are found in ecclesiastical displays, hymnal lyrics, political cartoons and advertisements. We will discuss the theological implications of these illustrations referenced in the appendix at the end of this paper. The appendix following the paper is composed of images archived by both Susannah Heschel and Doris Bergen, contributors whom we will discuss below.

Just as modern Christian studies use the three synoptic Gospels to manifest a cohesive portrait of Jesus in the first century, we will integrate our three facets of Nazi propaganda--originary narratives, textual revisions, and artistic portrayals--to compose a comprehensive depiction of the National Socialist Jesus. This analysis will disclose inconsistencies in the ideal Christ during a totalitarian regime, as well as staple characteristics necessary for bolstering a Germanic savior. After examining this portrait of Christ, we will determine the validity of this particular construction and subsequently all constructions of the historical Jesus as reflections of a particular socio-political community as opposed to legitimate theories grounded in fact.

Credit is due to four scholars who helped shape this project, as many of the pertinent publications, doctrines, and images are unavailable for widespread use because of lack of translations and geographical proximity. The pioneer historians, Robert P. Ericksen and Doris L. Bergen, blazed a trail in scholarship of theology and ecclesiology
in the Third Reich in their books *Theologians Under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus, and Emanuel Hirsch* (1985) and *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (1996). Drawing on these works, Susannah Heschel constructed a survey on the same subject contingent upon primary sources and archival materials in her book *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (2008). Lastly, Peter M, Head’s article in the *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* (2004) highlighted the gaps in Third Reich historical Jesus analysis and projected the key points of research anticipated in this thesis. Without the background fieldwork performed by these scholars, this topic would not be feasible for an undergraduate project.
Section I: Origin Narratives

Defining and redefining Jesus’ origins was one of the chief projects of the religious facet of National Socialism, drawing on the disciplines of racial theory, linguistics, historicism, theology, and geography. Susannah Heschel identifies this effort as an extension of supersessionism or replacement theology. Nazi scholars attempted to literally replace the nation of Israel in God’s plan with the Christian church, or specifically in this case, Germany’s church. Heschel explains that the problem “was exacerbated by a sense of shame over Christianity’s origins and dependence on Judaism, encouraging theologians to invent alternative originary narratives within Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, or a vague ‘Aryanism’” (Heschel 27). As Germany became the new Israel for the fulfillment of God’s scheme, alternative constructions arose of a new Jesus unhindered by the pernicious Judaism the Third Reich fought so vehemently against. Curiously, we will find that National Socialist intellectuals relied heavily on existing scholarship from the mid-seventeenth century forward to constitute their Aryan, non-Semitic Jesus. As we will see, most of the ideas promoted by the Third Reich concerning the origins of the historical Jesus were borrowed from predecessors before the movement even came to fruition.

Jesus in Assyriology

For National Socialist racial theorists, historians, and theologians, the most straightforward method of redefining Jesus’ origins was to establish his place of birth as non-Semitic. This study and methodology became known as Assyriology, an intensive arena for establishing the nature of the population in Galilee after the Assyrian conquest
in the eighth century BCE (Heschel 56). Scholars Ernst Renan and Emil Schürer anticipated this challenge of geographic theology, setting forth descriptions of Galilee as an area with mixed populations in its “golden age” during Jesus’ lifetime (Ibid.). According to these Assyriologists, this ethnically heterogeneous atmosphere was substantiated by the following two claims: First, the Jewish Galileans in the region were alluded to in antiquity as a people with “laxity of religious observance and knowledge of the Torah,” discrediting an anchored Jewish culture in Galilee (Palestinian Talmud, Shabbat 16:8, 15d, qtd. in Heschel 56). Second, John 7:52’s reference to the lack of prophets emerging from Galilee delineates Jewish Galileans as a minority at the time. Emil Schürer depended on this evidence to declare that Jesus’ place of residence as an essentially Gentile region (Ibid).

Following Renan and Schürer was one of the most controversial authors of the nineteenth century, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, who extended the suppositions of Assyriology in his 1899 book Die Grundlagen des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts. Drawing on the work of ethnologists and biological racialists, Chamberlain produced a “lofty bible of anti-Semitism,” which sold 60,000 copies over a span often years (Head 64). Chamberlain devoted eighty pages to proving the Aryanism of Jesus by denouncing his Jewish roots and demonstrating syncretism in the region of Galilee (Ibid., 65). He reemphasized Renan and Schürer claims that of Galilee was essentially “heathen” as a result of the colonization by Assyrians, Phoenicians, and Greeks of pure Aryan blood post Assyrian conquest (Ibid.). While Jesus retained his Jewish nature in education and religion as a result of Aryans merging with Israelites, Chamberlain asserts that there is “not the slightest foundation for the supposition that Christ’s parents were of Jewish
descent” (Ibid.). He further evidences this claim by linguistic analysis of the formation of the larynx in Hebrew tongue verses Greek (Ibid.). Chamberlain’s claims were so prominent that Alfred Rosenberg made them known to Adolf Hitler while constructing the party propaganda and platform (Ibid.).

Contentions like Chamberlain’s were examined at the Third International Congress for the History of Religions in 1908 by Germany’s top Assyriologist Paul Haupt, professor at the University of Leipzig (Heschel 57). In Haupt’s lecture on “The Aryan Ancestry of Jesus,” he maintained that the term “Bethlehem” had roots in an old Assyrian name for the capital of Galilee, Nazareth, situating Jesus’ birthplace and heritage as Galilean (Ibid.). Haupt repeated Chamberlains’ claims of the Israelite deportation and subsequent Assyrian colonization of Galilee by primarily Iranians, interchangeable with Aryans (Ibid.).

