The Germans as a Chosen People: Old Testament Themes in German Nationalism

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During the victory parade for the Prussian troops returning to Berlin at the end of the war with France in 1871, a huge banner was displayed with the words: “Welch eine Wendung durch Gottes Fügung,” which can be translated as “What a sudden turn of events through God’s intervention.” The sermons preached during and after the Franco-Prussian War help us to grasp the meaning of this slogan: God has blessed and elevated the Germans by granting them this victory over France, Protestant ministers exclaimed, just as he has punished the French with defeat. It was the Germans’ duty, then, to live up to God’s commands, to prove worthy of their role as the people God had chosen to humiliate the French; those French, as many German pastors added, who had challenged God’s authority by embracing reason and by promoting enlightenment, who had attacked the worldly order set by God by starting revolution and by instigating a system of government centered on the rights of the people rather than on God’s authority; those French who had furthermore corrupted morals in Europe through their bad example and their literary works. In sermons of this kind the positive self-image of righteous German Protestants corresponded perfectly with the negative view of their enemy. The Protestant Germans, it seems, believed that they were not only inaugurating a new stage of world history in 1871, but that through them God had initiated a new stage of salvation history.

The story that explains why, and with what effect, nineteenth-century German Protestants believed that they were God’s people of a new covenant, has not yet been written, nor has it been fully researched.¹ What I can offer here is a rough sketch that outlines the topic, portrays the background, and discusses some of the implications. Thorough research into the way German Protestants became convinced that through them God had opened a new chapter in the
history of salvation may serve to revise our present view of nineteenth-century German nationalism. This story will show, I think, how closely nineteenth-century German nationalism was linked to religion and how the German national movement was not just a product of social, economic, and political forces, as nationalism is often described.

Of course it is not easy to estimate the degree to which religious feelings and biblical references influenced German nationalism. We know, however, that nineteenth-century German Protestants were well acquainted with biblical themes. They knew the Old Testament better than any piece of modern literature. According to my research, German Protestants seem to have been so familiar with the way God ruled the people of the old covenant that one can assume they accepted the chosen people theme as a political model even when they do not explicitly mention it.

The written records documenting this relationship are abundant and waiting to be thoroughly analyzed and put into a frame of interpretation. Once this has been achieved, a new explanation and revised chronology of German nationalism may emerge. Before going any further, it may be appropriate to make some remarks concerning first historiography and then methodology. There is, to my knowledge, not much research on the relationship between religion and nationalism in Germany. In the 1930s, Koppel S. Pinson published a study in which he linked the rise of German nationalism with the influence of pietism in the decades around 1800. In 1960, Gerhard Kaiser produced a volume on Pietismus und Patriotismus im literarischen Deutschland in which tried to show how certain pietistic ideas were secularized around 1800 and then transferred into the ideology of German nationalism. Both authors failed to grasp, however, how nineteenth-century Protestantism was linked to German nationalism, a theme to which I have devoted some attention since the mid-1960s.

The methodological implications of my approach should not be overlooked. Concentrating on the chosen-people theme, as I do, means mainly three things: First it means to take religious and theological matters very seriously, both in the form of straightforward belief in God's governing and guiding hand, as in the form of hopes and anxieties that we find when we analyze how people speak about the past, discuss the present, and speculate about the future. Second it means to explain how those events in the history of the German people were understood that were considered as events directly influenced by God — the victory over Napoleon in 1813 for example, or the war of 1870, or the First World War. Third it means not to write another military history, or the history of great events, but an attempt to explain how the German people understood, or were told to understand, the consequences of great events and the sacrifices of war, and, specifically, it means to listen to the voices that
justified the sacrifices of war in the name of the German nation. For many Protestant pastors, to be sure, it was the chosen-people model, and metaphors derived from it, that served to give meaning to individual suffering, sacrifice, and loss.

