

Richard Wagner's *Jesus of Nazareth* and the *Ring of the Nibelung* I
 Wagner's Portrayal of Jesus of Nazareth: Social Revolutionary and
 Redeemer

1. Introduction

In these three lectures we are going to look at aspects of the prose sketches Wagner wrote for what he intended as an opera, *Jesus of Nazareth* (1849). Although the work was never brought to completion the sketches are important in at least two respects.

First, they help us understand Wagner's theological views at a key point in his artistic development when he was moving away from composing 'romantic operas' such as *Lohengrin* (1848) and moving towards what he called the 'artwork of the future', the revolutionary world of the *Ring* cycle. *The Ring of the Nibelung*, comprises four operas, *The Rhinegold*, *The Valkyrie*, *Siegfried*, and *Twilight of the Gods* (the German names are given also on the handout: *Der Ring des Nibelungen: Das Rheingold, Die Walküre, Siegfried, Götterdämmerung*). This highly complex work of around 15 hours offers theological insights which are often rather well hidden in the complex interweaving of words, music and action.

And this brings me to the second reason why the *Jesus* sketches are so significant. They offer a key to understanding the theological heart of this *Ring* cycle, for much of the material from the proposed *Jesus* opera actually ends up on the stage of this great artwork.

Today I want to introduce you to the *Jesus of Nazareth* sketches, focussing on the history and drama of the work and the portrayal of Jesus. Then on Wednesday and Thursday I will consider themes from the sketches which are developed in the *Ring* cycle. So on Wednesday we will look at law and freedom and on Thursday Love, death and immortality.

2. Two important sources which appeared after Wagner's death

As Richard Wagner was approaching his 36th birthday he was one of the leaders of the May 1849 uprising in Dresden, the capital city of Saxony. When the troops were sent in to quash the revolt, Wagner fled the city on the night of 9/10 May and by a very fortunate series of events evaded arrest and what could have been a very long imprisonment or even execution.¹ He fled to Switzerland where he was, for the most part, to spend his years of exile. Then in 1860 a partial amnesty was allowed in that he could return to Germany but not Saxony and then in 1862 he was allowed a full amnesty but, for various reasons, decided not to settle in Dresden.

In his autobiography he explains that his 'last creative project' in Dresden was a 'draft of a five-act drama *Jesus of Nazareth*'.² The manuscript of 28 written sides was at some point lent to Carolyne von Sayn-Wittgenstein, the partner of the composer Franz Liszt. Considering herself a conservative Catholic, she clearly felt that a drama based on the life of Jesus of Nazareth was highly inappropriate and, despite Wagner's various pleas to return the sketches, she held on to them. It was only in 1887, four years after Wagner's death, that his son, Siegfried, published the sketches. We do not know how Siegfried managed to recover the manuscript but it is significant that Carolyne died on 9 March 1887 and the sketches were published at the end of that year.³

Another work which eventually saw the light of day, and which is important for understanding the sketches, is Wagner's copy of the New Testament in Luther's translation.⁴ This was in Wagner's private library in

¹ His fellow revolutionaries Bakunin, Heubner and Röckel were captured and tried and on 14 January 1850 were found guilty and sentenced to death (E.H. Carr, *Michael Bakunin* (London/Basingstoke: Macmillan, repr. 1975; 1st edn 1937), p. 201); on 6 June 1850 this was later commuted to 'imprisonment for life of the second degree' (Carr, *Bakunin*, p. 203).

² Richard Wagner, *My Life* (trans. Andrew Gray; ed. Mary Whittall; Cambridge: CUP, 1983), p. 389.

³ The sketches were published by Breitkopf & Härtel of Leipzig and were dedicated to the memory of Heinrich von Stein, Siegfried's tutor, whose death was announced in the *Musikalisches Wochenblatt*, 24 November 1887.

⁴ *Das neue Testament, unseres Herrn und Heilandes Jesu Christi. Leipziger Jubelausgabe, nach der letzten Ausgabe Dr. Martin Luthers (vom Jahre 1545) revidiert von Hofrath Dr. Gersdorf und Dr. K.A. Espe* (Leipzig: Verlag von Im. Tr. Möller, n.d.).

Dresden (he moved there in 1842) and from 1843 he built up a personal library of around 200 works.⁵ After he fled Dresden ‘through some odd vicissitudes’⁶ all these books including the New Testament came into the possession of Heinrich Brockhaus to whom Wagner owed five hundred thalers. Wagner bitterly explains in his autobiography that Brockhaus felt he had the right to retain the books until he had paid the debt (‘slapped a lien on it for this amount’⁷) ((without telling his wife⁸)) and that he ‘never succeeded in getting this unusual collection back from him’.⁹ So Brockhaus, whose family ran the famous publishing house F.A. Brockhaus of Leipzig, kept these books despite Wagner’s attempts to recover them. Moving on to the twentieth century, with the heavy bombing of Leipzig on 4 December 1943 it was assumed that the collection had been destroyed.¹⁰ However, they reappeared after the war in Wiesbaden. They had been stored in a deep bunker in Leipzig and on 12 June 1945 key works from the publishing house, including Wagner’s library, were flown to Wiesbaden before Soviet troops entered Leipzig. His library is now available for scholarly use in the Richard Wagner museum in Bayreuth and I have had the privilege of studying a number of books including his New Testament.

⁵ In *My Life*, p. 261, he tells how having moved into the Ostra-Allee ‘the house was transformed into a home by the presence of a library, which I had acquired in one fell swoop in accordance with a systematic plan of study I had in mind to undertake’. Wagner moved to the Ostra-Allee on 1 October 1843 (Martin Gregor-Dellin, *Wagner-Chronik: Daten zu Leben und Werk* (Kassel/Basel/London: Bärenreiter, 2nd edn, 1983.) p. 35) so if he did acquire everything ‘in one fell swoop’ we can date his purchase of the New Testament to the Autumn of 1843. For the library Curt von Westernhagen, *Richard Wagners Dresdener Bibliothek 1842 bis 1849* (Wiesbaden: F.A. Brockhaus, 1966), pp. 84-110, lists 169 titles and there are a further 29 titles which can be derived from a list Minna gave (111-13); hence there were 198 titles, possibly more. Many of these titles comprise several volumes.

⁶ *My Life*, p. 261.

⁷ His salary in Dresden was 1500 thalers so the amount he owed was one third of his annual salary, a substantial sum. Assuming today he was earning £60,000, 500 thalers would be equivalent to around £20,000. Assuming a rough equivalence between the amount he owed and the value of the library, the average price of a *work* (i.e. not *volume*) in his library would then be £100.

⁸ Minna remained in Dresden for some time after Wagner fled the city and passed on the library to Brockhaus (*My Life*, p. 428).

⁹ *My Life*, p. 261. Wagner did however receive 9 expensive volumes (cf. *My Life*, p. 261) of a French work (*Romans des douze pairs de France*) in April 1873 (Westernhagen, *Dresdener Bibliothek*, pp. 80-81). Further Brockhaus sent a collection of Wagner’s own scores to Uhlig on 27 January 1852 (Westernhagen, *Dresdener Bibliothek*, p. 78).

¹⁰ The quarter where the bookshops were situated was especially badly bombed.

