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The Church and the Jewish Question in Dietrich Bonhoeffer: From Theological Critique to an Ethics of Responsibility

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Abstract

This study explores Dietrich Bonhoeffer's essay *The Church and the Jewish Question* (1933) within the historical context of Nazi Germany and the position of the Jewish population in both society and the Church. At the heart of the analysis lies the question of how Bonhoeffer conceptualizes the responsibility of the Protestant Christian community toward the Jews under conditions of state-sponsored institutional injustice. The article argues that this early text constitutes one of the first formulations of the ethics of responsibility that would later become a defining characteristic of Bonhoeffer's theological thought. Employing historical-critical and theological-ethical approaches, the study examines the relationship between the Church, the state, and the Jewish question in Germany during the 1930s. The analysis demonstrates that, as early as 1933, Bonhoeffer had already developed a concept of active ecclesial responsibility toward victims of injustice. At the same time, it identifies certain limitations in his approach, insofar as the principal focus of his argument remains the responsibility of the Church rather than the development of a theology of Judaism in the modern sense. The article concludes that this essay possesses both historical and contemporary relevance, as it raises enduring questions concerning the limits of ecclesial neutrality and the Church's responsibility in the face of social injustice.

Keywords: Dietrich Bonhoeffer; Jewish question; Church; Nazism; ethics of responsibility; Protestant theology.

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1. Introduction

The relationship between the Protestant Christian community and the Jewish people constitutes one of the most complex issues in contemporary theology and church history. This question assumed particular significance with the rise of National Socialism in Germany and the gradual marginalization, discrimination, and persecution of Jews throughout the 1930s. Faced with rapidly changing political circumstances and the increasing intrusion of the state into both public and ecclesiastical life, the Protestant Church in Germany confronted a challenge that was not merely political but profoundly theological and ethical.

Among the Protestant theologians who sought to respond to this challenge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer occupies a distinctive place. As Eberhard Bethge observes, Bonhoeffer's engagement with the Jewish question marked one of the decisive turning points in both his theological development and his personal life, for it was his confrontation with National Socialist ideology that gradually led him toward an increasingly explicit form of ecclesiastical resistance.¹ His essay *The Church and the Jewish Question* (*Die Kirche vor der Judenfrage*), written in 1933, represents one of the earliest attempts to formulate a Christian response to the situation of Jews in Nazi Germany.²

Bonhoeffer begins from the observation that, in 1933, Jews in Germany were subjected to discriminatory state measures solely on the basis of their ancestry, irrespective of their religious affiliation. In his view, this situation confronted the Church with two fundamental questions: how should it assess the actions of the state, and what attitude should it adopt toward baptized Jews within its own congregations? These questions became the point of departure for his reflection on the relationship between the Church, the state, and Christian responsibility.³ Consequently, even several years before the systematic extermination of European Jewry began, the status of German Jews had already become a critical focal point in early historical and theological analyses of the Nazi regime. Although the systematic destruction of European Jewry had not yet begun, the early years of National Socialist rule established the legal and social mechanisms that would ultimately lead to their complete marginalization and persecution. Bonhoeffer's essay is therefore significant not only as a contribution to Protestant theology but also as one of the earliest Christian responses to the exclusion of Jews from German society.

Bonhoeffer insisted that the Church could not remain indifferent to injustice inflicted upon individuals or social groups. Contrary to the view that the Church's mission should be confined exclusively to the

¹ Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 286–290.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Church and the Jewish Question," in *Berlin: 1932–1933*, ed. Larry L. Rasmussen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 12 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 361–373.

³ Bonhoeffer, "The Church and the Jewish Question," p. 362.

spiritual sphere, he maintained that the Church is called to evaluate the actions of the state critically whenever the state abandons its fundamental responsibility to uphold justice.⁴

Proceeding from these considerations, the present study is structured into several thematic sections. It begins by outlining the historical context in which *The Church and the Jewish Question* was written. This is followed by an examination of Bonhoeffer's understanding of the relationship between the Church, the state, and the Jewish question, together with an analysis of the ethical implications of his position. The concluding sections consider the contemporary reception of Bonhoeffer's thought and its significance for subsequent discussions concerning the relationship between Christianity and Judaism.

Special attention is devoted to Bonhoeffer's essay *The Church and the Jewish Question* and to the concept of responsibility that emerges from it. The study proceeds from the premise that this text represents one of the decisive milestones in the formation of Bonhoeffer's ethical thought and already contains the foundations of what would later be developed more systematically in his *Ethics*.⁵ At the same time, the article demonstrates how Bonhoeffer's reflections on the position of Jews in Germany transcend the immediate political crisis of the period and become an important point of departure for later theological discussions on Christian responsibility toward the persecuted. In this respect, his approach makes a significant contribution not only to our understanding of Protestant resistance to National Socialism but also to the development of modern Jewish-Christian relations and theological reflection on the role of the Church within society.

The originality of the present study lies in demonstrating that Bonhoeffer's essay should be interpreted not merely as a response to the Jewish question but as a foundational text in the development of the ethics of responsibility that would later receive systematic expression in *Ethics*.

