

Nazi Decontextualization of the Bible

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Abstract: *When spreading antisemitic ideology, Hitler and his followers sometimes turned to the Bible to verify and support their hatred of the Jews. Passages such as “you are of your father the devil,” were used to encourage Bible-believing Christians that Jesus himself was antisemitic and that those who held antipathy towards the Jews were following Jesus’s legacy. However, many of these passages that the Nazis used to support their antisemitism were taken out of context and the original intent of the author was ignored. Anti-Jewish Christian expositors also ignored the contexts of Biblical passages—expositors both during the time of the Nazis and earlier. This article will consider this decontextualization of the Bible by the Nazis and anti-Jewish theologians. It suggests that if the original meaning of the text has been obscured by decontextualization, the solution is not to reject the text as anti-Jewish, but rather to reevaluate the anti-Jewish interpretation and recontextualize the passage.*

Keywords: Christian-Jewish Relations, Anti-Judaism, Nazi Theology, Christian Antisemitism, Biblical Context

Introduction

Hitler and the Nazis quoted from and alluded to the Bible in order to support their position against the Jews. Multiple times, Hitler quoted the Bible in *Mein Kampf*. And perhaps upon that basis, he made the assertion that he was “fighting the work of the Lord.”¹ At the same time, it is crucial to recognize that these Biblical assertions were not without consequences—in 1939, Germany was a nation that was almost entirely Christian.² Christian rhetoric and Biblical quotations had the power to sway crowds, entice Christian followers, and justify anti-Christian behavior as Christian. Yet how could that really be possible? How could one use the Bible,

¹ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), 65.

² Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 546.

a book with the central message of “love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18; Matt 22:39), to support the hatred and eventual murder of millions? Could it be that the Bible itself taught the hatred of the Jews?

In fact, the exact opposite was and is true. Both the Old and the New Testaments of the Bible speak unabashedly about God’s love for the Jews—declaring them to be God’s holy people and a special treasure. In the Hebrew Bible, Jeremiah wrote:

Thus says the LORD, who gives the sun for light by day and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar—the LORD of hosts is his name: ‘If this fixed order departs from before me, declares the LORD, then shall the offspring of Israel cease from being a nation before me forever.’ Thus says the LORD: ‘If the heavens above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth below can be explored, then I will cast off all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done, declares the LORD.’ (Jer 31:35–37)³

Such was the inviolability of God’s relationship with Israel. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul cautioned the believers in Rome about any animosity that they might hold towards Judaism—again affirming God’s relationship with Israel: “But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you” (Rom 11:17–18). Thus, the believers had been grafted into the Jewish tree—and while some of the Jewish branches had been broken off because of unbelief, the Jewish tree was still alive and was the very basis through which the believers in Rome could have a relationship with God. The root supported them, not the other way around.

How, then, could Hitler and the Nazis use the Bible to condemn the Jews? This article will pursue that question—looking first at the way that the Bible was used by Nazis against the Jews, and then considering how the foundation had been laid for this anti-Jewish misuse of Scripture within Christianity itself in both antiquity and leading up to the modern era. Overall, it will emphasize that both Nazis and Christians throughout the ages took passages of the Bible out of their context in order to use them against the Jews. This decontextualization of Scripture was done in multiple ways, and

³ All Bible quotations are taken from the *English Standard Version*.

Thus, highly influential Christian thinkers decontextualized Scripture when expounding about the position of the Jews, perhaps laying the foundation for the accepted misuse of Scripture by the Nazis so many years later.

Conclusion

In bringing all of this together, it is clear that both Hitler and his followers misused the Bible—taking passages out of their historical, literary, and Biblical contexts when referring to the Jews in order to convince those who held the Bible in high esteem that Scripture supported the Nazi position. Perhaps they were able to get away with this wresting of Scripture because this form of decontextualized misinterpretation of Biblical passages about Jews had become part of the Christian tradition. This article has examined some of the polemical quotations and allusions by John Chrysostom and Martin Luther and considered how these quotations consistently are used out of context, just like the use of Scripture by Nazi theologians. What is needed to establish a stronger pattern is further study of the writings of other Christian theologians.

If this pattern can indeed be found, the implication is powerful: not only have Christians taught incorrectly about Jews for centuries—which is readily acknowledged—but Christians have misunderstood their own Scriptures for centuries. Not only, then, should Christians reevaluate their teaching in order to consider the impact of those doctrines in actions, but the very basis of those doctrines should be reconsidered. In other words, perhaps Christianity needs to reexamine its own holy text focusing this time on the historical, literary, and Biblical contexts of the passages

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