And what I have discovered is that Wagner rarely marked his books (something which can be frustrating for scholarship) but his New Testament does stand out as being heavily marked (usually in the margin);¹¹ it is in fact the most heavily marked of all his books in his Dresden library.¹² The text is not only marked with vertical lines in the margin (from one to four strokes) together with occasional underlining of text and marginal comments, but there are often Roman numerals I to V in the margin which appear to indicate the relevance of that verse for his proposed drama *Jesus of Nazareth*. That his reading of the New Testament was preparatory work for his proposed drama is corroborated by his comments in his autobiography. He explains how he discussed the sketches with the Russian anarchist Mikael Bakunin, who was lodging with his friend and colleague August Röckel¹³ from early 1849: ‘Inspired by a recent reading of the gospels, I had at that time just produced a sketch for a tragedy to be performed in the ideal theatre of the future and to be entitled *Jesus von Nazareth*’.¹⁴ (Note ideal theatre of the future). (Note against Barry that he did not lose interest after discovering Feuerbach)

3. Nature of the Work

The work was called ‘A poetic draft’ (‘Ein dichterischer Entwurf’) when it was first published in 1887. The latest critical edition more accurately describes it as a ‘prose draft’ (‘Prosaentwurf’)¹⁵ and the title given by Wagner was simply ‘Jesus von Nazareth’. The sketches can be divided into two main parts with the second being further subdivided. So part one is the outline of the drama. Part two section one (II.1) is theological commentary and part two section two (II.2)

¹¹ I was very fortunate to be able to study his New Testament in the *Nationalarchiv der Richard Wagner-Stiftung*, Bayreuth, in August 2011.

¹² Westernhagen, *Dresdener Bibliothek*, p. 24.

¹³ *My Life*, p. 384.

¹⁴ *My Life*, p. 387. Bakunin is changing the crowd calling for Jesus’ crucifixion to other methods of execution (beheading, hanging, burning).

¹⁵ Isolde Vetter and Egon Voss (eds.), *Dokumente und Texte zu unvollendeten Bühnenwerken* (Sämtliche Werke 31; Mainz: B. Schott, 2005), p. 241. In subsequent citations this will be referred to with the acronym *DTB*.

gives the texts of a whole series of passages from the New Testament which the composer felt were relevant for the drama. To tease out the process of composition it is worth considering carefully the original manuscript.¹⁶ For the drama itself we have six written sides, numbered 2-7 but by a foreign hand.¹⁷ The second part likewise has the title ‘Jesus von Nazareth’ and consists of 21 written sides numbered 8-28 again by a foreign hand. But the last 5 *sheets* (containing the New Testament texts, i.e. section II.2) are numbered 1-5 (sides 20-28) *by the original hand*.¹⁸ Hence one cannot assume that the work was composed in the order we now have since apart from the final 5 sheets (all quotations from the New Testament) they are all numbered by the foreign hand. Taking these three sections, I, II.1, II.2, there are, by the law of permutations, six possible sequences for the sketches to be written, and I think the most likely is II.2; I; II.1. So after reading through the New Testament Wagner would first collate the verses and by writing them out internalise them (II.2). I think it would be quite difficult then to engage in II.1 (i.e. the commentary); this material, as we will see on Wednesday and Thursday, is quite sophisticated and a much more natural next step would be to sketch his drama since he would then have the New Testament texts fresh in his mind. Then once he had composed that, he could develop some of his theological ideas in II.1; the fact that the theology of II.1 is more complex and radical than that of the actual drama would seem to support this.¹⁹

In the English translation of Ellis the sketches amount to 56 pages so we are dealing with something fairly substantial;²⁰ incidentally, the fact that his

¹⁶ I have consulted the microfilms of the work in the National Archive in Bayreuth.

¹⁷ Herbert Barth, Dietrich Mack, and Egon Voss (eds.), *Wagner: A Documentary Study* (trans. P.R.J. Ford and Mary Whittall; London: Thames and Hudson, 1975), illustration 73, gives the first written page (numbered 2).

¹⁸ Wagner started a new sheet for each of the five Acts.

¹⁹ Hence I give only a qualified assent to John Deathridge, Martin Geck and Egon Voss, *The Wagner Werk-Verzeichnis* (Mainz/London/New York/Tokyo: Schott, 1985), p. 338, in describing the whole of the second part (II.1 and II.2) as ‘Preparatory Study to the Text Book’ (‘Vorstudien zum Textbuch’).

²⁰ William Ashton Ellis (ed.), *Richard Wagner’s Prose Works* (8 vols.; New York: Broude Brothers, 1892-99), 8:283-340. Translations are taken from this important source (referred to by the acronym *PW*); although the language at times appears antiquated Ellis does capture much of the character of Wagner’s prose.

proposed Buddhist Opera ‘The Victors’ (‘Die Sieger’) amounts to just over one page in Ellis’ translation should make one cautious in assessing Wagner’s Buddhist interests.²¹ The sketches demonstrate a very good knowledge of the New Testament and a level of theological sophistication which, as far as composers are concerned, I believe places him on a par with Johann Sebastian Bach. Bearing in mind the way Wagner has been so well researched, relatively little work has been done on the sketches and I believe that had he brought the work to completion we would have one of the greatest artworks portraying the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth.²²

4. Wagner’s Reading of the New Testament

One clear indication that Wagner worked through the New Testament systematically is that in section II.2 texts are quoted in canonical order for each of the five acts in turn, a quotation being anything from a single verse to more extended passages.²³ Sometimes he will name chapters or sections of chapters rather than quoting these extended sections and this is particularly the case with John where, rather than the laconic sayings of Jesus in the synoptic gospels, there are extended discourses which would be rather laborious to quote.

(4.1 Gospels)

So I turn first to his use of the gospels (section 4.2). The number of verses actually quoted for each of the gospels is Matthew (131), Mark (2), Luke (57), John (18). To some extent the pattern for the synoptic gospels can be explained by the fact that as he worked through the NT and quoted texts in their canonical order, that once a text was quoted from Matthew he then felt it unnecessary to

²¹ *PW* 8:385-86.

²² Cf. Julie Kniese, ‘Richard Wagners “Jesus von Nazareth”’, *Neue Musik-Zeitung* 47 (1926) pp. 472-74, 500-502 (502).

²³ For examples of extended quotations see, e.g., Mt. 15:2-6, 11-13 (Act I, *PW* 8:324-25; *DTB* 260); Mt. 5:2-14 with gaps and 6:7-27 with gaps (Act II, *PW* 8:328-29; *DTB* 261-62); Acts 17:23b-29 (Act III, *PW* 8:335-36; *DTB* 264-65).

quote parallels in Mark or Luke. The number of 18 verses quoted for John misrepresents the importance of this gospel since, as indicated, he also refers to extended passages from John in addition to the actual quotations.

His relative interests in the gospels is better represented by the number of verses marked in his NT: Matthew (199), Mark (14), Luke (176) and John (222). This pattern of marking the gospels could be explained by the simple fact that after marking Matthew he found in Mark little new material; one of his rare markings in Mark is at Mk 2:27 where Jesus speaks of the sabbath being made for humankind not humankind for the Sabbath, which was to be useful ammunition for the composer's criticism of 'legal' religion.²⁴ When he came to Luke he found much new material, such as Lk. 17:20-21 (the kingdom of God is within you) which again would support his theological interests. And of course when he came to John he found a whole new world of theological richness upon which he could draw.