1.1. State of Scholarship

To fully appreciate the scholarly reception of *The Church and the Jewish Question*, it is essential to contextualize both Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a theologian and the socio-ecclesial conditions of early 1930s Germany. Bonhoeffer was an influential German Lutheran pastor and theologian whose critical engagement with National Socialism quickly set him apart within the Protestant establishment. Following Adolf Hitler's rise to power in January 1933, the German Protestant Church faced unprecedented political coercion and internal division, exacerbated by the emergence of the *Deutsche Christen* ("German Christians") movement, which sought to synthesize Christian doctrine with Nazi racial ideology. It was precisely within this volatile historical climate—characterized by the state's totalitarian overreach and the Church's widespread institutional compromise—that Bonhoeffer formulated his earliest theological critique of Nazi policies regarding the persecution of Jews. This growing crisis eventually led to the formation of the Confessing Church (*Bekennende Kirche*) and the adoption of the Barmen Declaration of 1934, which rejected the Nazi-aligned *Deutsche Christen* ideology and affirmed the sovereignty of Christ over the state. Consequently, Bonhoeffer's early writing directly contributed to the theological foundations of this broader resistance movement.

Over the past several decades, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's essay *The Church and the Jewish Question* has attracted sustained scholarly attention, particularly within studies devoted to Protestant resistance to National Socialism, Christian-Jewish relations, and the development of Bonhoeffer's ethical theology. Although scholars generally agree that the essay represents one of the earliest Protestant responses to the anti-Jewish policies of the Nazi regime, they differ considerably in their assessments of its

⁴ Bonhoeffer, "The Church and the Jewish Question," p. 363.

⁵ Throughout this article, references to Bonhoeffer's ethical thought are based on the following edition: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (Rijeka: Ex Libris, 2007).

theological significance and its place within the broader trajectory of Bonhoeffer's thought. Consequently, the existing scholarship presents a rich but diverse body of interpretations, leaving several important questions open for further investigation.

The foundation of virtually all contemporary Bonhoeffer research was laid by Eberhard Bethge, whose monumental biography remains the indispensable point of departure for any serious study of Bonhoeffer's life and theology. Bethge situates *The Church and the Jewish Question* within the dramatic political developments of 1933 and argues that Bonhoeffer's confrontation with National Socialism marked a decisive turning point in both his theological development and his personal life. In Bethge's interpretation, the Jewish question became one of the principal catalysts leading Bonhoeffer from academic theology toward active ecclesiastical and political resistance.⁶ While Bethge carefully reconstructs the historical circumstances surrounding the essay, his primary concern remains Bonhoeffer's intellectual and spiritual biography rather than a systematic analysis of the essay as an early expression of Bonhoeffer's ethics.

A different perspective has been developed by Stephen R. Haynes, who has devoted considerable attention to Bonhoeffer's reception in post-war scholarship and to his place within Christian-Jewish dialogue. Haynes argues that Bonhoeffer occupies a unique position among twentieth-century Protestant theologians because he recognized, earlier than many of his contemporaries, that the persecution of the Jews presented not merely a political crisis but a profound theological challenge for the Church.⁷ At the same time, Haynes emphasizes that Bonhoeffer's position should not be interpreted anachronistically. Although Bonhoeffer clearly rejected racial discrimination and opposed the exclusion of Jews from ecclesiastical life, he nevertheless remained within important aspects of the Protestant theological framework of his own era.⁸

Similar conclusions are reached by Andreas Pangritz, whose work focuses specifically on Bonhoeffer's relationship to Judaism and the Jewish people. Pangritz argues that Bonhoeffer's importance lies not in having developed a modern theology of Judaism but in recognizing that the treatment of the Jews constituted a decisive test of the Church's faithfulness to the Gospel.⁹ His studies have significantly contributed to understanding the theological dimensions of Bonhoeffer's opposition to anti-Jewish legislation, while also drawing attention to the historical limitations that shaped his thinking.

Expanding on these historical limitations, Nicholas Scott-Blakely examines the persistence of traditional Protestant anti-Judaic theological patterns in Bonhoeffer's early writings. Scott-Blakely argues that while Bonhoeffer decisively opposed state violence against Jews, his early theological reasoning remained partially bounded by historical supersessionist concepts regarding the role of the Church in relation to Israel.¹⁰

The broader historical context of Protestant resistance has been examined extensively by Victoria J. Barnett. Rather than concentrating exclusively on Bonhoeffer, Barnett situates his activities within the wider spectrum of Protestant responses to National Socialism. Her work demonstrates that Bonhoeffer's position was exceptional precisely because he moved beyond expressions of personal disagreement

⁶ Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 286–290.

⁷ Stephen R. Haynes, *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon: Portraits of a Protestant Saint* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 82–85.

⁸ Stephen R. Haynes, "Bonhoeffer, the Jewish People and Post-Holocaust Theology," *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 2, no. 1 (2007): 36–52.

⁹ Andreas Pangritz, *Bonhoeffer and the Jews* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019), 45–52.

¹⁰ Nicholas Scott-Blakely, "The Legacy of Anti-Judaism in the Works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer," *Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* 18, no. 1 (2019), <https://jsr.shanti.virginia.edu/back-issues/7127670-2/the-legacy-of-anti-judaism-in-the-works-of-dietrich-bonhoeffer/>.

toward a theological critique of state injustice and an increasingly active form of resistance.¹¹ Barnett's historical analysis therefore provides an essential framework for understanding the significance of Bonhoeffer's early writings.