As the trajectory from Renan to Chamberlain to Haupt indicates, these arguments were thoroughly incorporated into works of German university theologians in the twentieth century (Heschel 58). Professor of New Testament at the University of Gottingen, Walter Bauer, published an article in 1927 entitled “Jesus der Galiläer.” This article “validated the distinctions between the political, cultural, and religious life of Galilee and Judea,” placing “the Pharisees in control of Judea, while identifying the Galilee as decidedly non-Jewish and outside the realm of the political influence of Jerusalem” (Ibid., 60). Much of the scholarly community agreed and extended Bauer’s assertions, most notably Institute leader Walter Grundmann, who was studying at the University of Leipzig at the time (Ibid., 61).
Professor of systematic theology at the University of Gottingen, Emanuel Hirsch, used statistical arguments for conclusions on the subject (Heschel 61). After the fall of the Northern Kingdom in the eighth century BCE, Galilee became “heathen” and retained only enough Jews to constitute ten percent of the population (Ericksen 164). Hirsch consequently explained that, “according to all the rules of scientific probability, Jesus was of non-Jewish blood” (Ibid.). He further evidences this claim by explaining a trace of adultery in Jesus’ mother Mary, who allegedly had an affair with a Roman soldier named Panther, a fact that gospel writers suppressed to preserve Jesus’ Jewish roots congruent with the son-of David legend (Ibid.). Hirsch worked tirelessly to purify Jesus’ lineage through Greek onomastics and historical references in outside ecclesiastical sources (Ibid.). Heschel notes that despite Hirsch’s reputation, his theory held no sound evidence and was subsequently dismissed (Heschel 61).

Assyriologists used not only historical justifications but also the dichotomy between Judea and Galilee in apocalyptic eschatology to situate Jesus as purely Galilean (Heschel 61). The conflict between Galilee and Judea became congruent with Christianity versus Judaism. Rudolf Otto’s 1933 publication Reich Gottes und Menschensohn insisted that Jesus’ message “was not authentically Jewish because late Jewish apocalypticism was derived from Chaldean and Iranian traditions of a dualism of divine and evil forces, a notion that did not arise in Israel but originated in ancient Aryan sources and was expressed in texts such as…1 Enoch 105” (Otto 15, cited in Heschel 61-62). New Testament scholar Ernst Lohmeyer of the University of Breslau also distinguished between the two first-century eschatologies originating in Galilee and Jerusalem (Heschel 62). Starting with John 7:41, Lohmeyer determined that Galilee
demonstrated a “son of man” eschatology verses a “messiah” eschatology in Judea. This argument influenced many New Testament scholars like Johannes Leipoldt, who inserted Jesus’ opposition to Jewish messianism in his 1937 guide to religious instruction (Heschel 62-63).

Building on Lohmeyer’s “son of man” argument, professor of New Testament at the University of Gottingen, Wilhelm Bousset, used his prestige to bolster the notion that the phrase “son of man,” is absent as a formal title in Judaism (Heschel 59). Bousset argues in his 1903 Die Religion des Judentums that the phrase actually “stemmed from a syncretistic religious milieu within ‘Hellenism’--a category he employed to serve as a kind of “witch’s brew” of religious notions from India, Persia, Greece; but not from Jews” (Heschel 59). Bousset’s assertion leads us away from the efforts of Assyriology and into the realm of aligning Jesus with far Eastern spirituality.

A Buddhist Jesus

While Assyriologists attempted to align Jesus with an Indo-European background, their claims were just few among many contenders of Christ’s origins. Other attempts were made not to align Jesus’ background with Aryan descent, but to displace Christ from the context of Judaism completely. Heschel explains that this process started with the eighteenth century emphasis on race as the source of language, culture, and religion, because once Jesus’ racial identity was purified of Semitism, he could be aligned with any number of religious faiths (Heschel 40). Historian Colin Kidd identified the impetus for “an ideological space for the uninhibited articulation of racialist sentiments” in the decline of seventeenth century authority of scripture (Kidd 19 qtd. in Heschel 28-29). The
consequences two hundred years later resulted in the trend that race “did not always begin with biology, but with analyses of language that led to conclusions regarding religion, society, and morality. Racism had a linguistic and cultural genesis” (Heschel 29).

The authority of Kidd combined with acclaimed intellectuals like Friedrich Max Muller, linguist Adolphe Pictet, and Ernst Renan justified situating Jesus outside of the Jewish world and molding his portrait to Far Eastern religions.

The academic justification above, compiled with complaints of Jesus’ prominent Jewishness provoked German artistic and literary representations to identify with images and parallels outside of the Indo-European stamp (Heschel 38). In the 1880’s, artistic expressions of Jesus were comparable to deities from Teutonic myths like Baldur in Norse and Teutonic mythology (Ibid.). However, to preserve Christ’s teachings, textual sources aligned Jesus’ origins with Buddha. The first historian of religion to do so was Rudolf Seydel, professor of the University of Leipzig in the 1880’s (Ibid., 39). Seydel concluded that the gospels were roughly constructed from collections of Buddha legends, which began to appear more prominently in the Western world at the start of the nineteenth century (Ibid.). Seydel presents countless parallels in the myths of Jesus’ childhood, reminiscent of those described in the non-canonical “Infancy Gospel of Thomas,” and Buddha’s youth (Ibid.). Arthur Schopenhauer also identified parallels between Jesus and Buddha, not in their childhoods, but in teaching content and styles (Ibid.). Both figures preached asceticism and a religion of optimism, as opposed to the pessimistic nature of Judaism (Ibid.). Schopenhauer held no interest in reconstructing the life of the historical Jesus, but saw him instead as a “symbol for a negation of the world” (Ibid.). Schopenhauer’s symbolism is consistent with the cultic rituals of Zoroastrianism
and Buddhism, defining religion as “an ineffable, prelinguistic experience expressed in…symbol” (Ibid., 29-30).