One does wonder whether questions of source criticism interested him as he worked through the synoptic gospels. Did he realise, for example, that one of his rare markings in Mark just mentioned (2:27) was what was to be later understood as one of those significant 'minor agreements', in this case where Matthew and Luke agree in 'omitting' Markan material? The prevalent synoptic hypothesis at the time was that of J.J. Griesbach which was put forward in 1789 and dominated scholarship until H.J. Holtzmann popularised the two-source hypothesis in 1863. This new hypothesis was first put forward by C.H. Weisse in 1838 and it was just six years earlier in the winter semester of 1831-32 that Wagner attended some of his lectures on aesthetics at Leipzig University. On becoming personally acquainted with Weisse at the home of his uncle, Adolf

²⁴ Note that the markings and quotations give a good but approximate idea of his interests in the texts. So in the dramatic outline we find clear allusions to NT texts which are neither marked in his New Testament nor quoted in II.2. A good example is the raising of the publican Levi's daughter. This is largely based on the raising of the daughter of the synagogue leader, Jairus (Mk 5:21-24, 35-43; cf. the parallel in Mt. 9:18-19, 23-26). There are also allusions to the Jesus' raising the Widow's son at Nain since Levi's daughter is already being taken out on a bier (cf. Lk. 7:14) for burial (cf. Lk. 7:12). However, none of these texts are either marked or quoted.

Wagner, he was ‘greatly attracted’ by his ‘distracted air, manner of speaking rapidly but in fits and starts, and above all interesting and pensive physiognomy’ as he spoke with his uncle on matters of ‘philosophy and philosophers’.²⁵ But it seems unlikely that Wagner would know of the work of Weisse (or Griesbach) on source criticism when he worked his way through the gospels. **Any first-hand knowledge of gospel criticism would most likely come from Lessing.**

Of the gospels Wagner certainly had a special interest in John. Although in section II.2 only 18 verses are actually quoted, he lists long passages from this gospel and the list for Act IV of the drama is especially striking: Jn 12:4ff (‘Jesus’ anointment and Judas’) together with chapters 13-17 (‘*Last Supper*’).²⁶ Further in the dramatic outline (I) there are a number of distinctive Johannine features. First, in the Gethsemane scene Jesus passes over the brook Kidron.²⁷ Second, when ‘Caiaphas, Priests and Pharisees’ come to Pilate’s headquarters, they do not enter since they do not want to be defiled for the Passover.²⁸ So like John, Wagner places the trial (and crucifixion) before the Passover; but whereas John places it on Passover eve (Jn 19:14, 14th Nisan) Wagner actually places it three days before the Passover.²⁹ (NELSON) Thirdly, and most significant of all, it is stressed that the Spirit is given as a result of Jesus’ death.³⁰

This third point indicates that his interest in John is clearly driven by theological concerns, many of which will be discussed later in relation to Hegel. But for now it is worth pointing to two factors which, in addition to the literary

²⁵ *My Life*, p. 54.

²⁶ *PW* 8:338; *DTB* 266. It would clearly be too much to write out this whole section of six chapters and this is presumably why he resorts simply to listing them.

²⁷ *PW* 8:293; *DTB* 244. Cf. Jn 18:1.

²⁸ *PW* 8:294; *DTB* 245. Cf. Jn 18:28.

²⁹ *PW* 8:294; *DTB* 245. It is not clear why Wagner wishes to place the death of Jesus on 12th Nisan. It is almost as though he wishes to avoid any Passover lamb symbolism for Jesus’ death (no such symbolism in John’s gospel is taken up in the sketches). According to P.M. Casey, *Aramaic Sources of Mark’s Gospel* (SNTSMS 102; Cambridge: CUP, 1998), p. 224, Passover lambs could be slaughtered on 13th or 14th Nisan (see *m. Zeb.* 1:3).

³⁰ Wagner explicitly points to this Johannine theme (*PW* 8:292; *DTB* 244) which will be discussed below.

dependence and canonical order discussed above, may to some extent explain his preference for both John and Matthew. First, these gospels are the most ‘antisemitic’ of the gospels. We do in fact find that texts which could be so understood are marked in Wagner’s New Testament (e.g. Mt. 21:43; Jn 8:42-52);³¹ further he clearly appreciates Jesus’ denunciation of the Pharisees found in the special material of Matthew.³² A second possible reason for his preference for Matthew and John is the fact that Bach’s two great Passions are based on the passion narratives of these gospels.³³

(4.2 Rest of New Testament)

As far as the rest of the New Testament is concerned (section 4.2) Wagner draws on a number of key themes. He clearly treasures Romans and 1 Corinthians. Paul’s ideas of freedom from law are strongly represented in the dramatic outline and especially in the commentary. Texts which deal with love are emphasised (e.g. 1 Cor. 13:1, 3, 4-10)³⁴ and he takes the liberty of replacing ‘faith’ with ‘love’ in Rom. 3:28: ‘We reckon therefore that a man is justified, without the work of the law, through (Love) alone.’³⁵ A series of texts in James are marked (2:5-9, 14-16; 4:2; 5:1-6, 11) which clearly appeal to the composer’s socialist convictions. And to give another example Revelation 18, which concerns the fall of Babylon, is heavily marked (he refers to the whole chapter in II.2³⁶), a chapter which he no doubt saw as a prophecy of the fall of

³¹ Mt. 21:43 is both heavily underlined in the NT and quoted. Jn 8:40-41, 42-52 is marked and ‘[t]he whole chapter from 31’ is referred to in section II.2 (*PW* 8:335; *DTB* 264).

³² E.g. he marked Mt. 23:1, 16b-28; but note he also marked Lk. 11:46-47, 52.

³³ The Matthew passion was fairly well known after Mendelssohn revived the work in 1829; the John passion was not well known when Wagner was composing his Jesus sketches.

³⁴ He also doubly marks 1 Cor. 12:25-27 and writes ‘liebe’ (‘love’) in the margin.

³⁵ *PW* 8:336; *DTB* 265.

³⁶ *PW* 8:337; *DTB* 265.

capitalism!³⁷ The only books he neither marks nor quotes in the sketches are Philippians, Colossians, 1 Peter, 2 and 3 John and Jude.³⁸

Wagner's Reading of Theological Literature

Although we have a reasonably good idea of the way Wagner worked his way through the New Testament, marking and writing out verses which were relevant for his drama, we are rather in the dark as to what theological literature he had studied. The secondary literature usually mentions the names of David Friedrich Strauss and Ludwig Feuerbach.³⁹ However, works of neither author are found in his private library in Dresden.⁴⁰ He did later possess the 1864 edition of Strauss' *Life of Jesus* in his Wahnfried library in Bayreuth⁴¹ but we have no evidence of his reading of Strauss up to the time of his work on *Jesus of Nazareth*. In fact Wagner's first mention of Strauss is as late as 1868, his *Annalen* for March of that year simply recording 'David Strauss'.⁴² This refers no doubt to three ironical sonnets Wagner wrote 'to David Strauss' which are critical of both his person and his theology.⁴³ To an idea of his disdain for Strauss I cite the first verse of the first sonnet runs as follows:

³⁷ Or Luther's fall of Roman Catholic Church.

³⁸ He may have skipped Phil and Col thinking they were not different from Eph. 2 and 3 John and Jude are also altogether. It is odd that 1 Peter is not marked not quoted given its importance for Luther.

³⁹ See, e.g., Ronald Taylor, *Richard Wagner: His Life, Art, and Thought* (London: Paul Elek, 1979), p. 92: 'Behind his human Jesus, the social reformer, lurk the figures not only of the humanist theologian David Friedrich Strauss but also the materialist Feuerbach [...].'