The ethical implications of Bonhoeffer's theology have been explored in particular depth by John W. de Gruchy and Clifford J. Green. De Gruchy interprets Bonhoeffer's theology primarily through the lens of public responsibility, emphasizing its continuing relevance for questions of justice, reconciliation, and social transformation in contemporary societies.¹² Furthermore, broader contextual assessments collected in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer* provide essential insights into the theological developments surrounding his thought.¹³ In addition, recent contributions such as those by Mark Braverman further re-examine Bonhoeffer's stance and its implications within contemporary discourse.¹⁴ Green, by contrast, focuses on the internal development of Bonhoeffer's ethical thought, arguing that responsibility constitutes one of the central organizing principles of his mature theology.¹⁵ Both scholars demonstrate that Bonhoeffer's later ethical writings cannot be understood apart from the historical experiences that shaped his response to National Socialism.

A similarly important contribution has been made by Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, whose biography places particular emphasis on the continuity of Bonhoeffer's theological development. Schlingensiepen challenges interpretations that portray Bonhoeffer's resistance as a sudden reaction to political events, arguing instead that his opposition to National Socialism emerged gradually from convictions already present in his earlier theological reflections.¹⁶ From this perspective, *The Church and the Jewish Question* should be understood not as an isolated political intervention but as an important stage in the development of Bonhoeffer's mature theology.

Despite the substantial body of scholarship devoted to Bonhoeffer, an important gap remains. Most studies have concentrated either on Bonhoeffer's opposition to National Socialism, his relationship to Judaism, or the historical significance of his resistance. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to examining *The Church and the Jewish Question* specifically as one of the earliest coherent formulations of the ethics of responsibility that would later receive systematic expression in *Ethics*. Existing scholarship frequently acknowledges the continuity between these two texts but rarely places this relationship at the centre of the analysis.

The present study seeks to address this gap by examining *The Church and the Jewish Question* not merely as a response to the immediate political circumstances of 1933, nor solely as an early contribution to Christian reflection on the Jewish question, but as a foundational text in the development of Bonhoeffer's ethics of responsibility. By integrating historical analysis with theological-ethical interpretation, the article argues that Bonhoeffer's response to the persecution of the Jews already contains the essential conceptual framework that would later become central to his mature ethical theology.

¹¹ Victoria J. Barnett, *For the Soul of the People: Protestant Protest Against Hitler* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 45–49.

¹² John W. de Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa: Theology in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1984).

¹³ John W. de Gruchy, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

¹⁴ Mark Braverman, "Theology in the Shadow of the Holocaust: Revisiting Bonhoeffer and the Jews," *Theology Today* 79, no. 2 (2022): 146–165.

¹⁵ Clifford J. Green, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999).

¹⁶ Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906–1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance* (London: T&T Clark, 2010).

1.2. Methodology

This study employs an interdisciplinary methodology that combines historical-critical analysis with theological-ethical interpretation. The historical-critical approach provides the necessary framework for examining Dietrich Bonhoeffer's essay *The Church and the Jewish Question* within the political, ecclesiastical, and intellectual context of Germany in 1933, particularly in relation to the National Socialist seizure of power and the introduction of anti-Jewish legislation. Rather than treating Bonhoeffer's essay as an isolated theological document, the study situates it within the historical circumstances that shaped both its immediate purpose and its broader theological significance.

At the same time, the article adopts a theological-ethical approach in order to examine the internal coherence of Bonhoeffer's argument and to identify the conceptual foundations of what would later develop into his ethics of responsibility. The analysis focuses on the relationship between Christology, ecclesiology, responsibility, justice, public action, and the relationship between the Church and the state, as these themes constitute the principal theological categories through which Bonhoeffer addresses the Jewish question. This approach makes it possible to evaluate not only the historical circumstances that prompted the essay but also its significance within the broader development of Bonhoeffer's ethical theology.

The analysis is based primarily on a close textual reading of Bonhoeffer's *The Church and the Jewish Question* (1933), interpreted in dialogue with his later work *Ethics*. The comparative examination of these texts enables the identification of conceptual continuities and theological developments that connect Bonhoeffer's early reflections on the Jewish question with his mature understanding of responsible Christian action. More specifically, the comparison focuses on the recurring theological categories of responsibility, justice, ecclesial witness, public action, and the relationship between the Church and the state in order to assess the extent of their conceptual continuity between the two texts. In addition, selected contributions from contemporary Bonhoeffer scholarship are incorporated in order to situate the present study within ongoing academic discussions concerning Bonhoeffer's theology, Protestant resistance to National Socialism, and Christian-Jewish relations. The secondary literature has been selected on the basis of its recognized significance within contemporary Bonhoeffer scholarship and its direct relevance to the historical, theological, and ethical questions addressed in this study.

Methodologically, the study does not seek to reconstruct the entirety of Bonhoeffer's theology or to provide a comprehensive historical account of Protestant responses to National Socialism. Rather, its purpose is to examine a single theological text as a pivotal moment in the formation of Bonhoeffer's ethics of responsibility. Consequently, the analysis focuses on conceptual development rather than on exhaustive historical reconstruction. Such an approach makes it possible to evaluate the essay simultaneously as a historical document, a theological argument, and an important stage in the development of one of the twentieth century's most influential Protestant ethical frameworks.