In the course of modern German history, the political implications of the chosen-people theme can be seen first when pious German Protestants turned against the Enlightenment. At the end of the eighteenth century Herder had expounded his view, according to which Europe consisted of peoples, or nations, with distinct traits and in various stages of development or maturity. In the same years, as a reaction to the cultural hegemony of the Enlightenment, Protestant Germany experienced the first of several waves of revivalism. For the first time in the history of German Protestantism, poor people assembled for religious edification without the guiding help of ministers. As enlightened church hierarchies were not ready to tolerate such lay initiative, many members of these revivalist circles decided to leave Germany. George Rapp, founder of New Harmony, was one of them. The majority emigrated not to America, however, but to the south of Russia, which they considered more suitable as a place of refuge on their way to Palestine, where they believed Christ would soon return to begin his reign.

In the same decades the Protestant middle class was also touched by revivalism. They were shocked by the events in France. The French Revolution, which they detested, was in their eyes a logical consequence of the spirit of the Enlightenment. Napoleon, whom they feared, was to many of them the embodiment of human arrogance — some even called him the forerunner of the Anti-Christ. Despite being deeply troubled, these early nineteenth-century German born-again Protestants became very active. Within a few years they founded more organizations and established more institutions than in the whole history of German Protestantism from Luther to the end of the eighteenth century. Their activities far exceeded those of Pietists like Spener, Francke, and Zinzendorf whom they adored. Among other things, these fervent German Protestants supported foreign missions, they cared for orphans and the disabled, they printed and distributed Bibles, and they built seminaries for the training of truly Christian teachers. For them, God's kingdom was not something in the distant future, but an entity in which they themselves could be involved. In their eyes, the victory over Napoleon in 1813 was a very special gift from God. It is in connection with this turning point in European power politics that they demanded that the Germans should be especially grateful to God.4

In the decades that followed, the notion that the Germans were God's chosen people developed and was spread among German Protestants in four distinct phases.
Phase one: The years between the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the Revolution of 1830.

In those years pious German Protestants labored unceasingly for what they called the building of God's kingdom. The enterprises that I have mentioned were foremost on their agenda: Printing and distributing Bibles in order to spread God's Word and to counter fallible human reason; printing and distributing edifying pamphlets in order to stem the dangerous spirit of the Enlightenment; financing and organizing institutions for orphans and for the deaf and dumb; and training and sending out missionaries to preach the Gospel around the world. In all of these activities German Protestants were convinced that they were God's loyal children and that a special relationship existed between them and God. In contrast to later times they did not as yet embrace the idea that a special covenant existed between God and the German people. In the tradition of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century pietism, they believed that God's faithful children were but a small group that lived amongst a majority not committed to following God's commands. While this majority was doomed, however, God had promised the faithful salvation and eternal life. These German Protestants were mostly middle or lower middle class; they lived in small towns rather than in the large cities or in villages. No doubt the stories told by missionaries on home-leave inspired them more than anything else. They believed it was out there that the battle against Satan was fought, and where they, the Christians who attempted to overcome the Enlightenment, possessed a special task of universal significance.

Phase two: The years between the revolutions of 1830 and 1848.

That the revolutionary events originating in France should disrupt the German body politic once more was a shock to pious German Protestants and was considered a severe setback, yet also a great challenge. After 1830, therefore, they believed the main battle had to be fought against the sinfulness originating in France which included, with special intent, also the battle against all those Germans whom they considered the disciples of French enlightenment. It was in these years that many German Protestants developed a distinct and decidedly negative view of the people across the Rhine, which corresponded, with an equal degree of over simplification, with the notion that Germans were something very special. The so-called Rhine crisis of 1840 brought forebodings of later anti-French propaganda.
Phase three: The revolution of 1848 and the years until the early 1860s.

