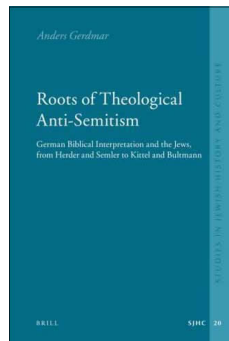


○ **REVIEW OF ANDERS GERDMAR, *ROOTS OF THEOLOGICAL ANTI-SEMITISM: GERMAN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION AND THE JEWS, FROM HERDER AND SEMLER TO KITTEL AND BULTMANN***  
(LEIDEN AND BOSTON, 2009)

*Esther Fuchs, University of Arizona*



This massive study of German New Testament interpretation, over a period of two hundred years (1750–1950) since the emergence of modern biblical exegesis, explores the shadow side of Christian theology, especially as it was articulated during the Nazi era. Gerdmar links Protestant theological configurations to the historical context and political ideology that consciously and unconsciously motivated influential thinkers whose work continues to influence contemporary scholarship.

Gerdmar begins with a definition of anti-Semitism as a distinct racist movement that emerged in Germany in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a movement that sought to legitimize the political disenfranchisement of the Jews based on allegations of inferiority. Gerdmar links this modern movement to traditional religious and cultural manifestations of anti-Judaic polemic, or representations of Judaism as a religious system inferior in some sense to Christianity. Each theologian is analysed as a symptom of a particular time and place, and as an agent influencing both religious and secular attitudes toward Jews and Judaism. Three basic and interrelated questions are posed in each specific analysis: How are Jews characterised or stereotyped? How is Jewish historiography described? Does the theologian under discussion legitimise anti Semitic discrimination and oppression? Though he focuses on modern Christian anti-Semitism, Gerdmar concedes that the problem he investigates can be traced to the earliest origins of Christianity: ‘The perspective that I am writing from is that of a Christian exegete, with a pathos to counter anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism as the dark companions of Christianity from the time of the Letter to the Romans until today – an anti-Semitism that has not ceased but is evident in old and new forms (p. 20)’.

The book is divided into four parts, each dealing with a distinct historical period and exegetical tradition: enlightenment exegesis, salvation-historical exegesis, form criticism and Nazi exegesis. Enlightenment exegesis tends to derogate the Old Testament in the name of rational, moral and universalistic principles of European deism. Thus the founders of Protestant interpretation, the likes of Johann Salomo Semler and Johann Gottfried Herder sought to draw sharp distinctions between the Old religion which they portrayed as savage, primitive and foreign, and the new religion which they depicted as spiritual, ethical and superior. These representations fed an emerging German nationalist fervour that sought to set the 'Volk' apart from 'foreign' elements, like the Jews. Salvation-historical exegesis, closely related with the Pietistic movement which emerged in the 1880s, upheld the role of the Jews in a Christian redemptive schema. Leading exegetes in this tradition perceive Judaism as an essential preparatory stage, without which Christianity could not fulfill its mission in the world. The Philo-Semitic articulations, of the likes of Johann Tobias Beck and Franz Delitzsch, seek to highlight the continuities between Judaism and Christianity, and to question the Greco-Roman, or pagan, influence on the history of Christianity. In this exegesis, Christian configurations appear as having already been foreshadowed and outlined in the Old Testament, which appears as a shared origin, rather than as degenerate form of Christian religion. Though it does not oppose Judaism explicitly, this exegetical phase is closely allied with missionary efforts to convert the Jews who, after the Napoleonic wars, have emerged as citizens – at least in theory - of the new European nation states. Form Criticism, which emerged after World War I, reflects an ambiguous attitude on the part of its three most prominent practitioners: Karl Ludwig Schmidt, Martin Dibelius and Rudolf Bultmann. On the one hand Jesus is Jewish; on the other, there is a rift between him and 'the Jews.' While all three exegetes opposed Nationalist Socialism explicitly and consciously, their tendency to depict 'the Jews' in oppositional terms implicitly reinforced the fascist ideology that began to gain momentum during this period.

Nazi Exegesis, the exegetical work of officially self-proclaimed members of the Nazi party, seems to share much in common with all the preceding phases. The work of Gerhard Kittel, for example, presents Jews as the eternal other, a homeless and restless foreign people who have lost their land, in compliance with Jesus' curse. Thus, Kittel justifies the exclusion and oppression of Jews in the Nazi state as part of a biblical scheme. According to Kittel, the conversion of Jews cannot solve the 'Jewish problem' which is rooted in an inalterable divine curse, and punishment for Jewish assimilation. At the same time, Kittel agrees that Christianity is rooted in Palestinian late Judaism, and that the New Testament is a fulfillment of the Old Testament. Kittel sets up the German Christian state as an ideal, and warns that assimilated Jews pose a serious threat to it. Despite his racial and essentialist interpretation of the 'Jews' Kittel did not explicitly justify violence against Jews in Nazi Germany. Despite the numerous ambiguities and inconsistencies in Kittel's exegetical work, fundamentally, he tended to dichotomise Judaism and Christianity, and eventually this contrast became racial. His theological legitimisation of the suffering of the Jews is not so much borne out by the text, as by his political sympathies and identification with Nazi ideology. Walter Grundmann, a registered member of the Nazi party, took the binary opposition between Judaism and Christianity to a new level. According to his interpretation, Jesus can only be understood in his opposition to the Jews. Hellenistic, Galilean, German and Aryan identity is posited over against Judean, Pharisaic, Jewish identity as both culturally and racially superior. Grundmann's exegetical strategy is to denigrate, negate and derogate all things Judaic

and to drive them out of the Church. In political terms, this strategy complemented the politics of driving Jews out of the Germanic *lebensraum*.

The conclusion of the book suggests that the differences between Nazi Exegesis and previous interpretive trends in German Protestantism are not as obvious as one may believe. The main difference refers to the level of conscious, intentional and official articulations of political positions vis-à-vis the 'Jewish Question.' Nazi exegetes did not hesitate to openly promote policies of persecution and discrimination. The fundamental notions of binary opposition between the Old Testament and the New Testament as well as the notion that the New Testament is the fulfillment of the Old Testament can be traced to earlier exegetical traditions. Gerdmar thus demonstrates that anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism have deep roots in Protestant exegesis and that the difference between Nazi Exegesis and non-Nazi exegesis is a matter of degree rather than substance. Gerdmar concludes that even in Philo-semitic exegesis, Judaism is constructed as legalistic, leading to the justification of conversion, and that supersessionist prejudice informs all traditional exegetical approaches to Judaism. Gerdmar suggests that the only approach capable of withstanding the anti-Judaic currents that inform Protestant German exegesis is the one that posits an organic continuity between the two testaments. This organic connection construes the Old Testament as the foundation of the New Testament, Jesus as a Jew who preached Jewish ideas, modern Jews as the descendants of biblical Israel and as a crucial factor in any divine salvation plan for humanity. Gerdmar concludes that anti-Semitic bias informs Protestant exegesis, much as the latter informed and promoted anti-Semitic policies during the last two hundred years. He insists that Christian theological approaches to the New Testament must recognise that the exegetical enterprise is not merely a religious activity, but a political and cultural enterprise. Calling for a hermeneutics of suspicion toward texts and interpretations, Gerdmar stops short of inviting a critical interrogation of the New Testament itself as an ideological and political text. Meticulously researched, balanced and profoundly aware of the politics of interpretation, this book is an important contribution to ideological criticism, and critical theory.