Since Bonhoeffer's theological argument is consistently grounded in the biblical understanding of justice, covenant, neighbour-love, and human dignity, selected Hebrew lexical observations are incorporated where they clarify the Old Testament conceptual background presupposed by Bonhoeffer's ethical reasoning. These lexical remarks are not presented as independent philological analyses but as contextual theological evidence supporting the historical-theological interpretation.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the analysis focuses primarily on Bonhoeffer's essay *The Church and the Jewish Question* and therefore does not seek to reconstruct the entirety of his theological development. Although frequent reference is made to *Ethics* in order to demonstrate the continuity of Bonhoeffer's thought, other important writings—including his prison letters and later correspondence—fall outside the scope of the present investigation. Secondly, the article

does not undertake a comparative analysis of Bonhoeffer's theology alongside other leading representatives of the Confessing Church, most notably Karl Barth.¹⁷ Such a comparison would undoubtedly contribute to a broader understanding of the theological diversity within German Protestant resistance to National Socialism. Finally, the present study concentrates on the internal development of Bonhoeffer's ethics of responsibility rather than on the subsequent reception of his theology in post-war Protestantism or contemporary political theology. These limitations do not diminish the significance of the present analysis but rather indicate several promising directions for future research.

2. Bonhoeffer's Essay *The Church and the Jewish Question*

Bonhoeffer's essay *The Church and the Jewish Question* (*Die Kirche vor der Judenfrage*) was written as an immediate response to the political and legal developments that followed the National Socialists' rise to power. The immediate occasion for its composition was the introduction of the so-called Aryan Paragraph (*Arierparagraph*). For Bonhoeffer, however, the issue extended far beyond a single legislative measure; it raised the far more fundamental question of the relationship between the Church and the state. It is precisely for this reason that he argues the Aryan Paragraph constituted a *status confessionis* for the Church—that is, a matter touching the very essence of the Church's identity and therefore demanding an unequivocal confession of faith.¹⁸

Bonhoeffer's argument rests on the conviction that both the Church and the state are institutions established within God's ordering of the world, yet their respective spheres of authority are fundamentally distinct. The state's vocation is to uphold the legal order, preserve peace, and protect its citizens, whereas the Church is called to bear witness to the Gospel and to remind society of God's justice. The problem arises when the state exceeds the limits of its legitimate authority and, instead of safeguarding justice, becomes an agent of injustice. According to Bonhoeffer, political authority is never absolute but always remains accountable to God's order of justice.¹⁹ This understanding of justice is deeply rooted in the Old Testament tradition. In Biblical Hebrew, the terms *sedeq* (סֶדֶק) and *šēdāqāh* (שְׁדָאָה) denote not merely legal correctness but also righteous relationships with others and faithfulness to God's covenant.²⁰ Although Bonhoeffer does not engage in a lexical analysis of these Hebrew terms, his understanding of justice presupposes this broader Old Testament theological conception, in which justice is inseparable from God's righteous order and covenantal faithfulness. The present lexical reference is therefore intended not as an independent philological discussion but as contextual theological evidence that clarifies the biblical framework underlying Bonhoeffer's ethical critique of political authority. The central thrust of Bonhoeffer's critique is that a state which deprives its citizens of their rights ceases to fulfil its God-given vocation in a legitimate manner and thereby undermines the very foundations of its own political authority.²¹

It is precisely within this context that Bonhoeffer raises the question of how the Church ought to respond when the state ceases to fulfil its fundamental vocation. He rejects the view that the Church should

¹⁷ Karl Barth, *Theological Existence Today!* (1933); Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976); Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

¹⁸ The expression *status confessionis* refers to a situation in which questions concerning the life and identity of the Church can no longer be regarded as secondary matters (*adiaphora*), but become issues upon which the truth of the Gospel and Christian freedom itself depend. In such circumstances, the Church is called to make an unequivocal confession of faith, even at the cost of suffering. Here Bonhoeffer draws upon the Lutheran tradition, particularly the *Formula of Concord*, which maintains that in times of persecution no concessions may be made where the truth of the Gospel and the freedom of the Christian faith are at stake. Bonhoeffer, "The Church and the Jewish Question," p. 366.

¹⁹ Bonhoeffer, "The Church and the Jewish Question," p. 364.

²⁰ Željko Stanojević, *Serbian–Hebrew, Hebrew–Serbian Dictionary* (Belgrade: Institute for Hebrew Language and Literature, 2012), p. 212.

²¹ Bonhoeffer, "The Church and the Jewish Question," p. 364.

remain entirely passive or confine itself to the sphere of internal religious life. On the contrary, he maintains that the Church bears the responsibility of evaluating the actions of the state critically and of responding whenever justice and human dignity are placed under threat. For this reason, Bonhoeffer dismisses any understanding of the Church that would reduce its mission to the realm of private piety. Its vocation necessarily includes public witness to the truth whenever the fundamental principles of justice and humanity are violated.²²

The best-known section of the essay is Bonhoeffer's formulation of three possible forms of ecclesial engagement in response to an unjust state. First, the Church has the obligation to ask whether the state's actions are consistent with law and justice. Bonhoeffer understands this as an indispensable expression of the Church's public responsibility, for it is the Church's task to remind the state of both the limits of its authority and its duty to uphold the rule of law.²³ This presupposes a prophetic role in which the Church does not accept governmental actions uncritically but evaluates them in the light of moral and theological criteria.

Second, the Church is called to assist those who become victims of state injustice, irrespective of their religious, ethnic, or political identity. Bonhoeffer emphasizes that Christians are obliged to offer assistance to all who suffer injustice. Significantly, he does not restrict this obligation to members of the Church; rather, he insists that help must be extended to every victim of oppression. It is precisely here that the ethical dimension of his approach to the Jewish question becomes most evident, since human suffering takes precedence over ethnic or religious affiliation.²⁴ More importantly, this demonstrates that, for Bonhoeffer, the Jewish question is not fundamentally a political issue but a test of Christian responsibility.