When in 1848 another revolution began in France which spread rapidly over Central Europe, pious German Protestants were alarmed and disturbed. Why would God again punish the Germans? Why would the spirit of disobedience rise in their fatherland? Had all their efforts to build a truly Christian Germany been in vain? Johann Hinrich Wichern summed up the prevailing feelings in 1849 when he argued that a new initiative was necessary to overcome the sins that had led to revolution. In Wichern’s view the best way to achieve this was to establish a united German domestic mission. As he explained, this was the precondition for the moral regeneration and the religious revival of the German people. In establishing the *Innere Mission* Wichern’s followers believed that moral regeneration and religious revival should and would be accompanied by social renewal and would finally also lead to national unification. Just as God had used the revolutions of 1830 and 1848 to punish the Germans as a people, so would he bless them by unification once they had abstained from sin, that is, from disobedience to his word and to the authorities that he had created to rule over them.

Phase four: The decade preceding the Franco-Prussian War and the creation of the new empire in 1871.

When the fiftieth anniversary of the victory over Napoleon was observed in Germany in 1863, Protestant ministers in many German towns and villages explained in their sermons that God had saved the Germans from French tyranny in 1813 and that he would elevate them if they followed his commands. Now the Germans were seen, and conceived, as an entity, as a collective unit, and the way God dealt with such units was directly derived from the history of the people of the first covenant as told in the Old Testament. While the Prussian victory over Denmark in 1864 could only be explained in terms of power politics, the Prussian victory over Austria in 1866 was interpreted as the victory of the genuine Christian (that is, Protestant) forces in Germany over the anti-German Catholic powers. In 1870-71, finally, in the war sermons of Protestant ministers, the anti-Latin, anti-Roman, anti-Catholic, and anti-Enlightenment resentments converged into vehement, unrestrained anti-French propaganda, just as the pro-German and pro-Protestant emotions ran high and led to the highest praise for Prussian leadership. In the struggle against the France of Napoleon III, German Protestants had seen themselves as underdogs, but “Welch eine Wendung durch Gottes Fügung” — “What a sudden turn of events through God’s intervention.” Although German soldiers did not succeed
in capturing Paris, Babylon had fallen and Protestant pastors rejoiced. God had blessed German virtue with victory. This victory seemed to justify all those Protestant zealots who had propagated the view that God would use Luther's disciples and descendants to inaugurate a new chapter in the history of salvation. While all those who had nourished doubt about this kind of rhetoric became remarkably silent, those who praised the virtues of German Christians spoke out louder than ever before.

The story of the gradual corruption, and perversion, of the notion that a special covenant existed between God and the German people can also be recounted in four phases.

*Phase one: The 1870s and 1880s.*

To the deep distress of those who believed that national unification would automatically result in social renewal and religious revival of the German people, German society remained unchanged even after 1871. Social tensions persisted, and so did mass emigration. In this situation some Protestant leaders looked for new ways of solving the old problems. Friedrich von Bodelschwingh, for example, was convinced that in the new *Reich* things could improve only through the initiative of concerned Christians. Consequently, he set up the impressive institutions at Bethel. Adolf Stoecker took another route. In the 1870s he used his position as court preacher to influence politics. In the 1880s he used his gift as a speaker, some would say as a demagogue, in order to organize the Christian social workers party. In his campaign he did not refrain from equating liberal positions with Jewish power, thereby introducing into German politics a new level of anti-Semitic rhetoric. Bismarck must also be mentioned. He saw himself in the tradition of German Protestantism, and he was, in many ways, more successful than either Bodelschwingh or Stoecker. He drafted legislation which provided for basic unemployment insurance, health insurance, and insurance against accidents in the workplace. Furthermore, Bismarck attempted to minimize Catholic influence in the new *Reich*, but he did not repeat any of the populist slogans of Stoecker. In 1883, on the occasion of Luther's four hundredth birthday, exponents of German *Bildungsbürgertum* elevated Martin Luther into the position of a saint and hero for all Germans.

*Phase two: The years between the end of Bismarck's rule and the outbreak of the First World War.*

During the reign of William II, the convictions of pious German Protestants were corrupted by two forces which would not converge until a
generation later: Social Darwinism and power politics. From the 1890s Darwin's German disciples taught at universities and schools that racial differences existed. They insisted that these differences were expressed in different qualities of mind and body, that the superior races had the right to rule over those inferior, and that the Germans were the highest ranking human species. At the same time, Bismarck's German heirs became increasingly entangled in their lust for power and in the game of power politics. It was not religion that mattered, in their view, or God's commands — much less did God call for solidarity with the underprivileged and the poor. What was important was power; or, to be more precise, German power: first in Central Europe, and then beyond.

