

Timothy Jackson
***Mordecai Would Not Bow Down:
Anti-Semitism, the Holocaust,
and Christian Supersessionism***

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Timothy Jackson's book sounds like it should be of interest to scholars of the Holocaust, antisemitism, and the history of Jewish-Christian relations. Given its subtitle, one might expect Jackson to consider whether Christian supersessionism is the distant historical root of the antisemitism which resulted in the Nazi program to exterminate European Jewry. His core argument, however, is something else entirely. Although Jackson affirms the antisemitic implications of supersessionism and compares it with Nazi ideology, he relates them not historically but rather through a Christian metaphysics of human existence that he describes as "original sin" (2) and "active schadenfreude" (214-216). In contrast to the Nazis, whom he regards as the exemplification of a universal human tendency to reject a faith-based morality, Jackson understands the Jews as representative of the equally human capacity for a life close to God. Mordecai's defiance of Haman expresses paradigmatically the Jews' holiness and their unwavering commitment to the transcendent source of goodness and grace. Scholars of antisemitism and the Holocaust thus should not be misled by the subtitle, for they will find not a work of history or religious studies but rather a proposal for a philosemitic Christian theology.

Based on his theological orientation, Jackson offers a novel thesis about anti-semitism, which has little to do with the currently heated debates about the phenomenon's most adequate definition. In his hands, antisemitism is hatred of God and God's loved ones, namely, the Jewish people and the person of Christ (himself a Jew). With this definition, Jackson sets out to explain Nazi evil as well as the moral failings of Christian supersessionism.

The very existence of the Jews, who embody a faith opposed to all forms of humanistic eudaimonism, was anathema to Nazi ideology, which Jackson characterizes alternately as pantheistic naturalism, pagan anti-supernaturalism, and social Darwinism. Jackson argues that, although as a matter of pretense Hitler and other Nazi leaders depicted the Jews as a subhuman threat to Aryan life and culture, their

beliefs and actions reflect a deep awareness of Jews' holiness. The Holocaust is accordingly explained not as a case of ignorance of the good or of a will too weak to do it, but rather as a basic perversity among the Nazi party's upper echelon. Even if they could not entirely admit this to themselves or to their followers (whom Jackson places on a fivefold scale of moral responsibility from oblivious to murderous [112-120]), Hitler, Himmler, and other chief Nazis understood that the Jews represent a moral monotheism antithetical to their pantheistic worldview, a form of survival of the fittest threatened by anti-natural charity. Thus, while a tendency to elevate oneself by vilifying others stands at the core of all sin and evil, according to Jackson, sinfulness assumes its most intense form when, as in Nazism, the others whom one vilifies symbolize religious sanctity and charity.

Jackson's religious readers might find this picture of sinfulness attractive as well as familiar. His account of Nazi evil appeals at bottom to a rather traditional Christian understanding of sin as a person's deliberate turning away from divine grace and goodness. But these readers might also wonder how this general human possibility to choose evil instead of good and God bears upon the dogma of Christianity's supersession of Judaism. If Christians have become the true Israel, then would they not be furthest of all from anything like anti-religious Nazism because they aim indeed to be closest of all to God? It is exactly Christianity's competitive attitude towards Judaism, it seems to me, that Jackson means above all to undercut by likening supersessionism to Nazism. Jackson's particular way of talking about and accounting for Nazi evil makes sense only as part of a rhetorical strategy intended to cast as negative a light as possible on Christian antisemitism. It is, I suspect, the basic, albeit unstated, lesson of his book.

Christians, Jackson suggests, should always have been the allies of the Jews as witnesses of God's gracious love. Just as God chose Jesus as the individual in whom the vices of selfish individualism would be overcome, so He chose the Jews as the people (or "tribe") through whom the vices of tribalism would be overcome, a tribe which could be a light unto other nations about monotheism's anti-naturalistic faith and charity (3). And yet, Christians bear tremendous responsibility for much of the historical persecution of the Jews (even by anti-Christian Nazis) by accusing Jews of a parochial tribalism, a tribalism that is actually Judaism's antithesis rather than its essence. Why, according to Jackson, have Christians consistently failed to acknowledge lovingly their debt to the Jews? While he is not entirely clear, he seems to be claiming that, just as one feels hurt or angry when someone else has been singled out for an honor one might wish for oneself, so Christians have often responded to Jewish chosenness not with gratitude for the goodness which Jews represent but rather with jealousy at their selection. On Jackson's account, then, despite Christianity's many important differences from Nazism, Christian supersessionism is similarly a form of original sin, namely, the elevation of the self by the denigration of that other—the Jewish people—who stands for supernatural goodness.

If I am correct in identifying this claim as the central message of Jackson's book, then his ideal audience is rather circumscribed. The book, as I said at the

outset, does not speak to scholars of the Holocaust, antisemitism, or Jewish-Christian relations. While Jackson engages with some of the literature in these fields, he assumes a theological framework largely foreign to it (45-54). For this same reason, his audience also is not anyone who takes naturalism seriously, whether as a religious option or as a philosophical position. This is evident throughout in Jackson's contrast between faith-based morality and naturalism as fundamental alternatives, as a "perennial either / or" (the title of chapter two). For him, naturalism includes both social Darwinists like Nazis, who actively pursue the elimination of alleged inferiors, and humanistic virtue theorists such as Aristotle, Kant, Rawls, and Sen, whom Jackson engages to varying degrees. He seems aware that these profoundly different atheistic naturalisms should not be conflated when he disowns any intention "to suggest that all nontheistic worldviews are murderous or embrace fascist hierarchies" (77). But how meaningful could this disavowal be given that he subsequently asserts "that any anthropocentric starting point that emphasizes flourishing (individually or collectively) will lead to social disaster" (95)? And what good is his category "naturalism" if it puts anthropocentric ideals of individual and collective flourishing alongside the murderous embrace of fascist hierarchies? Anyone who regards humanism as a serious option will find both his contrast between moral faith and immoral humanisms as well as all the claims that follow from it to be inadequate and unpersuasive. His argument, in other words, rests on polemical religious assumptions that beg the question of the necessity of faith and the awful consequences of its denial in any form. Perhaps readers sharing his religious views would welcome Jackson's philosemitic Christian theology for offering an important moral warning about the temptation to self-aggrandizing and other-disparaging faith. This lesson is certainly commendable. It would be better served and of wider interest, however, if delivered with a different and more compelling argument.