Third—and most radically—the Church may ultimately be called to resist actively the machinery of a state that perpetuates injustice. Bonhoeffer expresses this idea through his well-known statement that the Church is called not merely to "bandage the victims beneath the wheel," but also to "jam a spoke into the wheel itself."²⁵ This formulation represents one of the earliest and most forceful expressions of his ethics of responsibility. The metaphor points beyond alleviating the consequences of injustice to active resistance against the structures that produce it. As the editors of the critical English edition observe, the expression *dem Rad selbst in die Speichen zu fallen* should be understood as an attempt to bring the operation of an unjust and illegitimate state apparatus to a halt, rather than simply to care for those who suffer under it.²⁶

Although the essay is centred on the Jewish question, Bonhoeffer had not yet developed what would later be recognized as a modern theology of Jewish-Christian relations. Nevertheless, the enduring importance of this issue within his theological thought is clearly demonstrated by his memorandum *The Jewish-Christian Question as Status Confessionis*, written later in the same year, 1933. There Bonhoeffer argues even more explicitly that the exclusion of baptized Christians of Jewish descent from ecclesiastical office is neither an administrative nor a political matter but one that concerns the very nature of the Church itself. Were the Church to accept racial criteria as the basis for determining membership within the Christian community, it would renounce its own evangelical identity. It is for this reason that Bonhoeffer characterizes the issue as a *status confessionis*—a moment demanding a

²² Bonhoeffer, "The Church and the Jewish Question," p. 366.

²³ Bonhoeffer, "The Church and the Jewish Question," p. 365.

²⁴ Bonhoeffer, "The Church and the Jewish Question," p. 365.

²⁵ Bonhoeffer, "The Church and the Jewish Question," p. 365.

²⁶ Bonhoeffer, "The Church and the Jewish Question," p. 365.

public confession of faith and the rejection of any compromise with the ideological demands of the state.²⁷

Viewed from a historical perspective, *The Church and the Jewish Question* constitutes one of the earliest attempts within German Protestantism to articulate a coherent theological critique of state-sponsored discrimination against Jews. The Jewish question therefore emerges not merely as a political issue but as one that reaches into the very identity of the Christian community and its vocation within society, since the state's anti-Jewish measures challenged the fundamental principles underlying the Church's religious and ethical witness.²⁸ At the same time, the essay anticipates themes that would later become central to Bonhoeffer's ethical thought: responsibility, action within history, solidarity with the vulnerable, and a rejection of passive acquiescence in the face of injustice.

Although the essay was written in response to an immediate political crisis, Bonhoeffer's argument progressively moves beyond theological criticism of state injustice. The three forms of ecclesial action outlined in the essay already reveal a transition from doctrinal reflection to an ethics centred upon concrete responsibility. The Church is no longer portrayed merely as the guardian of theological truth but as an active moral agent whose faith necessarily finds expression in responsible action. In this respect, *The Church and the Jewish Question* may legitimately be understood as the conceptual bridge between Bonhoeffer's early ecclesiology and the ethics of responsibility that would later receive systematic development in *Ethics*.

3. From Theological Critique to an Ethics of Responsibility

The Church and the Jewish Question occupies a distinctive place in the development of Bonhoeffer's thought because it represents far more than an immediate response to a particular political crisis. Even at this early stage, the essay contains the essential contours of the ethics of responsibility that would later receive systematic expression in his unfinished work *Ethic* or Bonhoeffer, Christian ethics does not begin with abstract moral rules or universal principles applicable independently of concrete historical circumstances. Rather, ethical reflection is grounded in a living relationship with Christ and in humanity's responsibility before God within history. Consequently, ethics is not merely a matter of correct moral reasoning but, above all, of responsible action.

This conviction becomes particularly evident in Bonhoeffer's discussion of the Jewish question through his rejection of ecclesiastical passivity. He refuses to accept that the Church may invoke institutional neutrality or confine itself to an exclusively spiritual mission in order to avoid confronting injustice. On the contrary, fidelity to Christ demands active engagement whenever human beings are subjected to persecution and discrimination.

A central place in Bonhoeffer's ethical thought is occupied by the concept of responsibility (*Verantwortung*). Responsibility is not understood as an individual moral quality but as a concrete response to the demands imposed upon the individual by historical reality. One cannot evade responsibility by retreating into private life or by appealing to abstract ethical principles. Decisions are made within the realities of human existence, and every decision carries consequences. As Bonhoeffer emphasizes, it is fundamentally mistaken to reduce ethical action to the isolated individual choosing between abstract notions of good and evil, since every human being exists within a concrete historical reality and is called to assume "the living responsibility of one's historical existence."²⁹ Accordingly, it is essential to recognize "that human beings necessarily live in relationship with others, and that this

²⁷Bonhoeffer, "The Church and the Jewish Question," pp. 371–373.

²⁸ Andreas Pangritz, *Bonhoeffer and the Jews* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019), pp. 45–52.

²⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (Rijeka: Ex Libris, 2007), p. 229.

relationship, depending on its nature, places them under varying degrees of responsibility for other persons."³⁰

For this reason, Bonhoeffer criticizes the assumption that personal moral integrity is sufficient while injustice unfolds within society. Genuine responsibility requires a willingness to assume the risks inherent in action. This theme would later become one of the defining features of his ethical thought. He likewise argues that an authentic ethical situation arises only when one accepts responsibility for others. The moral subject is therefore no longer the isolated individual but "the individual who is responsible for other human beings," while ethical decisions are made not on the basis of abstract principles but in relation to one's concrete neighbour and a specific historical situation.³¹

For Bonhoeffer, the situation of the Jews in Germany constituted a concrete historical test of Christian authenticity. The Church cannot proclaim love of neighbour while remaining indifferent to those who suffer injustice. Assistance to the persecuted is therefore not a matter of political preference but a direct consequence of the very nature of Christian faith. This understanding may also be related to the Old Testament commandment, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Lev. 19:18). The Hebrew expression *ve'ahavta lere'akha kamokha* (וְאַהֲבָתָה לְרֵעֲךָ כָּמוֹךָ) emphasizes responsibility toward one's fellow human being as a fundamental dimension of one's relationship with God, thereby providing an important theological background for Bonhoeffer's understanding of responsibility toward the persecuted.

This idea receives even fuller expression in *Ethics*, where the crucified Christ is presented as "refuge, justification, protection, and the claim laid upon all higher goods that have been violated, together with those who defend them," and where "justice, truth, humanity, and freedom seek refuge with the crucified and suffering Christ in his community."³² In this way, the protection of those who are vulnerable derives not from an abstract humanitarianism but from the Christological foundation of the Church's very existence.

Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that Bonhoeffer does not develop an ethic grounded merely in humanitarian ideals. His critique of injustice is rooted not in secular humanism but in Christology. Responsibility for others arises from responsibility before Christ. The Christological foundation of Bonhoeffer's ethics is expressed most clearly in his concept of vicarious representative action (*Stellvertretung*). According to Bonhoeffer, Christ does not exist for the sake of his own perfection but as the One who stands "in the place of all humanity." Consequently, he concludes that "the real representative action of Jesus Christ on behalf of humanity is the source of all human responsibility," and that "responsible action is, by its very nature, representative action."³³ It is for this reason that Bonhoeffer distinguishes ideology from responsible action, insisting that "ideology considers itself justified by virtue of its own ideas, whereas the responsible person lives by the grace of God, into whose hands he entrusts his actions."³⁴ This profoundly Christological character of ethics constitutes one of the defining features of Bonhoeffer's thought and distinguishes it from many modern ethical theories.

Viewed in light of the subsequent development of his theology, *The Church and the Jewish Question* may therefore be regarded as the earliest formulation of a theme that would later become central to *Ethics*: namely, how Christians are called to act responsibly within a world marked by injustice, violence, and historical conflict. For this reason, the essay should be understood not merely as a document of its own historical moment but as a crucial stage in the formation of Bonhoeffer's mature

³⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 230.

³¹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 230.

³² Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 106.

³³ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 237.

³⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 233.

ethical theology. It is precisely this movement—from theological diagnosis to responsible action—that constitutes the central argument of the present study.

4. The Limits of Bonhoeffer's Approach and Its Contemporary Significance

Although Bonhoeffer's essay *The Church and the Jewish Question* unquestionably represents one of the earliest and most significant theological responses to the anti-Jewish measures introduced by the National Socialist regime, an important question remains: to what extent did Bonhoeffer defend the Jews as members of the Jewish people, and to what extent did he defend them primarily as victims of unjust state action? While his essay unequivocally rejects discrimination and emphasizes the Church's obligation to stand alongside the persecuted, the primary focus of his argument is not a theological appreciation of Judaism as a living religious tradition. Rather, the central concern of the essay is the Church's responsibility and its relationship to the state. Consequently, a number of scholars have argued that Bonhoeffer had not yet developed what would later emerge, in the post-Holocaust era, as a theology of Jewish-Christian dialogue.³⁵

Bonhoeffer's reflections remain firmly situated within the framework of Protestant theology as it existed in his own time. Although he opposes the injustice inflicted upon the Jews, he does not fundamentally challenge the broader legacy of Christian interpretations that had shaped attitudes toward Judaism over many centuries. He continues to view the history of the Jewish people through the lens of suffering associated with the rejection of Christ and the expectation of Israel's future conversion.³⁶ Such an interpretation cannot be understood apart from the biblical concept of covenant. The Hebrew term *berit* (בְּרִית) denotes the covenantal relationship between God and Israel and constitutes one of the foundational concepts of Old Testament theology.³⁷ Although Bonhoeffer does not develop a philological discussion of the Hebrew concept itself, his reflections on Israel and the Church presuppose the biblical theology of the covenant as the broader theological framework within which the relationship between God, Israel, and the Christian community has traditionally been understood. The present lexical reference is therefore intended not as an independent linguistic analysis but as contextual theological evidence that clarifies the Old Testament background underlying Bonhoeffer's discussion. It was precisely the question of the enduring validity and theological significance of this covenant after the Holocaust that would become one of the central concerns of contemporary Jewish-Christian dialogue.

At the same time, it is precisely here that the distinctive nature of Bonhoeffer's contribution becomes evident. His primary concern is not the place of Judaism within salvation history but the question of how the Church ought to respond when the state violates the dignity and fundamental rights of a particular group of people. As a result, the Jewish question becomes more than an object of theoretical reflection; it becomes a concrete test of Christian fidelity to the Gospel. In this way, Bonhoeffer shifts the discussion away from abstract theological speculation toward the practical demands of Christian responsibility.