German composer, theatre director, polemicist, and conductor Wilhelm Richard Wagner picked up on Schopenhauer’s East Asian influence in his own performing arts work (Heschel 39). Using French Orientalist’s Eugène Burnouf’s Buddhist legend, Wagner traded his play depicting Jesus through the Gospel accounts for an opera titled *Die Sieger*, presenting the Buddhist conception of Christ in 1856 (Ibid.). *Die Sieger* was not accepted as widely as Wagner’s 1882 *Parsifal*, namely because the Aryan redeemer in the latter was more Germanic at heart (Ibid.). Wagner’s devotees who attended and supported the annual Bayreuth Festival during this time were identified as members of *Der Bayreuther Kreis*, or “the Bayreuth Circle,” a fellowship of men supporting nationalist German politics and subsequently Adolf Hitler from the 1920’s forward (Spotts 113). The Bayreuth Circle’s monthly newsletter publicized the notion of an alternative racial identity of Jesus in numerous articles until 1939 (Heschel 39).

Another member of the Bayreuth circle, Leopold von Schröder, professor of Indology at the University of Vienna, commented on Jesus’ revision efforts as early as 1905 (Heschel 40). A forceful proponent of Aryan religion by 1923, von Schröder applauded “the heyday of the myth of the Aryan invasion of India, now extended to a myth of Europe’s Aryan reclamation via Jesus” (Ibid.). While von Schröder never clearly defined his “Aryan religion,” he provides hints of Indian influence, noting that at the time, “Buddha had taken the place of Socrates as the idol of the elucidated elite” (Ibid., 40). Another intellectual who presented alternative Christian roots was philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, author of the acclaimed 1883-1885 *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, which countless
volkisch theologians evidenced as an “anti-Sermon on the Mount” (Ibid.). Religious scholars Albert Kalthoff and Max Maurenbrecher urged pastors to give this book exemplifying “the racial fantasy of Aryanism” the same theological standing as Jesus (Ibid., 41). Nietzsche, in his 1888 *The Jewish Dysangelist*, dictates the failings of Christianity as a religious institution and the need for integration per se of faiths:

> You now realize what it was that came to an end with the death on the cross: a new and thoroughly original effort towards a Buddhistic movement of peace, towards real and not merely promised happiness on earth. For, as I have already pointed out, this remains, the fundamental difference between the two religions of decadence: Buddhism promises little but fulfills more, Christianity promises everything but fulfills nothing. (Nietzsche qtd. in “Writings” 413)

While Nietzsche added to the dialogue between Jesus and non-Semitic religions, Heschel explains that “The east…was too remote and too effeminate for some nationalist Germans seeking their cultural roots…and a Jesus styled after an Indian Buddha met neither the nationalist nor the militaristic interests of Germany” (Heschel 41). It was therefore in greater party interests to combine “the immanence of the Aryan of the East with the strength and racial purity of the German as exemplified in Teutonic myths” when composing originary narratives of Jesus (Ibid.).
Section II: Textual Revisions

As National Socialism permeated church life and theology, the demand for an Aryan Jesus called for textual support from sources grounded in the Christian doctrine. However, as Susannah Heschel points out, members of the German Christian movement “viewed texts as products of the cultural and religious beliefs of their era; the canonicity of the texts was irrelevant to their weight as historical evidence for the circumstances of Christianity’s origins” (Heschel 58). Naturally, Jews, who were viewed by National Socialism as genrasse or a toxic race whose main objective was to overthrow Aryans, tainted the first half of Germany’s Christian canon and subsequently Jesus’ image (Cochrane 22). This problem of supersessionism sparked a replacement theology that permeated Christianity’s most revered texts and literature (Heschel 29). Using historical-religious methodology, canonical texts were stripped of any inconsistencies or contradictions to German superiority and National Socialism’s platform, starting with any traces of Semitism in Biblical literature.

Old Testament Rejection

Chief intellectual of Hitler’s inner circle, Alfred Rosenberg, made the Third Reich’s theological objectives clear when he declared “The Old Testament as a book of religious instruction must be abolished once and for all. With it will end the unsuccessful attempt of the last one-and-a-half millennia to make us all spiritual Jews” (Head 69). However, Rosenberg’s words were far from groundbreaking; his objectives almost directly mirrored the intent of a Roman Christian shipbuilder over 1,000 years ago known as Marcion. Author Stephen L. Harris explains that Marcion was the first scholar to
advocate a scriptural canon stripped of its Judeo origins, seeking to advance instead a
Gnostic Christianity (Harris 245). The dichotomy between a ruthless Old Testament God
compared to the ethically superior deity of Jesus Christ in New Testament writings led
Marcion to compose a strictly edited Christian canon (Ibid.). Marcion denounced the
Jewish Yahweh and its Torah and replaced it with only Paul’s letters and a version of the
Gospel of Luke “with offensive references to the morally unacceptable biblical God”
removed (Ibid.).