⁴⁰ He could, of course, have borrowed books from the Royal Library in Dresden. We know he borrowed works of Germanic and Norse mythology from this library (see Elizabeth Magee, *Richard Wagner and the Nibelungs* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), pp. 38-46) in the period June 1848 to early May 1849. Whether he borrowed books on New Testament scholarship is at present unknown.

⁴¹ *Das Leben Jesu für das deutsche Volk bearbeitet* (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1864). This was published in one volume (the first edition of 1835 was published as two volumes) and '[a]lthough ostensibly designed for more popular consumption [...] it was prefaced by a lengthy review of over 150 pages, dealing with the views of other scholars and outlining the critical theories underlying his approach' (Colin Brown, *Jesus in European Protestant Thought 1778-1860* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker), p. 200).

⁴² Otto Strobel (ed.), *König Ludwig II. und Richard Wagner: Briefwechsel* (5 vols.; Karlsruhe: G. Braun, 1936), 2:8.

⁴³ Joachim Bergfeld (ed.), *The Diary of Richard Wagner 1865-1882: The Brown Book*, translated by George Bird (London: Victor Gollanz, 1980), p. 125. One reason Wagner took a special dislike to Strauss was because he supported the conductor Franz Lachner with whom Wagner had a bad relationship. Note also that Wagner supported Nietzsche's attack on Strauss in the first of his *Untimely*

O David! Hero! Staussest of the
Strausses!

Deliver from delusion's weighty
chains! May us redeem for error and
deception
your exposé of humbug in the
Gospels!

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 Flause!

Returning to the 1840s, Wagner may have learned something of Strauss from his fellow revolutionary in Dresden, Mikael Bakunin, who appears to have a reasonable knowledge of Strauss. Bakunin himself was negative about Christianity believing that it was 'the most impoverishing and enslaving religion of all',⁴⁴ this contrasting with Wagner's portrayal of Jesus (and the various New Testament witnesses) as a proclaimer of freedom in the sketches. But on a positive note Bakunin says that Strauss himself has established that Christ was an 'actual historical figure' ('personage historique et reel') and represented a magnificent example of genius.⁴⁵ A reading of Wagner's sketches by no means suggests a knowledge of Strauss. One could argue that he shares with Strauss a denial of the 'resurrection'; but, of course, Strauss was by no means the first to question the resurrection.⁴⁶ And, more to the point, the ending of Wagner's

Meditations 'David Strauss, the Confessor and the Writer', published in 1873 (see Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, (ed. Daniel Breazeale; trans. R.J. Hollingdale; CTHP; Cambridge: CUP, repr., 2001), pp. 3-55).

⁴⁴ Paul McLaughlin. *Mikhail Bakunin: The Philosophical Basis of His Theory of Anarchism* (New York: Algora Publishing 2002), p. 137.

⁴⁵ Michel Bakounine, *Considérations philosophiques sur le fantôme divin, le monde reel et l'homme* (Geneva: Entremonde, 2010), p. 105. Arthur Lehning in the 'Notes' (p. 123 n. 13) thinks Bakunin here refers to a brochure of Strauss, *Zwei friedliche Blätter: Vermehrter und verbesserter Abdruck der beiden Ausätze: 'Über Justinus Kerner', und: 'Über Vergängliches und Bleibendes im Christentum'* (Altona, 1839). Bakunin is drawing on the thought of the second article (pp. 109-118). Bakunin briefly refers to the impression made by Strauss' *Das Leben Jesu* in *The Confession of Mikhail Bakunin with marginal comments by Tsar Nicholas I* (trans. Robert C. Howes; introduction and notes by Lawrence D. Orton; Ithaca/London: Cornell University, 1977), p. 35.

⁴⁶ Over a hundred years before the publication of Strauss's *Das Leben Jesus* (1835), Thomas Woolston (1670-1733) had questioned the resurrection narratives in the sixth of his *Discourses on the Miracles of our Saviour* (1727-29) (Brown, *Jesus*, pp. 40-42). Wagner would also no doubt be aware of Reimarus, whose 'seventh

Jesus of Nazareth actually corresponds to Hegel's view that the 'resurrection' is to be seen in terms of the Spirit at work in the Christian community.⁴⁷ Further, Wagner does not appear to be influenced in the sketches by Strauss' central idea of 'myth' and when he does start speaking of the 'Christian myth' in *Opera and Drama* two years later it is used in a decidedly non-Straussian manner.⁴⁸

As far as Feuerbach is concerned Wagner most probably had knowledge of him from conversations with friends even as early as his years in Paris (September 1839-April 1842) but the evidence we have suggests his first reading of Feuerbach took place in July 1849, some months after writing the sketches. In certain respects Wagner's possible debt to Feuerbach is not entirely straightforward and I will return to this when I discuss Wagner's discussion of freedom from law and redemption from death.

Another figure sometimes mentioned who could have influenced Wagner's sketches is Wilhelm Weitling,⁴⁹ whose rather moralistic *Gospel of the poor Sinner (Evangelium des armen Sünders)*, published in 1845, presents a purely human Jesus who is a 'communist' and 'has no respect for property'.⁵⁰ The impending publication of this work led to his arrest in Zurich in June 1843. The previous month the poet (and revolutionary) Georg Herwegh sent Weitling to Bakunin with a letter of recommendation. Bakunin wrote that in this 'uneducated man' he found 'wild fanaticism, noble pride, and faith in the

fragment', *Vom dem Zwecke Jesu und seiner Jünger*, was published by Lessing in 1778. But note that Wagner's edition of Lessing's collected works only included the 'Vorrede', not the text of Reimarus.

⁴⁷ See Richard H. Bell, 'Teleology, Providence and the "Death of God": a New Perspective on the *Ring Cycle*'s Debt to G.W.F. Hegel', *The Wagner Journal* 11.1 (2017), pp. 30-45 (42-45).

⁴⁸ This point is made by Ellis, *PW* 8:xviii. For Wagner's understanding of the 'Christian myth' in 'Opera and Drama' (the work was written in the winter of 1850-51, extracts were published in 1851 and the final complete work appeared in 1852) see *PW* 2:157-61 (part 2, chapter 2): 'The enthralling power of the Christian myth consists in its portrayal of a *transfiguration through Death*' (*PW* 2:159). For Strauss' view of myth see Brown, *Jesus*, pp. 187-96.

⁴⁹ The earliest reasonably detailed discussion I have found is Paul-Gerhard Graap, *Richard Wagners dramatischer Entwurf 'Jesus von Nazareth': Entstehungsgeschichte und Versuch einer kurzen Würdigung* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1921), pp. 59-66.

⁵⁰ Wilhelm Weitling, *The Poor Sinner's Gospel* (trans. Dinah Livingston; London/Sydney: Sheed and Ward, 1969), p. 117. On Weitling's book see Carl Wittke, *The Utopian Communist: A Biography of Wilhelm Weitling, Nineteenth-Century Reformer* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950), pp. 72-78.

liberation and future of the enslaved majority'.⁵¹ This encounter with Weitling proved to be 'one of the capital events in [Bakunin's] life, completing his transformation from a speculative philosopher into a practical revolutionary'.⁵² The question is whether Weitling influenced Wagner's portrayal of Jesus via Bakunin when they met six years later. Weitling presents Jesus 'as the first rebel and communist, "the illegitimate child of a poor girl Mary" – in fact, as a prototype of Weitling himself'.⁵³ But as we shall see Wagner's Jesus is not quite Weitling's 'rebel and communist' even though his teaching regarding property and riches is radical.⁵⁴

In short, any knowledge Wagner had of Strauss, Feuerbach, or Weitling was going to be second-hand. But someone he had very likely read during his Dresden years was Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. Given Lessing's stature, Wagner's keen interest in him, and the simple fact that the only works of what one would usually term 'Christian theological scholarship' in Wagner's Dresden library were those of Lessing, it is rather surprising that secondary literature on Wagner's Jesus of Nazareth sketches has largely ignored his possible influence. Wagner possessed his 'Complete Writings' in twelve volumes in his Dresden library⁵⁵ and he had an updated and expanded edition in his Wahnfried library.⁵⁶ Although Wagner's relation to Lessing has been discussed in Wagner scholarship in relation to questions of 'music and drama'⁵⁷ and the relationship of the arts to one another,⁵⁸ and his dislike of Lessing's play

⁵¹ Bakunin, *Confessions*, p. 38.