It is precisely for this reason that Bonhoeffer's thought continues to speak with remarkable relevance to contemporary debates concerning discrimination, human rights, and the public role of religious communities. Although he did not offer a definitive theological resolution to the relationship between Christianity and Judaism, he posed a question that has lost none of its urgency: can the Church remain faithful to its calling if it remains silent in the face of injustice?

³⁵ Stephen R. Haynes, *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon: Portraits of a Protestant Saint* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), pp. 82–85.

³⁶ Bonhoeffer, "The Church and the Jewish Question," p. 367.

³⁷ Stanojević, *Serbian–Hebrew, Hebrew–Serbian Dictionary*, p. 257.

Following the Second World War and the revelation of the full magnitude of the Holocaust, Bonhoeffer's work assumed an entirely new place within theological discussions concerning Christianity and the Jewish people. Whereas during his lifetime he was known primarily within German Protestant circles, after the war he came to be recognized as one of the foremost representatives of Christian resistance to National Socialism. His essay on the Jewish question increasingly came to be interpreted as one of the earliest theological attempts to oppose the anti-Jewish policies of the Nazi state.³⁸

Among those who emphasized the significance of Bonhoeffer's thought for Jewish-Christian relations were several Jewish scholars. As early as 1960, Stephen S. Schwarzschild argued that "Jews owe it to Dietrich Bonhoeffer to become acquainted with his theology," not merely because he was a martyr of National Socialism, but because his theology reveals "many affinities with fundamental Jewish orientations." In Schwarzschild's view, this should not be regarded as surprising, since Bonhoeffer "returned increasingly to what for him was the Old Testament, thereby drinking from the same source that nourishes Judaism."³⁹ Similarly, Pinchas Lapide describes Bonhoeffer as "an exemplary man of God" and "a blood witness to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," observing that the spiritual character of Bonhoeffer's prison writings bears striking similarities to testimonies produced in Bergen-Belsen, Auschwitz, and Treblinka.⁴⁰ Such assessments demonstrate that, for a number of Jewish thinkers, Bonhoeffer came to be regarded not only as a Christian martyr who resisted National Socialism but also as a figure whose witness possessed genuine significance within the context of Jewish suffering during the Holocaust.

A similar conclusion has been reached by a number of contemporary scholars, who argue that Bonhoeffer was among the very few Protestant theologians who recognized as early as 1933 that the Jewish question was not merely a political issue but a challenge demanding an unequivocal response from the Church. Haynes maintains that Bonhoeffer marked an important step in the development of Protestant self-criticism concerning Christian attitudes toward the Jews during the National Socialist period.⁴¹ Expanding upon his broader study of Bonhoeffer's reception, Haynes further demonstrates that later interpretations increasingly portrayed Bonhoeffer as a philo-Semite and as one of the forerunners of post-Holocaust Jewish-Christian dialogue,⁴² while Renate Wind argues that it was precisely the anti-Jewish legislation introduced after 1933 that ultimately led Bonhoeffer to his decisive break with National Socialism.⁴³

Equally noteworthy are recent studies that seek to situate the anti-Semitism of the Third Reich within the broader ideological relationship between National Socialism and Christianity. Oleg Soldat argues that in Hitler's *Table Talk* Judaism does not appear as an isolated topic but is consistently discussed in close association with Christianity. According to Soldat's analysis, Hitler regarded both Judaism and Christianity as components of the same historical process which, in his view, had contributed to the weakening of the Aryan world. He further observes that Jews are mentioned approximately 140 times

³⁸ Victoria J. Barnett, *For the Soul of the People: Protestant Protest Against Hitler* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 45–49.

³⁹ Stephen S. Schwarzschild, "Survey of Current Theological Literature: 'Liberal Religion (Protestant)'," *Judaism* 9 (1960), pp. 366–367.

⁴⁰ Pinchas E. Lapide, "Bonhoeffer und das Judentum," in Ernst Feil (ed.), *Verspieltes Erbe: Dietrich Bonhoeffer und der deutsche Nachkriegsprotestantismus* (Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1979), p. 126.

⁴¹ Stephen R. Haynes, "Bonhoeffer, the Jewish People and Post-Holocaust Theology," *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 2, no. 1 (2007), p. 45.

⁴² Haynes, "Bonhoeffer, the Jewish People and Post-Holocaust Theology," p. 38.

⁴³ Renate Wind, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Spoke in the Wheel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 70.

in these conversations, while the Church and Christianity appear on more than 150 occasions, indicating the close conceptual relationship between the two within Hitler's ideological worldview.⁴⁴

Such an interpretation does not diminish the unique role of anti-Semitism as the central pillar of Nazi ideology. Rather, it underscores the complexity of the ideological framework within which Nazi anti-Semitism developed. Viewed from this perspective, Bonhoeffer's resistance to the persecution of the Jews acquires an even deeper significance. His defence of the victims represented not merely a reaction to a particular piece of legislation but a testimony to a Christian understanding of the human person, the inherent dignity of every individual, and moral responsibility in the face of injustice. This understanding of human dignity may itself be related to the Old Testament teaching that humanity was created "in the image of God" (Gen. 1:27). The Hebrew expression *bešelem Elohim* (בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים) has for centuries provided one of the most important biblical foundations for theological reflection on the value and dignity of every human being. Although Bonhoeffer does not engage in a lexical interpretation of this Hebrew expression, his theological anthropology presupposes the biblical conception of the human person that it expresses. The present lexical reference is therefore intended not as an independent philological discussion but as contextual theological evidence that clarifies the Old Testament foundation underlying Bonhoeffer's understanding of human dignity and Christian responsibility. It may therefore be concluded that the limitations of Bonhoeffer's approach are inseparable from both his historical context and the enduring significance of his theological legacy. He was not a theologian of interreligious dialogue in the contemporary sense of the term. Nevertheless, he was among the very few Christian thinkers of his generation who recognized that the Church's response to the persecuted constitutes a direct measure of its own faithfulness to the Gospel. In this respect, Bonhoeffer's thought continues to speak not merely as a historical witness to a particular period but as a lasting summons to responsible action in the face of injustice, while simultaneously requiring a critical assessment of the enduring anti-Judaic elements within his early theological framework.⁴⁵