Despite the inroads caused by secularization, from the 1890s to 1914, pious German Protestants were not prepared to give up the ground on which they believed that the empire of 1870 had been built. In 1888 some of them created the Gnadauer Gemeinschaftsverband. This was a yearly meeting in which they could strengthen contacts, exchange views, and formulate policies. The Deutsch-Christliche Studentenvereinigung and the Jugendbund für Entschiedenes Christentum, both organized in the 1890s, attempted to win a following among the educated young elite of the Second Empire. In our context it is important to note that the leaders of these movements used nationalist slogans to support conservative Protestantism, just as they attempted to use conservative Protestantism as a means to support German nationalism. In 1913, to show another episode of the same story, Protestant pastors and politicians transformed the hundredth anniversary of the victory over Napoleon into a massive propaganda effort. What is remarkable is not only that they denounced the France of the Third Republic, that they demanded further armaments for Germany, and that they attacked all of those who did not follow their course, but also that the chosen-people theme was central to many, if not most, of their arguments.

In contrast, some nonconformist Protestant ministers influenced the Protestant public very little. Christoph Blumhardt, for example, a pietist from Württemberg who believed that Christ would return among the poor, joined the Social Democrats, for which he was ostracized by his colleagues and superiors. Friedrich Naumann, to give another example, attempted to unite all Protestants who worked for social reforms. It is only in retrospect that Naumann's importance is being widely recognized. Besides, no one among Blumhardt's and Naumann's contemporaries, scholars and nonscholars alike, was aware of the degree to which secularization had changed pre-1914 German society. The Protestant churches failed to attract workers whose numbers grew rapidly as industrialization progressed. On Sunday mornings, for example, when well-dressed middle-class Bürger assembled for church service, workers stayed at home and attempted to get some rest, went to pubs, or labored on small plots of land which they had rented and on which they tried to grow some food. New
and more aggressive methods of preaching, such as some evangelical pastors used in the Zeltnmission, reached only the lower middle class, not the workers. As a result, while the German population as a whole continued to grow before 1914, the social basis of the Protestant churches continued to shrink. For the middle-class Protestant groups who believed in the chosen-people theme, this notion was seen as a mission not yet fulfilled and they were looking for opportunities to carry it out.

Phase three: The First World War.

To pious German Protestants who felt threatened by secularization, the outbreak of the First World War appeared almost as a blessing. Beginning in August 1914 they prayed that God would repeat what they now called the miracle of 1870, thus granting the Germans another chance to return to true Christianity. German soldiers were praised as God’s soldiers; Protestants believed that through their prayers they could keep God on their side; and Hindenburg was seen as God’s special tool, to mention just some of the various expressions of Protestant chauvinism between 1914 and 1918. Defeat came unexpectedly, as did the downfall of the monarchy. In Protestant circles, both events could only be explained as the work of sinister forces: the Liberals and the Social Democrats, and above all, many German Protestants believed, the Jews. They were not ready to accept and support Weimar democracy. Their frustration found a fitting expression in the back stabbing legend.

Phase four: National Socialism and the Third Reich.