⁵² Carr, *Bakunin*, p. 123.

⁵³ Carr, *Bakunin*, 123. Weitling was 'the illegitimate child of a German girl of Magdeburg by a French officer quartered there after the Napoleonic campaign of 1806' (Carr, *Bakunin*, p. 122). On Jesus' illegitimacy see Weitling, *Gospel*, p. 87.

⁵⁴ Note Wagner's reference to the whole of Rev 18 in section II.2 (*PW* 8:337; *DTB* 265) and the markings of vv. 3, 5-21, 23-24 in his New Testament.

⁵⁵ This was edited by Karl Lachmann: *Sämtliche Schriften: Neue rechtmäßige Ausgabe* (Berlin: Voß'sche Buchhandlung, 1838-40). Although there are gaps it offers Lessing's main works.

⁵⁶ This was Lachmann's edition, revised and extended by Wendelin von Maltzahn (12 vols.; Leipzig: Göschen, 1853-57).

⁵⁷ Dieter Borchmeyer, *Richard Wagner: Theory and Theatre* (trans. Stewart Spencer; Oxford: Clarendon, 2002), pp. 160-61.

⁵⁸ Hilda M. Brown, *The Quest for the 'Gesamtkunstwerk' and Richard Wagner* (Oxford: OUP, 2016), pp. 92-98.

Nathan the Wise,⁵⁹ the question of the relevance of his theological writings seems to have been largely overlooked. It seems highly likely that Wagner did read his edition of Lessing (although whether he read everything is another matter) in his Dresden years since Wagner's essay *Opera and Drama*, which engages with Lessing's aesthetics, was written within two years of leaving Dresden.⁶⁰ Further we know he took an interest in Lessing's theological writings later in his career (even though he disliked *Nathan the Wise*) and in a 'Tagebuchaufzeichnung' for King Ludwig II (15 September 1865) went as far as to place Lessing in the inner sanctuary of figures who gave birth and formed the 'new German spirit'.⁶¹ We know that at some point he read *Nathan der Weise* (2:190-362)⁶² and *Laokoon* (6:372-546) as already indicated. In addition we know he read *Das Testament Johannis* (10:39-46) and *Anti-Goeze* (10:166-234) in his later years⁶³ and he may well have read these already in the Dresden years when he was composing the Jesus of Nazareth sketches. It is highly likely he read the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (7:1-460)⁶⁴ and there are a whole series of works scattered throughout Lessing's collected works which would no doubt interest him⁶⁵ including theological works. I am not sure he would want to immerse himself in Lessing's detailed discussion of the resurrection;⁶⁶ of more interest would be *Theses aus der Kirchengeschichte* (1776; 11:593-98) and

⁵⁹ Richard H. Bell, *Wagner's Parsifal: An Appreciation in the Light of his Theological Journey* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013), pp. 133-34, 200, 267.

⁶⁰ He engages with Lessing's *Laocoon* at the very beginning of Part II (PW 2:119-21).

⁶¹ Strobel, *König Ludwig II. und Richard Wagner: Briefwechsel*, 4:9. So he puts Lessing's name among those of Goethe, Schiller, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Kant.

⁶² Reference is given here and in the following to the twelve volume edition in his Dresden library.

⁶³ See Cosima's entry for 12 November 1878 she tells how 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.' (Martin Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack (ed.), *Cosima Wagner's Diaries* (trans. Geoffrey Skelton; 2 vols.; London/New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978-80), 2:199). Note that the intolerant Patriarch in *Nathan* is modelled on Johann Melchior Goeze (1717-86), the head minister of Hamburg, known for his disputes with Lessing and others (Brown, *Jesus*, pp. 7-8, p. 280 n. 37).

⁶⁴ Dieter Borchmeyer, *Richard Wagner: Theory and Theatre* (trans. Stewart Spencer; Oxford: Clarendon, repr. 2002), pp. 23, 160-61.

⁶⁵ E.g. *Ueber das Heldenbuch* (11:30-43), *Anmerkungen zu Winkelmann's Geschichte der Kunst* (11:114-25), *Zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur, von der Minnesänger bis auf Luther* (11:468-91).

⁶⁶ As pointed out already, his edition of Lessing contained his 'Vorrede' to Reimarus (10:234-38). But much more important is 'Eine Duplik' (10:46-121) which includes a discussion of ten contradictions in the resurrection narratives.

Neue Hypothese über die Evangelisten (1778; 11:495-514). In these works Lessing puts forward the view that there were essentially only 'two gospels'. First there was a 'Gospel of the flesh', a Hebrew or Aramaic gospel of the Nazarenes, which was used independently by each of the synoptic evangelists. But then there was a 'Gospel of the spirit', i.e. John, whose gospel was necessary so that Christianity was not to become a 'mere Jewish sect' but to be an 'independent religion'.⁶⁷ Wagner would no doubt be attracted to the emphasis on love in John's gospel and in the first letter of John⁶⁸ and this would further be reinforced by reading Lessing's *Das Testament Johannis*.⁶⁹

5. Theology of the Work

The theological ideas expressed in the sketches are rich and in the limited time we have I will have to be selective. The three issues I will focus on today are: Wagner's historical interests and dramatic concerns; his understanding of Jesus as messiah and son of God (including his understanding of the virginal conception); Jesus as a possible political and social revolutionary.

5.1 Historical Interests and Dramatic Concerns

One of the striking aspects of this drama is that Wagner is clearly interested in history. Of the operas he had so far composed, *Jesus of Nazareth* would appear to have the closest association with *Rienzi*. Both works were based on a historical figure, Rienzi being a tribune in 14th century Rome.⁷⁰ The other operas he had composed so far either had a fundamental mythical element (*The Fairies*, *Flying Dutchman*, *Tannhäuser*, *Lohengrin*) (*Die Feen*, *Der fliegende*

⁶⁷ Henry Chadwick (ed.), *Lessing's Theological Writings* (London: A. & C. Black, 1956), pp. 80-81.

⁶⁸ He marked 26 verses in 1 John.

⁶⁹ Chadwick, *Lessing's Theological Writings*, pp. 57-64. Lessing's dialogue concerns a passage in Jerome's commentary on Galatians which relates how John in old age in Ephesus said nothing more than a constant 'Little children, love one another'. When asked why he always repeated this, John replied: 'Because it is the Lord's command; because this alone, if it is done, is enough, is sufficient and adequate'.

⁷⁰ On the history of *Rienzi*, Bulwer-Lytton, on whose novel the opera was based, presents a somewhat idealised *Rienzi* which to some extent is found also in Wagner's opera (cf. Barry Millington, *Wagner* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), pp. 150-52).