5. Conclusion

The present analysis has demonstrated that Bonhoeffer's essay *The Church and the Jewish Question* constitutes one of the earliest and most significant Protestant responses to the position of the Jews in Nazi Germany. Although it was written in direct response to the political developments of 1933 and, more specifically, to the introduction of the Aryan Paragraph, the essay reaches far beyond its immediate historical context by raising fundamental questions concerning the relationship between the Church, the state, and Christian responsibility.

The study has shown that Bonhoeffer rejects any conception of the Church as a passive observer of social and political developments. Instead, he argues that the Church bears the responsibility to examine the actions of the state critically, to stand in defence of those who suffer injustice, and, where necessary, to resist actively the very structures that generate oppression. Within this framework, the Jewish

⁴⁴ Oleg Soldat, "Ordo pingendi, ordo occidendi: Ikonolomstvo, Hitler i revizija Holokausta," in Vera Mevorah, Željko Šarić and Predrag Krstić (eds.), *Holokaust i teologija* (Belgrade: Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory; University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy; University of Banja Luka, 2023), pp. 60–62.

⁴⁵ Luís Cumarú, "A New Ethics for a New Time? Rereading Bonhoeffer's 'Heritage and Decay'," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 9, no. 4 (2023), pp. 1–20. As Cumarú argues, responsibility in Bonhoeffer's thought constitutes a comprehensive human response to reality in its entirety, making politics, human rights, culture, and public engagement inseparable dimensions of Christian ethics. See also Nicholas Scott-Blakely, "The Legacy of Anti-Judaism in the Works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer," *Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* 18, no. 1 (2019), for a critical discussion on the persistence of traditional Christian anti-Judaism in Bonhoeffer's early writings.

question emerges not simply as a historical or political issue but as a concrete illustration of the broader moral and theological responsibility of the Christian community.

At the same time, the analysis has also identified the limitations of Bonhoeffer's approach. Although he unequivocally condemned discrimination against the Jews and called upon the Church to act on their behalf, he had not yet developed a theology of Jewish-Christian relations in the form that would emerge after the Holocaust. His primary concern remains the responsibility of the Church and the limits of state authority rather than a theological reassessment of Judaism as a living religious tradition. Yet it is precisely here that the distinctive character of his contribution becomes evident. At a time when many ecclesiastical institutions responded with hesitation or silence, Bonhoeffer publicly confronted the question of Christian responsibility toward the persecuted.

Contemporary scholarship likewise confirms that the significance of Bonhoeffer's essay extends far beyond the history of National Socialism. His ethics of responsibility continues to provide an important point of reference in present-day discussions of human rights, discrimination, political violence, and the public role of religious communities. While most scholars have interpreted *The Church and the Jewish Question* primarily as Bonhoeffer's response to the anti-Jewish policies of the National Socialist regime, the present study argues that the essay simultaneously contains the essential foundations of the ethics of responsibility that would later be developed more fully in *Ethics*. In other words, the essay should be understood not only as a document of ecclesiastical resistance but also as a decisive stage in the formation of Bonhoeffer's mature ethical thought.

It may therefore be concluded that Bonhoeffer's theological legacy occupies a significant place both in the history of Protestant theology and in the development of contemporary Christian ethics. Above all, it continues to serve as an important stimulus for further reflection on the relationship between faith, responsibility, and human dignity in the modern world. His reflections on the position of the Jews in Nazi Germany remain particularly significant because they bring the Church's responsibility into direct dialogue with the historical experience of Jewish suffering. For this reason, *The Church and the Jewish Question* continues to function as an indispensable point of reference not only for the study of Christian resistance to National Socialism but also for subsequent theological discussions concerning Jewish-Christian relations, human dignity, and ethical responsibility in the face of injustice.

Taken together, these observations suggest that Bonhoeffer's early reflections should be situated within the wider theological movement that culminated in the Barmen Declaration⁴⁶ and the emergence of the Confessing Church. Although his treatment of the Jewish question remained historically conditioned and did not yet constitute a fully developed theology of Judaism, it nevertheless anticipated many of the ethical concerns that would shape his later theological writings. Read in this broader context, *The Church and the Jewish Question* occupies a pivotal position not only within Bonhoeffer's intellectual development but also within the history of twentieth-century Protestant political theology. The principal contribution of this study is therefore not merely to demonstrate that Bonhoeffer criticized state injustice in 1933, but to show that this critique already contained the essential theological structure of the ethics of responsibility that would later become one of the defining characteristics of his mature thought.

⁴⁶ *The Theological Declaration of Barmen* (1934), First Confessional Synod of the German Evangelical Church, Barmen, 29–31 May 1934. Available at: [Evangelical Church in Germany \(EKD\) – The Barmen Declaration](#) (Accessed: 30 June 2026).

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