Marcion’s attempt anticipated the vitriolic ambition with which National Socialist
pastors, theologians, and professors approached the Old Testament. While renowned
German scholars such as Gerhard Kittel and Emanuel Hirsch advocated the Old
Testament’s ethical, monotheistic values, the de facto solution for more zealous
advocates of scriptural purity was a complete expulsion of the Old Testament from the
study and practice of Christianity (Ericksen 50,163). This pattern emerged most
prominently at the “self-proclaimed bastion of National Socialism” residing at the
University of Jena, a small, liberal institution that was infiltrated by National Socialist
objectives (Heschel 201). Under the leadership of Rector Wolf Meyer-Erlach and
Institute leader and instructor Walter Grundmann, the status of Old Testament studies
during wartime suffered (Ibid., 214). The theological curriculum of the university
adopted the partisan History of Religions method, permeated with racial theory in order
to overturn current church doctrine and discipline (Ibid., 225). In a collaborative paper,
Grundmann explained the reform aspirations of Jena’s “new value system,” which
included “eradication of Jewish elements from church teachings, religious practices, and
the interpretation of Scripture, and from educational training given to pastors” (Ibid.,
These reform aspirations came to practice when courses like Church History were replaced with “History of Germanic Piety,” and the number of Old Testament professors on the faculty dwindled (Ibid., 227). The study of Jewish origins itself was replaced under the title “The Aryan Question,” and by 1938, the Thuringian Church Council ended the requirement of Hebrew language studies for graduation and pastoral ordination (Ibid.). Doctoral dissertations were even rejected for finding favorable connections with the Old Testament or demonstrating sympathy to Jewish scholars (Ibid., 234). The legacy of Old Testament and Apocrypha eradication from Christian doctrine and the nazification of the University of Jena’s curriculum proved that the oldest Jewish elements were easily detachable for the purposes of Nazism. This eradication was the first step to creating a Jesus acceptable to National Socialism.

**New Testament Revisions**

While the Old Testament was easily expunged from the German Christian canon due to its overwhelming Jewish nature, preserving and purifying Jesus in the New Testament writings was a top priority not so easily accomplished. Some New Testament verses manifested continuity with the party platform, for example, the declared German Christian favorite, First Corinthians 26:13 “Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong” (Bergen 74). However, most Gospel passages, according to the narrative setting and nature of the passion story, were infiltrated with Jewish degeneracy posing “serious challenges” to cleansing Christ (Ibid.). The most intellectually elite theological scholars in the German Christian circle reverted to rewriting the second half of the Christian canon, as its purification from Jewish influence was nearly impossible.
otherwise. We will focus on the four most prominent redrafting attempts in latter war years of Bishop Heinz Weidemann of Bremen, Emanuel Hirsch, Ludwig Muller, and the Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life.

Most New Testament revision was predicated on the methods of the History of Religions school orchestrated by professor of New Testament William Wrede of the University of Breslau (Heschel 58). Insisting that the faith of Jesus was inaccurately portrayed by Gospel writers for their own theological purposes, Wrede reinforced “historicism’s ability to identify with accuracy of the strata of the gospels and the nature of Jesus’ personality and message independent of the strictures of doctrine and church discipline” (Ibid., 59). Bishop Heinz Weidemann of Bremen was one of the first to extend Wrede’s methodology into German Christian manifestations of the Gospels. Weidemann claims to have printed fourteen thousand copies of “a translation of the New Testament along such lines,” in his 1936 publication titled Das Evangelium Johannes Deutsch (Weidemann 4-5 qtd. in Bergen 161). This radical rewriting of the Gospel of John removed any allusions or references to the prophets, Moses, Jewish history and geography (Head 80). Passages that depicted Jesus’ interactions with Pharisees, scribes, and temple confrontations were usually left unaltered, but portrayed an intensely hostile message nonetheless. One irregularity Bergen notes is the adjustment of the phrase “den of thieves” in the John 2:13-16 temple story to a German term Kaufhaus, connoting a department store (Bergen 161-162). Weidemann altered scripture aside from Jewish interactions to “reflect the realities of life in Nazi society” (Ibid.). For example, John 1:20 “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” was changed to “Behold the chosen one of God, who through his sacrifice brings blessing to the world”
(Weidemann qtd. in Bergen 162). Bergen notes that Weidemann admits his “manifesto of hatred toward Jews” brought about “no resounding success,” despite its support from publishers (Bergen 161).

In the same year, Reich Bishop Ludwig Mueller also attempted to translate a New Testament text—this time Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount instead of a whole Gospel itself. Mueller describes his motives as an “experiment of a new and up-to-date Germanization” that would render Jesus’ sayings “into our present form of thinking and speaking in such a way that it can be ‘understood’ in a new way, i.e., grasped with a German heart” (Head 80). Passages like Matthew 5:4-5 became militaristic messages, reformed to read “Happy is he who bears his sufferings like a man; he will find the strength never to despair without courage. Happy is he who is always a good comrade; he will make his way in the world” (Heschel 53). Renowned scholar Emanuel Hirsch of the University of Gottingen also experimented with versions of the Jesus’ words in the Synoptic gospels in 1939 (Bergen 162). Bergen comments in her footnotes that she located only one copy of this publication in the collection of Druckscriften at LKA Bielefeld, and the limited number of manuscripts most likely explains this publication’s omission from Robert P. Ericksen’s intensive study of Hirsch (Ibid.).

