

Wagner's Prose Sketches for *Jesus of Nazareth*  
 Theological Reflections on an Uncompleted Opera  
 Richard H Bell. New Testament Seminar, Nottingham 3 February 2017

### **I Introduction**

Wagner (1813-1883) in 1849. Carolyne von Sayn-Wittgenstein (1819-1887), the partner of Franz Liszt (1811-86). Heinrich Brockhaus (1804-74).

### **II Nature of the work**

“A poetic draft” (“Ein dichterischer Entwurf”) 1887.

*DTB* “prose draft” (“Prosaentwurf”). I Drama; II.1 commentary; II.2 NT texts.

I: six written sides numbered 2-7 but by a foreign hand.

II: 21 written sides numbered 8-28 again by a foreign hand.

Last 5 *sheets* (containing the New Testament texts, i.e. section II.2) are numbered 1-5 (sides 20-28) *by the original hand*.

Order of composition: (1) II.1, II.2, I; (2) II.2, II.1, I; (3) I, II.1, II.2; (4) II.2, I, II.1.

### **III Wagner's reading of theological literature.**

1. David Friedrich Strauss (1808-74)

O David! Hero! Staussest of the Strausses! Deliverer from delusion's weighty chains! May you ever redeem us from error and deception as you expose humbug of the Gospels! David!	O David! Held. Du sträusslichster der Strausse! Befreier aus des Wahnes schweren Ketten! So woll' uns stets von Irr' und Trug erretten, wie du enthüllt der Evangelien Flausse!
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Mikael Bakunin (1814-76): Christianity was the most impoverishing and enslaving religion of all. Contrast Wagner. Bakunin: Strauss has established that Christ was an “actual historical figure” (“personage historique et reel”) and represented a magnificent example of genius.

2. Feuerbach (1804-72): traces of Feuerbach in relations to “egoism”.

3. Wilhelm Weitling (1808-71), *Gospel of the poor Sinner (Evangelium des armen Sünders)* 1845.

Jesus “as the first rebel and communist, ‘the illegitimate child of a poor girl Mary’ – in fact, as a prototype of Weitling himself” (Carr, *Bakunin*, 123).

4. Reimarus (1694-1768) and Lessing (1729-81).

Cosima's entry for 12 November 1878: Richard “reads to me the conversation about John's will and two of the replies to Goeze; much pleasure in their acuity and elegance: ‘What wit there is in such a brain!’ says R.”

13 November 1878: “This is the curse of Christianity, all this clinging to the Old Testament, such a name: Ephraim! It shows how predominant the Old Testament was, in the beginning presumably in order to impart more authority to the new religion. But it can’t all be explained by that: there are such things as simply universal pests. I suppose we must accept that another 1,000 year will be needed to cleanse the Revelation of the Old Testament.”

15 November: “‘The main point is never discussed, the root never touched on,’ R. says. ‘I must admit that Renan was the first to have got a *bit* closer to the point, but only a bit, he didn’t recognize God, either.’ ‘It may be that our present-day criticism will succeed in showing Christ in a pure light, for how much in the Gospels has still to be abstracted!’ ‘I shall really have to put my theology in writing one day,’ he says, half jestingly, half in earnest—or, rather, changing from earnestness to jest.”

“The Testament of John”: “little children, love one another”.

#### **IV Why was the work abandoned?**

Intended as an opera. Given up because:

1. “contradictory nature of the subject matter, in the guise in which it lies before us”
2. “impossibility of bringing this work . . . to a public hearing” (*Communication to my Friends*). Meeting with Liszt and Carolyne von Sayn-Wittgenstein in Weimar: “one afternoon there was a lively discussion resulting from my description of the draft for a tragedy to be entitled *Jesus von Nazareth*, during which I saw Liszt lapse into doubtful silence, while the Princess protested vigorously against my plan to bring such material onto the stage. From the lukewarm attempt I made to support the paradoxical theories I had put forward in this respect, I could see for myself how things stood with me inwardly” (*My Life*)

Cosima’s entry 22 October 1882: “R. begins, ‘One cannot paint Christ, but one can portray him in music.’ – I say that I see it as evidence of his great and so significant artistic sagacity that he abandoned the figure of Christ and created Parsifal instead: ‘To have Chr. sung by a tenor—what a disgusting idea! (von einem Tenoristen Chr.[istus] gegeben, pfui T.[eufel])’ he says.” Christ is a tenor in Beethoven’s oratorio *Christus am Ölberg*.

#### **V Theology of the work**

1. Interest in “historical Jesus”. Compare *Jesus von Nazareth* and *Rienzi*: historical figures abandoned by the people; in 5 acts.
2. Dramatic concerns.
3. Jesus as messiah and/or social revolutionary? Cf. Proudhon.