Holländer, Tannhäuser, Lohengrin) or was a comic opera set in a historical situation (The Ban on Love) (*Das Liebesverbot*).⁷¹ The operas to follow would also fall into such categories: so we have the mythical operas of *The Ring* (*Der Ring*), *Tristan and Parsifal* or we have the other comic opera, *The Mastersingers* (*Meistersinger*), which he set in the sixteenth century Nuremberg.

That Wagner became so interested in history, particularly ancient Graeco-Roman history, can be seen in his main reading interests for 1847 as recorded in this Annals: (HANDOUT) ‘Greek antiquity. (first Gibbon: then classical historical works. Aeschylus – fearful impression. Droysen’s Alexander, Hellenism. – also Hegel’s Philosophy of History)’.⁷² Although questions need to be asked about the historical details in Wagner’s Jesus sketches, his presentation of Jesus in the dramatic outline seems largely plausible although some may object to miracles such as the bringing to life of Levi’s daughter⁷³ and rending of the temple curtain (also the earthquake at Jesus’ death could be seen as miraculous in the sense of being providential – i.e. it was a result of natural causes but the timing was precisely right). But the miraculous elements are sober when compared to the Gospels. So there are no nature miracles (turning water into wine, walking on water, stilling of the storm) and the feeding miracle is transformed into a non-miraculous form of communion service; there are no voices from heaven or appearances of the devil; there are no exorcisms and, as already indicated, there is just one healing. Perhaps most significant of all, there is no resurrection of Jesus; however, like

⁷¹ Wagner set it in 16th century Palermo. Contrast Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*.

⁷² Wagner, *Brown Book*, p. 94. He possessed these works of Hegel and Droysen, together with Johann Sporschil’s translation of Gibbon, in his Dresden library. All these works are relevant to a study of the New Testament times.

⁷³ *PW* 8:285-86. Ellis, *PW* 8:xviii sees this is a ‘natural recovery’. However, since this story is based on the raising of Jarius’ daughter (Wagner takes the girl’s age from Mk 5:42, not specified in Mt. 9:25) and the raising of the son of the widow at Nain (Lk. 7:11-17), Wagner most likely intended the raising of Levi’s daughter also as ‘miraculous’.

Hegel he denied that Jesus was simply ‘a historical bygone personality’ since he became for the Apostles (as Hegel puts it) ‘the Spirit of the Church, in which he became to them for the first time an object for their truly spiritual consciousness’.⁷⁴ Further Wagner speaks of Jesus’ second coming, using ‘wiederkunft’/ ‘wiederkehr’, precisely the terms used in Christian dogmatics. So towards the end of Act II Jesus ‘foreshadows his redeeming death and second advent (wiederkunft) for the liberation of mankind’⁷⁵ and, in the last supper scene of Act IV, after he speaks of his sacrificial death and the giving of the Holy Spirit, we read of ‘Announcement of the future and return’.⁷⁶ He also refers to the second coming in the commentary, pointing to 2 Thess. 2:8-12.⁷⁷ Perhaps most intriguing of all is that although there is nothing explicit in part I of the sketches (i.e. the outline of the drama) that Jesus was born of a virgin, there are hints that his conception was not the same as that of his brothers, a point to which I will return.

Generally speaking the sketches follow the outline of the gospels, Jesus making his first appearance with his disciples and bringing to life the daughter of Levi.⁷⁸ The earlier events in his life (birth, youth, baptism, sojourn in the wilderness) come in a ‘flashback’ in Act II which, had he brought the sparse elements in the sketches to completion, would involve a recitative, and possibly a long one!⁷⁹ (Comparable to Wotan’s long monologue in *Walküre* Act II). The action ends with Jesus’ crucifixion and Peter, being filled with the Holy Spirit and able to interpret the significance of Jesus’ death, proclaims ‘the fulfilment of Jesus’ promise’, i.e. that his death is a redemptive death and that the Holy

⁷⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (trans. J. Sibree; Mineola, NY: Dover, repr., 2004), p. 325. As we will see, in the drama the Spirit is given after Jesus has been crucified (*PW* 8:292; 297; *DTB* 244; 246).

⁷⁵ *PW* 8:289; *DTB* 243.

⁷⁶ *PW* 8:292; *DTB* 244.

⁷⁷ *PW* 8:308; *DTB* 253.

⁷⁸ *PW* 8:286; *DTB* 241.

⁷⁹ Wagner’s operas have frequent flashbacks, as in Wotan’s monologue in *Walküre* Act II.

Spirit will then be given. Whoever hears Peter ‘presses forward to demand baptism (reception into the community)’.⁸⁰

Some aspects of the drama are clearly shaped by dramatic rather than historical considerations, but nevertheless have a historical plausibility. Throughout the drama Barabbas⁸¹ acts as an antipode to Jesus, and Judas Iscariot is given a much stronger political role than in the gospels. In the very first scene Barabbas plots with Judas against the Roman yoke (this scene, taking place at night, has a certain resemblance to *Götterdämmerung* Act II Scene 1). A striking addition to the gospels is that the Roman forces are portrayed as ‘unusually weak just now’⁸² and so the two plotters are confident of success if the people can be goaded into decisive insurrection. Barabbas is encouraged to hear that ‘all Jerusalem is full of the Son of David’ and wants to know more about him.⁸³ Also the weakness of the Roman forces weighs on Pilate’s mind when, in Act III, he makes his first appearance. We read that Pilate is ‘well acquainted with the mutinous temper of the Jewish people; he has written to Egypt and Syria for more troops; until their arrival he sees himself reduced to skilful manipulation of party-discord to prevent a general rising, against which he has not sufficient strength’.⁸⁴ Everything comes to a head in the final act.

Although Barabbas’ rebellion has been quashed and Barabbas himself taken prisoner and condemned back in Act III, Jesus is described as causing ‘fresh trouble’ (but as a polar opposite, it being stressed that Jesus is not a political messiah)⁸⁵ in that the Jews are demanding Jesus’ death. Pilate desperately waits for reinforcements to arrive in Jerusalem and in the trial scene Pilate attempts to

⁸⁰ PW 8:297; DTB 246.

⁸¹ Note that Wagner follows Luther’s spelling ‘Barrabas’. Ellios in his translation spells it ‘Barabbas’.

⁸² I have found no evidence for this and it is none of the sources Wagner used. Gibbon covers this period? Not in Momsen.

⁸³ PW 8:285; DTB 241.

⁸⁴ PW 8:289; DTB 243.

⁸⁵ PW 8:294; DTB 246.

delay proceedings hoping that the Syrian reinforcements will arrive soon.⁸⁶ A marginal note at the end of the drama tells us that just after Jesus' death Pilate receives news that his awaited legions are approaching and he despairs at their coming too late, thereby portraying Pilate even more positively than in the gospels. In view of Wagner's antisemitism, it perhaps comes as no surprise that the villains are the Jewish leaders, a Pharisee from Tiberias being singled out for special censure. He appears right from Act I where he criticises Jesus for 'his familiar intercourse with publicans and sinners'.⁸⁷ He is also the one who approaches Judas to betray Jesus. Further 'the Pharisees ply the Folk, direct its sympathies to Barabbas . . . not Jesus'⁸⁸ and, with Caiaphas, they object when Pilate wishes to acquit Jesus.⁸⁹ Further it is the Pharisees who object to Pilate's inscription saying Jesus is 'King of the Jews'.⁹⁰ In the canonical gospels the Pharisees are not involved directly in Jesus death⁹¹ but Wagner enhances their involvement.⁹²

We have not only a plausible historical drama but also a great deal of action, making the *Jesus* opera contrast starkly with *Tristan* and *Parsifal* (works which are fundamentally psychological, focussing on the 'internal' workings of the human person).⁹³ Further it would appear to be more densely filled with action than the *Ring* in that we do not appear to have long monologues apart from the possible exception of Jesus' recounting his past in Act II. We also have high drama and again we see this dramatic concern making Wagner change the gospel stories. One key figure for Wagner is Mary Magdalene. She is identified with the adulteress of John 8 (not the prostitute as in much Christian tradition)

⁸⁶ *PW* 8:294-95; *DTB* 246.