The last revision of New Testament literature we will discuss was perhaps the most prominent, as it was a project of Walter Grundmann’s legendary Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life. Founded in Eisenach on May 6, 1939, German Christian leaders Walter Grundmann and Siegfried Leffler assigned the Institute a number of projects in hopes of aligning Christianity with National Socialism (Head 76). One of these projects included a de-Judaized version of the New
Testament (Ibid., 79). The full extent of the proposal anticipated a publication entitled “Das Volktestament” or “The People’s Testament” with three parts: a compilation of the Synoptic Gospels, the Gospel of John, and the balance of the New Testament (Bergen 162). However, only part one was completed in December 1939 entitled “Die Botschaft Gottes” translated “The Message of God” (Ibid.). This 96-page work was best described as a “vague depiction of Christianity as a mix of familiar words and pithy sayings,” typically omitting the word Jew and any other references to Jewish culture, essentially situating Jesus in “a historical and geographical vacuum” (Ibid., 163). By limiting itself to tendentious quotations, the document lacked any narrative of Jesus’ life, completing omitting his birth story, the flight to Egypt, and genealogies inherent to the Synoptics (Ibid.). Despite its avant-garde abandonment of Biblical canonicity, part one sold 200,000 copies in six months, catering to clergy members in confirmation instruction and pastoral care as a tool “more effective than the New Testament, with its unclear, alien expression of the message of Christ” (Ibid., 162). One writer of the project justified its content by explaining the omission of “individual words that stem from the Palestinian congregation but were wrongly attributed to Jesus, because they are contradicted through the behavior of Jesus” (Ibid., 163). A good example of these erasures is the elimination of Jesus’ poignant cry on the cross in Luke 23:24, a plea too vulnerable and merciful towards Jews from a Christian Jesus (Ibid.). A more typical verse highlighted in the Institute’s New Testament is Matthew 6:28—a staple ethical instruction in the Sermon on the Mount. Bergen concludes that efforts of the Institute such as these were a product of “misguided and even pathetic devotion to some vestiges of Christianity” (Ibid., 164).
Literary Allusions

Germany’s Nazi Jesus was not only depicted through typical theological doctrine, research, and catechism, but also in works of literature. Heschel suggests political literary parallels beginning with the plot drama in Jesus’ own story, “particularly the contrast between Jesus’ life as a preacher and his death via crucifixion…[which] served as a palimpsest for nationalist motifs of suffering, redemption, and triumph” (Heschel 32). Theological narrative allusions were not only limited to the Gospel plot, but also extended to Germanic myths, folktales, and Teutonic rituals merged with Christian elements (Heschel 49). Scholar Joachim Kurd Niedlich led the commentary on “Germanic prefiguring and paralleling the Christian,” noting coinciding dates between Jesus birth and the birth of the sun in Teutonic ritual and common themes in Jesus’ and Germanic folktales that “warn of wolves in sheeps clothing” (Niedlich 29 qtd. in Heschel 49). Heschel notes that parallels such as these wove allusions of Jesus into “the new political and religious ethos,” calling for a Christ “better suited to militarism and murder” (Heschel 49). Following this notion, Niedlich identified the gruesome fairy tales written by the Grimm brothers, such as the tale of “Twelve Brothers” as a “sister Gospel” which God delineated for the Germans in a time of war (Niedlich 105).

Today, religion lecturer and author Philip Zaleski of Smith College also discusses this Nordic heritage and its links to Germanic ideals of the Third Reich. Zaleski relays Georgetown Professor G. Ronald Murphy’s observation that the Grimm masterwork “Kinderund Hausmarchen” (1812-1822) contains “cultural landmarks [which] are so permanently settled…into the human psyche that one could consider them religious at core” (Zaleski). The writings of Wilhelm Grimm especially reveal his German
personality as “an ardent Christian of Johannine leanings, a mystic rather than a theologian…who saw much of value in pagan religions insofar as they reflect in some way the light of Christ and the primacy of love” (Ibid.). In National Socialist terms, Grimm’s “light of Christ” was reflected in the male characters in the beloved “Snow White” and “Sleeping Beauty.” The princes in both fairy tales demonstrate several Christ-like parallels; breaking into creation (the rose-covered gate) for his bride, appearing in camouflage, and acting as an agent of resurrection through a kiss (Ibid.). If Christ parallels these masculine throne heirs, his princess or damsel is most certainly comparable to Doris Bergen’s analysis of Germany as the motherhood or bride figure of Jesus, a contradictory image we will discuss later in section four (Bergen 196-197).

**Catechism in the Christian Community**

While National Socialism’s fulcrum centered on intellectual elites and individuals in powerful positions, its legacy hinged on the ideological continuity flowing into community and youth circles. Although organizations like the Hitler Youth have received the most scholarly and media attention, a less exposed underscore of theological debate permeated schools and homes in the same political arena (Weinreich 54-57). From confirmation exams to standard textbooks, Doris Bergen elaborates on the impact of written religious revision on youth in the home and community.

Most reachable to the average German household was the phenomenon that “Specific words were attributed to Jesus that he never uttered, and sayings of Jesus that clearly revealed the nature of Judaism and in general were directed against the Old Testament and Jewish nature were suppressed” (Bergen 160). Theological propaganda that flowed from the pulpit to the congregation to the schools consisted of typical
conspiracy theory logic demonstrated at public forums. Generalized statements lacking scriptural or academic authority were widely available by the late 1930’s in German communities. Leader of the Berlin German Christians, Friedrich Tausch, gives a fine example in his 1937 speech.

Christ was no Jew. Christ himself was the greatest hater of Jews. Some clever people might quote Jesus’ words that salvation would come from the Jews, but Chamberlain clearly proved that sentence is not authentic. Because people did not accept Christ, from whom salvation came, a pious Jew out of defiance wrote in the margin: But salvation comes from the Jews! A subsequent scribe brought that remark into the text. (Tausch qtd.
in Bergen 157)

Tausch’s words had a resounding affect. Just two years later in March 1939, a German Christian confirmation exam poised the question “Who was Jesus Christ” and “Against whom did he fight?” (Bergen 159). The responses included sentiments like “A hero and a warrior” who fought against “Jews and Pharisees” (Ibid.) Examination responses became even more polemical as nationalistic efforts continued, identifying Hitler as “purifier of the ‘temple of the German Volk’” and presenting the Parable of the Good Samaritan as Gospel proof of Jesus’ anti-Jewishness (Ibid.). These typical responses were often fostered by standard textbook revisions bolstering German Christian movement ideals. Bergen identifies one title of a lesson called “Jesus’ Fight against the Jewish Spirit” as subjectively crafted to expose Jesus’ negative words towards Jews (Ibid.). For example, the following quotation from John 8:44-47 was given the specific introductory clause “Jesus addresses the Jews”:
You are of your father the devil and you will do the wishes of your father.