*Vaterlandsverein* speech: “If a limb offend thee, cut it off and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should

be cast into hell.” Society “is maintained by the *activity of its members*, and not through any fancied agency of *money* [ . . . ] and like a hideous nightmare will this demoniac idea of Money vanish from us, with all its loathsome retinue of open and secret usury, paper-juggling, percentage and bankers’ speculations. That will be the *full emancipation of the human race*; that will be the *fulfilment of Christ’s pure teaching*, which enviously they hide from us behind parading dogmas, invented erst to bind the simple world of raw barbarians”.

4. Law and freedom. *Jesus von Nazareth*: “I redeem you from Sin by proclaiming to you the everlasting law of the Spirit, which is its being, but not its limitation. The Law, as given you heretofore, was the limitation of your being in the flesh: without that law ye had no sin, but hearkened to the law of Nature: but the Letter (buchstabe) was set up over your flesh, and the Law, which taught you to regard the nature of the flesh as sinful, brought you to death; for now ye sinned in doing what, according to the law, ye should not. But I release you from the Law which slew you, inasmuch as I bring unto you the law of the Spirit, which giveth life [ . . . ] now I slay this law, and thereby root up sin: from sin I thus redeem you, inasmuch as I give you Love”.

“God was one with the world from the beginning: the earliest races (Adam and Eve) lived and moved in this oneness, innocent, unknowing it: the first step in knowledge was the distinguishing between the helpful and the harmful; in the human heart the notion of the Harmful developed into that of the Wicked”. “Human society next sought deliverance through the *Law*: it fastened the notion of Good to the Law, as to something intelligible and perceptible by us all: but what was bound fast to the Law was only a moment of the Good, and since God is eternally generative, fluent and mobile, the Law thus turned against God’s self; for as man can live and move by none save the ur-law of Motion itself, in pursuance for his nature he needs must clash against the Law, i.e. the binding, standing,—thus grow sinful.” “This is man’s suffering, the suffering of God himself, who has not come as yet to consciousness in men”.

But Wagner can speak positively about law as the law of love: “but God is the law of Love, and when once we know it and walk thereby, as every creature walketh without knowing it, we are God himself: for God is the knowledge of self.”

Jünger (H.P. Rüger): in ancient Judaism “the law would be most appropriately fulfilled if one were to do what corresponds to it *before* the law itself were given” (Jünger, *Mystery*, 358 n. 35). *Numbers Rabbah* 14:2: “Joseph, you observed the Sabbath before the Torah was given. By your life! I shall repay your grandson by allowing him to present his

offering on the Sabbath, an offering which an individual is otherwise not permitted to bring, and I undertake to accept his offering with favour.”

Job 41:3 applied to Joseph: “Whoso hath anticipated Me, I will repay him’ speaks of Joseph who early observed the Sabbath before it was given.”

Jüngel: “[t]he law [. . .] is the representative of that obviousness of force (Selbstverständlichkeit des Zwanges) to which human exertion and human achievement correspond”. To love God and one’s neighbour “is the very epitome of the law’s demands” (Mark 12:29-34); “[b]ut this demand is fulfilled by one’s *exertions*.” (Jüngel, *Mystery*, 358). Hence Paul has the negative view of “works of law” and seeking to establish one’s own righteousness (Rom 10:3). The human being under the law is “chained to himself”. Jesus by contrast “anticipated the law out of the obviousness of love (Selbstverständlichkeit der Liebe), and thus more than satisfied the law with a great although new obviousness. And he thereby made plain that one could fulfil the law only by *preceding* it, anticipating it in its fulfilment. That is the only way in which man can show himself to be absolutely *free*” (Jüngel, *Mystery*, 359).

Problem: Jesus being brought up in the law by his family!

Correlate of Wagner’s view of the law is his view of freedom. For Hegel, “[t]rue freedom . . . lies not merely in doing or choosing what one wishes, but in being a ‘free will which wills the free will’” (Houlgate, *Hegel*, 184, quoting *Philosophy of Right* §27 (Werke 7:79)). The free will therefore derives obligations from itself; it is “a self-legislating and self-determining will” (Houlgate, *Hegel*, 185).

“This spirit of Jesus, a spirit raised above morality [Kant’s view of reason dominating inclination], is visible, directly attacking laws, in the Sermon on the Mount, which is an attempt, elaborated in numerous examples, to strip the laws of legality, of their legal form” (Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, 212). Against Kant Hegel argued that “in love all thought of duties vanishes” (Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, 213). “The opposition of duty to inclination has found its unification in the modifications of love, i.e., in the virtues. Since law was opposed to love, not in its content but in its form, it could be taken up into love, though in this process it lost its shape” (Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, 225).

*DTB* Vetter, Isolde, and Egon Voss, eds. *Dokumente und Texte zu unvollendeten Bühnenwerken*. SW 31. Mainz: B. Schott, 2005.

*My Life* Wagner, Richard. *My Life*. Translated by Andrew Gray. Edited by Mary Whittall. Cambridge: CUP, 1983.

*PW* *Richard Wagner’s Prose Works*. Translated by William Ashton Ellis. 8 vols. New York: Broude Brothers, 1892-99.