⁸⁷ *PW* 8:286; *DTB* 242.

⁸⁸ *PW* 8:294; *DTB* 245. Contrast Mt. 26:20 where it is the 'chief priests and the elders'.

⁸⁹ *PW* 8:295; *DTB* 245.

⁹⁰ *PW* 8:296; *DTB* 246. In Jn 19:21 it is 'the chief priests of the Jews' who object.

⁹¹ But see their attempts to destroy him in Mk 3:6; Mt. 21:45-46; see especially Jn 11:57; nevertheless the Pharisees do tend to move into the background as we approach the passion of Jesus.

⁹² Note that Sadducees are not mentioned by name but the 'Jewish tribal aristocracy' (*PW* 8:298) can be identified as Sadducees.

⁹³ In both these operas there is not a great deal of external action; rather the 'action' as such tends to be internal, anticipating psychoanalysis.

and she is the one who anoints Jesus.⁹⁴ This anointing scene is placed in the context of the last supper.⁹⁵ Here Mary first asks Jesus whether he intends to submit to Judas' plan (OF BETRAYAL – WHAT IS HIS MOTIVE?). Jesus waves her away with the back of his hand and Mary, turning aside, weeps bitterly (i.e. she realises he will allow himself to be betrayed by Judas). This means that in the following anointing scene she understands the significance of what she is doing (unlike in the gospels where the unnamed woman anoints Jesus but is unaware of its significance and Jesus then has to give a theological interpretation: 'she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial' (Mk 14:8)). In the sketches we read that Mary (QUOTE) 'takes a costly phial from her bosom, approaches Jesus once more, pours its contents on his head, washes his feet, dries, and anoints them, amid sobs and tears'.⁹⁶ Hence Wagner conflates Mk 14:3-9 (a woman anoints his head (14:3)) and Lk. 7:36-50 (the sinful woman bathes Jesus feet with her tears, dries them with her hair, kisses his feet and anoints them (7:38)). (The stage direction for Kundry's anointing of Parsifal in Wagner's final stage work is strikingly similar to the wording of Mary's anointing Jesus in the sketches). An added element to the anointing scene in the *Jesus* sketches is that scenes from Act II suggest that Mary is in love with Jesus although Jesus, stressing his celibacy, seems not to reciprocate.⁹⁷ A highly dramatic scene is introduced after the last supper. After Jesus has left for Gethsemane with his disciples, Mary enters by a side door and realises that Jesus has kept his resolution to die. It is then that armed servants of the High

⁹⁴ In section II.2 he understands Mt. 26:9-12 to refer to '[a]nointment of Jesus by M.[ary]M.[agdalene]' (PW 8:338; DTB 266).

⁹⁵ Hence Wagner places it slightly later in the Gospel passion narrative.

⁹⁶ PW 8:292; DTB 244. Compare the stage direction for Kundry's anointing of Parsifal (discussed in Bell, *Parsifal*, p. 120 n. 52).

⁹⁷ While Jesus is sleeping Mary 'kneeling at his feet and kissing the hem of his garment, expresses her deep contrition and venerating love (beseligende liebe) for her redeemer' (PW 287; DTB 242). This may seem rather 'innocent' but later we read Jesus is with his mother and their conversation is indicated with these laconic words: 'About the Magdalene; Jesus on his state of celibacy', implying Mary is in love with Jesus but Jesus cannot reciprocate.

Priest, with Judas, enter and ask for Jesus. Realising he is not there, the armed servants accuse Judas of leading them astray and Mary denies knowledge as to where Jesus has gone. It has been claimed that at this point Wagner considered inserting a scene where Judas is alone with Mary and is overcome by her beauty and says he is prepared to give up his plan of betrayal if she will give herself to him. Mary, being true to Jesus' teaching, refuses, whereupon Judas with the servants head off find Jesus.⁹⁸ Mary then reappears in Act V when we learn that she visits Pilate's wife to intercede for Jesus,⁹⁹ this replacing the laconic note in Mt. 27:19 of Pilate's wife suffering a dream about Jesus and sending a note to her husband that he should have nothing to do with this 'innocent man'.

Although there is a great deal of 'action' on stage, Wagner, wisely in my view, places the death of Jesus offstage. Nevertheless, great drama surrounds his death. As Jesus dies Peter denounces Judas and (QUOTE) 'teaches him to understand the sacrificial death of Jesus, now being suffered: this death is his apotheosis, and not the signs and marvels which Judas had expected of him'.¹⁰⁰ I will return to discuss the significance of Jesus' death on Thursday, but for now I highlight the fact that although Wagner described the work as a 'tragedy', in many respects the work ends on a positive note, for through Jesus' death the Holy Spirit is given. I earlier discussed Wagner's historical interests common to *Jesus of Nazareth* and *Rienzi*. To this one can add that in both works the main protagonist is abandoned by the people and dies and both works are presented as five-act¹⁰¹ tragedies, *Rienzi* being entitled a 'grand tragic opera' and Wagner describing *Jesus of Nazareth* as a 'tragedy'. However, *Jesus of Nazareth*, unlike *Rienzi*, does end on a positive note and one can legitimately call it an 'optimistic

⁹⁸ The hint of such a scene is found in the sketches with the mere words '(Judas and Mary-.)' (*PW* 8:293; *DTB* 244) but Eugen Schmitz, 'Richard Wagners "Jesus von Nazareth"', *Hochland* 11.1 (1913-14), pp. 719-26 (724) claims Wagner, in conversation, filled this out in the way I have described. Graap, *Entwurf*, 90, considers that such a scene would not in fact fit Wagner's representation of Judas in the sketches.

⁹⁹ *PW* 8:295; *DTB* 245.

¹⁰⁰ *PW* 8:297; *DTB* 246.

¹⁰¹ Note that all the Wagner's other operas had three acts (apart from *Liebesverbot* which had two).

tragedy' having more in common with Aeschylus's *Oresteia* than with Shakespeare's five-act tragedies. This brings me to the fundamental point that although *Jesus of Nazareth* has many points of contact with *Rienzi*, the work with which it has the closest association is another 'optimistic tragedy', *The Ring of the Nibelung*. This is understandable given that *Jesus of Nazareth* was sketched shortly after he had composed the libretto for *Siegfried's Death* (which was later to be modified to become *Twilight of the Gods*, the final opera of the *Ring* cycle). On Wednesday and Thursday we will examine these common elements but for now let me highlight a key issue. Although the opera *Jesus of Nazareth* was never taken beyond the prose sketches (and just one musical sketch), the material did not go to waste for many of the principal themes in the sketches actually end up on the stage of the *Ring* cycle.

I now turn to the particular issue of Wagner's portrayal of the person of Jesus. Much of the secondary literature assumes Wagner's Jesus is simply a 'human' Jesus¹⁰² and is a political messiah. This is something I now question.