He was a murderer from the beginning, and dwelt not in the truth, because there is no truth in him…He that is of God hears God’s words: you, therefore, do not hear them, because you are not of God. (John 8:44-47, qtd. in Bergen 159)

Bergen notes that this type of scriptural exegesis was promoted and mandated by the Institute for Research into and Elimination of Jewish Influence in German Church Life (Bergen 160). Projects and circulars of this same Institute advocated certain responses for mothers of children who questioned the logic of the German Christian movement. For example, if a child were to propose, “Mother; we were told that Jesus was a Jew. Christianity doesn’t fit with out National Socialist thought,” the mother was instructed to answer, “Through the revolution…the eyes of us old people were too opened to many things…Because Christ was the opponent of the Jew, it is impossible that he himself could have come from Jewish blood and Jewish spirit” (Ibid., 195).

Even more evocative was the mandated catechism of the Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence from German Church Life, published in 1941 (Head 81). The few words summarizing Germany’s Christian principles speak for themselves:

Jesus of Nazareth in the Galilee demonstrates in his message and behavior a spirit which is opposed in every way to that of Judaism. The fight between him and the Jews became so bitter that it led to his crucifixion. So Jesus cannot have been a Jew. Until today the Jews persecute Jesus and all who follow him with unreconcilable [sic] hatred. By contrast, Aryans in particular can find the answers in him to their ultimate questions. So he
became the savior of the Germans. (Heschel ‘When Jesus was an Aryan’ 73 qtd. in Head 81)

This catechism mirrors the ancient Gnostic concept of receiving Christ as a form of special knowledge for the elite, or in this case, for the German community. This enlightened theological notion arguably contributed to superiority motifs archetypal of the Third Reich. Examples of catechism and text revision such as these indicate that theological propaganda perhaps penetrated the average household and children most, who were susceptible to the illegitimate exegesis and logical fallacies promoted by the comprehensive movement in efforts to retain the moral continuity of their Christian heritage.
Section III: Artistic Portrayals

An Aryan Jesus penetrated not only the anthropology, theology, and texts of the Third Reich, but also the visual and performing art inherent to German culture residing in the church. The most prominent and archived depictions of this Germanic Jesus reside within the visual portraits constructed in a puritanical attempt to free Christ from his Jewish roots in sanctuary displays. There also exist carefully recorded revisions to the sung verses and liturgy, accompanied by revealing illustrations, in the German Christian Protestant Hymnal. We will explore first the visual portraits of Jesus in studio art, and then move to his facet in the German hymnology shift.

Portraits

Susannah Heschel and Doris Bergen make available the little information and resources archived on the depictions of Jesus in National Socialist art. While predecessor Doris Bergen prioritizes the portrayal of a masculine Jesus in the arts, Heschel elaborates on the physiognomy of Christ’s figure in ecclesiastical wall murals, cartoons, and posters. The impetus behind portrait revival was not mutually exclusive from textual revision; complaints were made from the 1880’s forward that Jesus appeared too Jewish in depictions up to that point (Heschel 49). Nordic artist Matthias Grünewald predicated this challenge in his famous 1512-1516 Isenheim altar, moved from a church in Colmar to Munich in 1917 (Ibid.) While the Isenheim altarpiece was a commodity in the post-World War I era, depicting the crucifixion as “an uncanny representation of the contemporary postwar agony,” it failed to meet the needs of an aggressive, heroic Jesus of the National Socialist movement (Ibid.). As the Second World War unfolded, the crucifixion’s focal point was reinterpreted as “the immediate prelude to a grand resurrection” instead of a
dismal death of the suffering servant (Ibid., 50). Appendix Figures 1 and 7 provide an accurate representation of this interpretation, highlighting a “blond, handsome muscular Jesus, gazing upward” on the cross in a grand wall mural at the Lutheran church in the village of Offenbach-Biber (Ibid., 50-51). Closer details of these murals also indicate negative Jewish stereotypes in the crucifixion victims on either side of Christ; illustrating pathetic men with sharp, rigid noses, pathetic slouches, and dark, leathery skin (Figure 1,7; Heschel 51-52). Artistic depictions such as these were most prominent in 1935 and 1936, accompanied by swastikas on the altar, crosses inserted in the German motto wreath, and pictures of Hitler, Martin Luther, and German soldiers in the sanctuary (Ibid., 50).

In discussing portrait analysis, Heschel comments “Artistic depictions by colonized groups of a black, yellow, female, or even Jewish Jesus were flawed efforts not so much to claim that Jesus was black, yellow, female, or Jewish, but to claim white maleness for the racially subjugated group via Christ” (Heschel 28) Theologian Gerhard Kittel and racial scientist Eugen Fischer collaborated on this theory in a contribution to the 1939 seventh volume of Forschungsabteilung Judenfrage, which posed questions on the racial characteristics of ancient Jews (Ericksen 63-64). Claiming to develop a nominal study of Jewish portraits and third century Trier caricatures, Fischer and Kittel furnished their true objectives of proving the Jewish problem existed 2,000 years ago, using the paradoxical assimilation, proselytization, and separation of Israel to propose a Jewish conspiracy for world power (Ibid.). The volume’s evidence resided in eighty Egyptian mummy portraits from the second and third centuries A.D., nine of which Fischer categorized as ancient Jews of the “intellectual” or “insolent” Jewish type (Ibid., 65).
Kittel and Fischer’s combined effort to distinguish ancient Jewish caricatures from the Christian messiah’s Galilean background gave tenacious professional credit to the ideal image of an Aryan Jesus, and their scientific conclusions made way for artists to mold depictions of Jesus, unfettered from his Jewish chains.