Only a few of the German Protestants deplored the downfall of the Weimar Republic. The more traditional their outlook had been — that is to say, the more they had continued to believe in a special role for the Germans in God’s plans — the more they welcomed Hitler’s rise to power. As they applauded Hitler’s rhetoric and the abolition of democratic institutions, they did little, if anything, to protect those persecuted by the Nazis. When Jewish shops were boycotted in April 1933 German Protestants did not protest; nor did they oppose the book-burnings a month later. The Machtergreifung, and the widespread enthusiasm of many German Protestants in the months after the Nazi seizure of power, seemed to them as an extraordinary, almost unique opportunity to stem the tide of secularization. That stormtroopers should attend church services, as they were ordered to do in the spring of 1933, was proof to them that the national revival as effected by Hitler would be accompanied by religious renewal and by a return of most, if not all Germans to true Christian
belief. What had only partially worked in 1870-71, and what had not had a lasting impact after 1914, would finally come true: the religious rebirth of the Germans. Hitler himself, many Protestant pastors did not fail to point out, had committed himself to *positives Christentum*, which meant, according to Protestant terminology of the time, conservative, fundamentalist, and nationalistic Protestantism.

Only after a group of radical Protestant supporters of Hitler started to take over power in the territorial Protestant churches in the summer and fall of 1933, did some Protestant ministers and laypeople have second thoughts about the new *Reich* and unite to form the confessing church. During the following years German Protestantism was deeply divided. On the one hand we find the so-called German Christians: fervent Nazi anti-Semites, ready to do away with the Old Testament which they considered anti-German and Jewish and which, as they thought, contained no useful lessons for German Protestants. On the other hand we find the so-called confessing church: Lutherans of both the orthodox and liberal tradition, desperately trying to protect the autonomy of the Lutheran churches and the Lutheran tradition, concentrating therefore on what one could call selective opposition. Yet all too often they ignored the wider political dimension of the fight in which they were involved; that is, the protection of human rights of all peoples persecuted by Nazis, including the Jews.

German Christians explained and understood the nineteenth-century notion of a special covenant in biological rather than theological terms. As a result, many German Protestants lacked orientation when the Nazis started to carry out their racial policies. On the one hand they abhorred the idea that some of those retarded and disabled men, women, and children for whom they had cared in their institutions should now be sent to their death by Nazi euthanasia; but on the other hand they hesitated to oppose a policy that promised to upgrade the Germans as a people — which, in turn, seemed to be a precondition for future German power, greatness, and glory. ¹¹ The same ambivalence can be observed in regard to Protestant attitudes concerning the Nazi terrorization of Jews about which no one could be mistaken after *Kristallnacht*. For too many German Protestants the idea of the new covenant, which had once been conceived according to the Old Testament model and which had been explained in the categories of salvation history, had deteriorated into a tool which seemed to justify the persecution of those whom the Nazis declared to be useless members of or alien to the German nation.

In conclusion I should like to stress four points:

1. In the nineteenth century the notion of a special covenant between God and the Germans inspired German Protestants to take part in the German national movement. At the same time this idea brought them to hate the French
as well as the socialists and liberals at home. In the twentieth century, this same notion was used as a justification for dangerous policies. It was first used as a justification for the huge losses in human lives during the First World War, then as an excuse for denouncing all peacemaking efforts, and finally as a justification for the Nazi programs for the annihilation of those labeled by the Nazis not fit to be proper or healthy members of the German nation. The idea that the Germans were a chosen people and that they should make special sacrifices in order to regain greatness were some of the most dangerous and misleading Nazi slogans after 1933.

(2) Since the late nineteenth century, secularization of the notion of the new covenant became more and more obvious. Before and shortly after 1870, pious German Protestants had attempted to understand German history as a part of salvation history. They had tried to make the idea of a unified German nation something sacred, a body politic directly guided by God. In this context, the lesson of a punishing and rewarding God was taught in the most simple terms. German unification was understood as an unexpected, yet tremendous reward. Within a few decades after 1871, however, German Protestants had to recognize that secularization threatened to destroy the very basis on which their conception of the empire of 1871 had been built. Rather than reevaluating the chosen-people theme and examining what it meant to their faith as Protestants if they excelled in nationalism, they were instead tempted to wait for another miracle effected by God: another 1813 in 1933, or another 1870-71 in 1914.

