RUDOLF BULTMANN:
LIBERAL AND ANTI-JEWISH

Rudolf Bultmann is known as a prominent figure in the academic theological resistance to the National Socialist regime.\(^1\) Even in his opening lecture of the semester on 2 May 1933, Bultmann spoke up against the existing political evils under the heading “The Task of Theology in the Present Situation”\(^2\). The boycott of the Jews that had been implemented on 1–4 April 1933, and the anti-Semitic laws that had been in force in the State realm since 7 April also involved a threat to the churches.\(^3\) In his lecture, Bultmann criticises the slandering of the Jews as well as völkisch theology, vindicating freedom of speech. Not long afterwards, he also initiated the famous declaration of New Testament scholars, “The New Testament and the Racial Question”.\(^4\) Moreover, Bultmann became instrumental in the writing of the expert verdict on the freedom of the Church and the Aryan paragraph, issued by the Marburg theological faculty in October 1933.\(^5\) The Marburg Declaration stirred up the discussion and led to a debate between Bultmann and the Psychology of Religion professor at Göttingen, Georg Wobbermin. As part

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\(^2\) Rudolf Bultmann, “Die Aufgabe der Theologie in der gegenwärtigen Situation”, Theologische Blätter 12, no. 6, Juni 1933.

\(^3\) There was a State as well as a Church Aryan paragraph. The struggle regarding the latter raged from the summer to early autumn of 1933, with the Aryan legislation coming into force in the Church of the Altpreussische Union on 6 September 1933, Smid, Deutscher Protestantismus und Judentum 1932/1933, 291, 295. See also Gerlach, Als die Zeugen schwiegen. Bekennende Kirche und die Juden. Mit einem Vorwort von Eberhard Bethge, which discusses the Confessing Church’s stand on the Jews in great detail.


\(^5\) Die Theologische Fakultät der Universität Marburg, “Gutachten der Theologischen Fakultät der Universität Marburg zum Kirchengesetz über die Religionsverhältnisse der Geistlichen und Kirchenbeamten”, Theologische Blätter 12, no. 10 (1933).
of this debate, Bultmann wrote another notable article, “The Aryan Paragraph in the Context of the Church”, in which he defends the freedom of the Church to employ non-Aryan ministers and workers. Thus there are no doubts concerning his strong stand against attempts to limit freedom by means of Aryan legislation in the Church.

Bultmann’s position to Jews and Judaism is debated, however, and again it is necessary to distinguish between the view on the State and National Socialism on the one hand, and the view on Jews and Judaism on the other; in earlier cases, we have seen that it is quite possible to be anti-National Socialist, yet have racist prejudice. Wolfgang Stegemann writes that anti-Jewish sentiments are not to be expected in Bultmann, due to his personal integrity during the Nazi regime, but he continues, “However, the personal integrity of Bultmann’s behaviour does not exclude that his theology includes what we determinedly and without compromises must regard as and call anti-Jewish.” Shawn Kelley describes Bultmann’s theology as ‘racialized’, due to its relation to Heidegger’s philosophy, and Peter von der Osten-Sacken finds anti-Jewish thoughts in Bultmann’s (as well as in Adolf von Harnack’s) writings. But Erich Grässer argues that anti-Judaism is only read into the Bultmannian texts, reminding of Bultmann’s resistance to the racial laws of 1933. Focusing on Bultmann’s ‘insights’ and ‘problems’ in relation to the Old Testament and the Jews, Paul-Gerhard Müller raises substantial criticism against Bultmann. He notes that Bultmann in fact

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9 Kelley, Racializing Jesus, 141. Kelley does not mean that Bultmann himself was a racist but that his work, like much of biblical scholarship, is embedded in a “racialized discourse”, 211.