**Christian Hymns**

Bavarian pastor Julius Leutheuser in a letter from the eastern front in May 1942 wrote “The most beautiful thing is when German people sing new songs about God, the Volk, and the Führer” (Bergen 50). Leutheuser’s radical conception of church music in the Third Reich was only whispered until the landmark Sports Hall Palace Rally on November 13, 1933, when Berlin German Christian leader, Reinhold Krause, voiced the movement’s objectives in a controversial speech (Heschel 114). Krause uttered, “We want to sing songs that are free from all Israelite elements. We want to liberate ourselves from the language of Canaan and turn to our German mother tongue. Only in the German mother tongue can humanity express its prayers, praise, and thanks in the most profound way” and was supposedly greeted by “loud applause” (Bergen 165). Krause’ eradication of all Hebrew elements from liturgy in church music was given intellectual credit in the same year by Wilhelm Caspari, professor of Old Testament at the University of Kiel and scholar of the ancient Israelite religion. Caspari called for the removal of specific words from hymnals including “Jehovah, messiah, son of David, Bethlehem, Judea, and Sabbath” while preserving the words “Amen, Hallelui, Hosanna, and Jerusalem” because of their concordance in the New Testament (Heschel 114). Professor of systematic theology of the University of Gottingen, Emanuel Hirsch, solidified this objective in his 1939 book *Das Wesen des Christentums*, which defined Jesus as Aryan (Ibid., 115). In his
publication, Hirsch urged that Hebrew and Old Testament traces in hymns be purged and replaced with more culturally pertinent phrases (Ibid.). For example, he suggested that the Hebrew “Halleluia” be replaced with “Gott sei sgelobt” meaning “God be praised” (Ibid., 115). Heschel explains that “The German Christian movement attempted not only to reconceive the theology but to alter Christian worship in keeping with Nazi racism, militarism, and hypermasculinity” (Ibid., 113).

While Heschel acknowledges the changes attempted in the conception of the hymnal, Bergen insists that “Only in the area of church music, far from the theological core of Christianity, did their assault on Jewish influence make less significant inroads. It is a testimony to the banality of their understanding of Christianity that, for the German Christians, notions of taste and appropriateness exercised a more effective brake on the project of dejudaization than did doctrinal or theological considerations” (Bergen 143). The number of dejudaized hymnals that came to fruition seems to indicate otherwise; Bergen and Heschel together record at least nine of these publications during the Third Reich era. The first attempt occurred early in 1898 titled Liederbuch für deutsche Studenten (Hymnal for German Students), a collection that predicated future hymnals with lyrics about war, soldiering, and the fatherland in response to the World War I era (Heschel 115). Years later in 1934, German Christians published their first official hymnal called So singen deutsche Christen, which contained German Christian poems set to familiar melodies (Ibid.). The collection held fifty-one songs divided into three specific categories of struggle, work, and meditation (Bergen 165). One year later in 1935, the German Christians expanded their publications to a liturgical guide for all occasions entitled Feierstunden Deutschen Christen (German Christian Celebrations) composed by
Wilhelm Bauer (Ibid., 167). This collection, according to Bauer, eliminated the “draggy musical style” that was “borrowed from the synagogue” and adjusted music and words according to aesthetic rather than moral or doctrinal standards (Ibid.). This avant-garde style was advertised in distributions like the March 1938 flyer of National Church wing of German Christians in Berlin, which included texts of twelve hymns recently composed (Ibid., 168). It is vital to note that at this point, none of the revised hymns mentioned Jesus (Ibid.).

This process continued in *Lieder der kommenden Kirche* (Songs of the Coming Church) edited by the infamous Bishop Weidemann, who had published a radical, offensive revision of the Gospel of John not well-accepted four years earlier (Heschel 115). This hymnal did not include overtly anti-Jewish statements like Weidemann’s previous revision, but instead reduced number of pietistic hymns and replaced them with twentieth century folksongs (Ibid.). Its success included 10,000 copies sold and wide circulation to regional bishops affiliated with German Christian congregations, especially in Bremen in hopes of becoming the national hymnal (Bergen 169). The military’s revised hymnal itself, *Feldgesangbuch* (Military Field Hymnal), took almost three fourths of the songs and lyrics from Weidemann’s book (Heschel 116). Despite the wide success, Bergen notes that a review of the collections until this point by an unnamed professor of theology detected more than just the eradication of strictly Jewish elements. In an analysis of the collection “Songs for divine celebrations” the professor counted that Christ is only mentioned fourteen times and did not appear in 33 hymns; in fact, the name “Jesus” itself is not found at all (Bergen 168). However, the most marginalizing hymnal publication was still to come.
One of the most practical works of Walter Grundmann’s *Institute for the Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life* according to Peter Head was its hymnbook project (Head 79). Siegfried Leffler appointed a working group for the project in 1939, and named unqualified Kurt Thieme editor in chief (Heschel 116-117). Heschel explains that the hymnal model according to Thieme was “Jesus himself…who had fought ‘a singular declaration of war against the Jewish race’” (Ibid.). Concurrent with Thieme’s claim was the rejection of any Jewish elements in German hymns, an objective relayed on July 6-7, 1939 at an Institute Conference (Bergen 169). Members announced that after examining over 2,300 hymns, 1,971 were denounced as Jewish in language or thought, 102 were accepted without alteration “as valuable German cultural property,” and 263 were being considered further (Heschel 117). The book was officially published in June 1941 titled *Grosser wir loben dich!* by the Weimar house, orchestrated by head of Institute finance Johnannes Sievers (Ibid., 118). Hymns written by non-Aryan Christians were eliminated, leaving a new hymnal with 284 songs and an additional section called “Von frommer deutscher Lebensart” (Pious German Ways of Life) with prayers and songs for family use (Ibid.). All but twenty-two hymns were altered or revised, and the new canon was widely accepted by soldiers, church communities in Thuringia, the Red Cross, etc, selling and distributing over 100,000 copies (Ibid., 124).