(3) The more racial theories and visions of German power were used to explain the destiny of the German nation, the more the notion of the new covenant was corrupted. Biblical theology offered little resistance. During the Weimar period most German Protestant theologians supported the anti-democratic political parties. In the 1930s, even among the opponents of Hitler, German nationalism was so strong that few attempts were made to organize resistance. When it was done, it was done characteristically to save German honor. As a result, too few German Protestants came to rescue their Jewish neighbors and friends. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, when the lives of the children of God's first covenant were in jeopardy, most of those who had been brought up to believe in a special covenant between God and the German people failed to help. With the exception of some exceptional theologians like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, it was only after 1945 that German Protestants began to take a more critical look at the German past. In an attempt to come to terms with Nazi terrorism, and in an attempt to explain their lack of resistance during the Third Reich, most of the leading Protestants joined in signing the Stuttgarter Schuldbeekenntnis in 1945, a document demonstrating a rare degree of insight into the causes of their failure to resist Nazi policies. No similar declaration was issued after 1918. Auschwitz and Treblinka, it seems, had brought an end to all illusions about a special relationship between God and the German people.
(4) We should note that the Germans were not the only people in modern times to utilize the chosen-people theme for national purposes. The English and the Americans did so, as did the Swedes and even the South Africans. What I wonder, therefore, is whether these very different cases can be included in a more general typology which in turn would help to describe the special German experience. Several aspects seem worth mentioning. Those peoples who considered themselves chosen used this image to explain dramatic change, or impending dramatic change, for a large group of people. They used it, as I mentioned above, to justify sacrifices made for, and in the name of, the large group that is the nation. At the same time the chosen-people image was also helpful in the attempt to reconcile nationalism and Christian belief, to reconcile political aims and religious tradition, and to fight secularization; thus it seemed also quite useful to strengthen the role of the one profession that in the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had continuously lost influence, the pastoral profession.

Wherever and whenever it appeared, the application of the chosen-people theme meant that God’s role in political affairs was highlighted; that God was portrayed as a mighty force directly and most efficiently intervening in secular matters. Furthermore, by stressing a specific nation’s uniqueness, chosenness, and superiority, it meant that this one nation was given a role in the salvation of the whole world, a kind of universal mission. By creating a close link between the past, present, and future of a nation, the chosen-people argument could serve to minimize present suffering by promising future glory. Finally, the chosen-people theme was so rich in imagery and metaphors that those who used it seemed very convincing. A leader could be called a Moses, a king a David, a political strategy a march to the promised land beyond the Red Sea, a country to which one was opposed could be called Egypt, and so on and so forth. Of course, there are limits to this kind of generalization. The comparison of different examples should be used to explain differences but not to excuse excesses. In this sense, therefore, the history of German nationalism remains unique, along with all the terrible consequences which followed after 1933.


1A first step in this direction has been made by Arlie J. Hoover, The Gospel of Nationalism (Wiesbaden and Stuttgart: F. Steiner, 1986) which contains a lot of helpful material. Hoover addresses the relationship of protestantism and nationalism in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Germany and has studied specifically the sermons delivered by German Protestant pastors during the wars of 1813, 1870-71, and 1914-18.


8In recent years many studies have explored the rise of eugenics as a discipline, the preoccupation with eugenics in conservative circles before 1933, but also beyond, and the extremely dangerous role eugenics played in National Socialist propaganda.

9I have attempted to deal with some of these problems in "Neupietismus und Säkularisierung. Beobachtungen zum sozialen Umfeld und politischen Hintergrund von Erweckungsbewegung und Gemeinschaftsbewegung," Pietismus und Neuzeit 15 (1989):
40-58.

It should be noted, in this context, that from 1933 until 1939, and in some cases also beyond, most of the leading members of the *Bekennende Kirche* accepted and supported Hitler's racial policies; Hans Asmussen as well as Martin Niemöller, Siegfried Knak as well as Theophil Wurm. Moreover, they failed to protect those within their ranks who were critical of Hitler's views, like Marga Meusel or Friedrich Weißler. See Ernst Klee, "Verfolgung als Mission. Die Bekennende Kirche akzeptiert Hitlers Rassenideologie," *Die Zeit* (10 November 1989): 89.