GERHARD KITTEL:
JEWISH UNHEIL THEOLOGICALLY FOUNDED

At first sight, Gerhard Kittel appears to be an enigma. In his time, Kittel was no doubt one of the most competent and respected New Testament experts in the Judaism of the Second Temple and Tannaitic to Talmudic times. Kittel’s publications after 1913 were primarily in the area of Judaism and Christianity, including the 1922 edition of Sifre to Deuteronomy, and he was editor of the great rabbinic text edition from 1932, Rabbinische Texte. His professorship at Tübingen and the editorship of Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament crowned his scholarly career. Yet, during National Socialism, Kittel was a party member with a programmatic and strongly negative stance towards Judaism, resulting in a racist apartheid policy against the Jews. During most of the National Socialist period, he was involved in the

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1 Central to Kittel’s argument in his 1933 reflection on the fate of the Jews is his theologising of contemporary events in terms of Heilsgeschichte and Unheilsgeschichte, see discussion below. Since the otherwise proper translation ‘disaster’ for Unheil lacks the negation of salvation (Heil) so important in Kittel’s argument, below I use the term Unheil instead of disaster.


3 Kittel discussed the pertinent methodological problems in connection with the translation of rabbinic texts, see Kittel, “Grundsätzliches und Methodisches zu den Übersetzungen rabbinischer Texte”.

4 So also Siegele-Wenschkewitz, Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft vor der Judenfrage. Gerhard Kittels theologische Arbeit im Wandel deutscher Geschichte.
Forschungsabteilung Judenfrage (Research Department for the Jewish Question) at the Reichsinstitut für Geschichte des neuen Deutschlands (Reich Institute for the History of the New Germany), an institute that directly served the National Socialist purposes. And here, Kittel did not conceal his view on the Jews. For instance, in the first paper at the 1937 conference of the institute, Kittel says of the ‘Jewish problem’ and its roots in the essence of Judaism:

What is important for this history of emergence [of Judaism, A.G.] and for the judging of the present-day questions is this: it shows irrefutably how the ‘Jewish problem’ is not a coincidence, but how the determining factors [...] lie in the essence of Judaism (das Wesen des Judentums), as it has developed historically from the first millennium of its existence. This means that all those remain bunglers, who think that they can render this problem harmless, which has been given to the peoples, that it can be ignored without harm or against which small measures can be taken; and this [implies, A.G.] that it was not arbitrary brutality and barbarity when the Führer of the new Germany put the Jewish problem on a completely new foundation in a radical resolution for the German people as the first people of the present day, but it was honest political action, born out of historical sobriety.

Thus Kittel’s attitudes to Jews and Judaism present an enigma: the combination of great interest and expertise in Judaism, as well as instances of personal defence of certain Jews, and a strong and programmatic deprecation of Judaism, suggesting racist measures against German Jewry. The question discussed here is how these attitudes and actions can be related to his overarching ideology and theology.

From the Lutheran Professor’s Home to Service under National Socialism

Gerhard Kittel was born in 1888 as the son of the famous Old Testament scholar Rudolf Kittel (1853–1929) and his wife Emilie. Born in

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