A literal celebration occurred after the Institute’s hymnal publication at the Wartburg chapel on June 13, 1941, where Grundmann and Dungs gave speeches praising the theological work of the Institute (Heschel 124). Many of the hymns’ essences can be detected in their illustrations throughout the collection, done by volksch artist Emil Ernst Heinsdorff (Ibid., 125). Heschel explains that the artist “Clearly intended to give hymn-
singing a forceful, wartime atmosphere, the hymnal’s drawings are highly militaristic, showing troops of soldiers with rifles over their shoulders; a contemplative knight in armor standing with a large sword; a soldier in uniform greeting his wife and two small children, and a knight in full armor, surrounded by flames” (Ibid.). The appendix following this paper contains some of the pertinent images paired with the hymns.

Figure 4 shows the title hymn “Grosser Gott, wir loben dich” (Holy God, We Praise Thy Name), an old and popular song translated to German from Latin. This hymn was noted as a favorite among stormtroopers and the SS because it equivocated church and nation, and a soldier is lovingly surrounded by faithful churchgoers in its accompanying illustration (Bergen 166). Even more vivid visually is the Figure 6 hymn “Heilig Vaterland” (Holy Fatherland), which boasts an illustration of a castle with the inscription “A mighty fortress is our God, a trust shield and weapon” (Heschel 124). The castle in this picture takes on the connotation of a religious and political German institution willed by God with medieval, militaristic allusions.

While none of the hymnal illustrations contain a depiction of Jesus, the words in the Baptismal hymn titled “Tender Child of German Blood” reveal that “Christ, his blood, and his resurrection were de-emphasized, as in the baptismal formula, ‘We baptize you that you may be consecrated and brave in life, faithfully committed to the Volk in a new time of truth’” (Heschel 124). The Institute’s hymnal reached beyond weekly services to inspire new Christmas Cantatas like “The Heliand” (The Savior), which circulated in 1940 restating the gospel story in Saxon terms (Bergen 170). Figure 3 shows an example of how liturgical propaganda stemming from Institute ideals was advertised. The poster displays an announcement for the 300th anniversary of the Passion Play at Oberammergau
Germany in 1934, emphasizing the caption “Germany is calling you!” This extension could be deemed an equivocation or integration of state and religion at best, mobilizing citizens to preserve German culture in song, verse, and visual representations.
Section IV: A Germanic Jesus

Now that we have examined Jesus in light of National Socialist originary narratives, textual revisions, and artistic portrayals, we can attempt to construct a comprehensive portrait of Germany’s Christ in the era leading up to and during the Third Reich. While theologians, racial scientists, historians, linguists, and others provide a myriad of Jesus’ imposed characteristics, we can narrow them down to four central, distinctive qualities. The Germanic Jesus in the context of National Socialism is first masculine, second militaristic, third anti-Semitic, and fourth non-canonical. It should be noted that evidence for these trait claims, especially those of militarism and masculinity, overlaps due to the skillful aptitude with which writers, speakers, and artists integrated the holistic portrait of a National Socialist Jesus into publications. Therefore, we will do our best to distinguish the Nazi facets of Jesus by breaking the evidence apart without losing the integrative essence of the declarations.

Masculine Jesus

The call for a masculine Jesus was initiated not at the start of the Third Reich, but at the close of the First World War. In light of the tremendous loss and shame following Germany’s defeat and subsequent economic and political crises in the 1920’s, blame was cast on the church for failing to “rally the people during the war and the years to follow because it had fallen victim to emasculating forces” (Bergen 68). German Christian leader Joachim Hossendfelder in response urged an “aggressive Christianity” whose manliness was in “sharp contrast” to the previous conceptions of the religion as one “for the weak” and “inappropriate” for males (Ibid., 66). In an explicit speech, Hossenfelder
asserted “Jesus Christ stood alone without any external means of support in the tumult of his time…He is a shining example of heroic courage…Christian faith is a manly, heroic matter” (Ibid., 66-68). In response to the German Christian proclamation, clergymen began to “extol the manly church as a soldierly church” in opposition to an effeminate home front that failed Germany in the preceding years (Ibid., 66).

We see evidence of this characteristic in the parallel drawn between German-born Christian legend Martin Luther and Jesus. Although Martin Luther was not a biblical figure, his amendable nature “exemplified the fusion of manliness, Christianity, and Germanness. Although he was not a soldier, Luther’s rejection of monasticism and celibacy gave him solid potential as a paragon of manliness” (Bergen 75). Other exemplary figures included Reich Bishop Ludwig Muller, both in his appearance and writings. As previously discussed, Muller attempted to render Jesus’ sayings “into our present form of thinking and speaking in such a way that it can be ‘understood’ in a new way, i.e., grasped with a German heart” (Head 80). Muller himself demonstrated this new “German way” at public appearances, where he consistently boasted a military uniform, “spoke in a course manner,” and often referred back to his wartime memories (Bergen 75). In this sense, Muller exhibited the essence of a “manly Christianity” (Ibid.). In not just his appearances, but also his speeches, Muller used language as an essential tool “in the construction of a manly image,” exemplified in his reaction to the Sports Palace Affair (Ibid., 75-77). An illustrative photograph of Muller in this context is included in the appendix following labeled Figure 8.

We also have evidence of a masculine religiosity through artistic portrayals of Jesus. As noted, the prince figures in many of the Grimm Brother Fairy Tales were