5.2 *Jesus as Messiah, Son of God*

When we come to more explicitly theological matters such as Christology, we have to look not just at the dramatic outline but also at section II which concerns the commentary and the quotation of New Testament texts. But if the order of writing was II.2 (New Testament texts), I (dramatic outline), II.2 (commentary) it is instructive to look at the drama first and then at the commentary.

¹⁰² This is suggested by Schmitz, 'Jesus', 721, who points to Lessing's view, expressed in his *Dramaturgie*, that divine beings are not suitable as dramatic heroes.

In the dramatic outline the word ‘God’ never appears apart from the term ‘son of God’.¹⁰³ So Jesus is affirmed as ‘son of God’ (and ‘messiah’) and it is stressed that his death will be a redemptive one. In the last supper narrative ‘the Holy Spirit’ is first mentioned: **(HANDOUT)** ‘Jesus’ one concern is that at least his disciples shall have learnt to understand him thoroughly: this is to happen through his sacrificial death, after which the Holy Ghost shall be sent to them. – (Gosp. John)’.¹⁰⁴ At the very end of the drama ‘Peter feels himself inspired with the Holy Spirit’ and by implication so does the ‘community’. It is clearly implied that this giving of the Spirit is a result of Jesus’ death, a connection which is important for John’s gospel. Jesus throughout the drama appears as an authentic messianic figure (but not as a political messiah) and, as in the gospels, a number of messianic elements can be found: Jesus teaches the people about the kingdom of heaven, he heals the sick, he enters Jerusalem on an ass and he cleanses the ‘temple’.¹⁰⁵ But also, as in the gospels, transcending most messianic expectations,¹⁰⁶ Jesus is presented as a figure who lays down his life as a sacrifice for sins.

His messianic role also arises in relation to his birth. In Act III we read: ‘His Galilean birth is scoffed at; yet he is said to descend from David, and (as the Scriptures demand) to have been born in Bethlehem’.¹⁰⁷ This is a clear allusion to Jn 7:41-42 (cf. the quotation of Mic. 5.2 in Mt. 2:6). This then brings us to the intriguing question of Wagner’s intimations of Jesus’ virginal conception. As I have already indicated Jesus first appears in the drama having already been baptised and having chosen his disciples. But in Act II there are some interesting hints as to how Wagner understood Jesus’ conception. When the brothers of Jesus arrive on the scene (they are described as ‘sons of Joseph,

¹⁰³ Note, however, Jesus speaks of ‘the Kingdom of Heaven in Man’ (*PW* 8:289; *DTB* 243) at the end of Act II; cf. Lk. 17:21

¹⁰⁴ *PW* 8:292; *DTB* 244. Cf. Jn 7:39.

¹⁰⁵ It is not said that Jesus enters the temple as in the gospels but rather clears out the sellers from the steps of the temple. Note the scene: ‘Square before the Grand Steps of the Temple’.

¹⁰⁶ An exception being the targum of Isa. 52:13.

¹⁰⁷ *PW* 8:290; *DTB* 243.

the carpenter’) ‘[t]hey are jealous of Jesus, to whom their mother gives all her love’.¹⁰⁸ The implication is that whereas his brothers are children of Joseph and Mary, Joseph is not Jesus’ biological father. Jesus, after expressing his ‘grief at their misapprehension of his teachings’, asks: ‘Mother, why barest thou these?’ This is followed by the cryptic words ‘his birth’ and may possibly point to Wagner’s plan for Jesus to sing of his virginal conception.¹⁰⁹ That Jesus is born of Mary and of God is made more explicit in the commentary (II.1). Wagner puts into Jesus’ mouth these words again: ‘Mother, why barest thou these?’ Mary responds ‘Saith not the law: Let the wife be subject to the husband?’¹¹⁰ The implication is that Joseph, after Jesus’ birth, demanded his conjugal rights. Then Jesus answers Mary and presumably refers to his brothers: **(HANDOUT)** ‘Thou sinnedst when thou gavest them life without love, and again thou sinnedst when thou nourishedst and brought them up without love. But I am come to redeem thee, also from thy sin: for they shall love me for God’s sake, and thank thee that through God thou gavest me to the world. This will I bring to fullness; so attend me to Jerusalem’.¹¹¹ These remarkable words match up with this section of the drama just quoted that Jesus’ brothers are jealous because Mary gave all her love to Jesus; and even more strikingly that ‘through God’ Mary gave Christ to the world as redeemer.¹¹²

(Note PW 306-7 “Jesus to his brothers (the sons of Joseph and Mary) concerning his antenuptial birth, as to which they question him: ‘Ye are born of the flesh, but I of love: so I am of God, but ye of the Law.’”)

The words ‘through God’ appear to point to the virginal conception. However, there is another complication. At the beginning of the commentary Wagner explains: **(HANDOUT)** ‘Jesus descended from the house of David, out

¹⁰⁸ PW 8:287-88; DTB 242.

¹⁰⁹ PW 8:288; DTB 242.

¹¹⁰ An approximate rendering of 1 Cor. 14:34.

¹¹¹ PW 8:309; DTB 253.

¹¹² Note that in section II.2 the quotation from Jn 1:13 is prefaced by ‘(to the Mother)’ (PW 8:331; DTB 263).

of which the Redeemer of the Jewish nation was awaited: David's own lineage, however, went back to Adam, the immediate offspring of God, from whom spring all men'.¹¹³ Although Jesus was seen as 'the heir of David' at his baptism, Jesus came to a different conclusion in the desert where 'he counselled with himself'.¹¹⁴ **(HANDOUT)** 'He went still deeper to the founder of his race, to Adam the child of God: might he not gain a superhuman strength, if he felt conscious of that origin from God who stood exalted over Nature? [...] So Jesus brushed aside the House of David: through Adam had he sprung from God, and therefore all men were his brothers'.¹¹⁵ Hence the reference to being given to the world 'through God' refers not only to a possible virginal conception but also to what we have come to call the 'second Adam'. It is significant that in the commentary (II.1) Wagner quotes two 'second Adam' texts: Rom. 5:18; 1 Cor. 15:45-46.¹¹⁶ **READ 1 Cor. 15:45-46.**

5.3 *Jesus as political and social revolutionary?*

In Jesus' teaching his principal target is the Pharisees whom he sees as legalistic oppressors of the people. Given Wagner's own negative assessment of 'the Romans' (as opposed to 'the Greeks') it is striking that Jesus does not attack them in the dramatic outline (I)¹¹⁷ and, as we have seen, Pilate is portrayed in a positive light. Further Jesus opposes Barabbas and appears **(the text is dense)** to support paying taxes to Caesar.¹¹⁸ This, together with the clear idea we have

¹¹³ *PW* 8:297; *DTB* 248.

¹¹⁴ *PW* 8:297; *DTB* 248.

¹¹⁵ *PW* 8:298; *DTB* 248. Note that "superhuman strength" ("übermenschliche Kraft") could correspond to Nietzsche's "Übermensch."

¹¹⁶ *PW* 8:338-39; *DTB* 266. Wagner actually gives the second reference as just 1 Cor. 15:46.

¹¹⁷ Note, however, that in the commentary Wagner speaks of the possibility of Jesus ending 'the execrable Roman rule of violence' (*PW* 8:298; *DTB* 248). Further Wagner does express his contempt for the Romans as he looked back at the sketches in 1851: Jesus was 'fronted with a materialism (Sinnlichkeit) so honourless, so hollow, and so pitiful as that of the Roman world' ('A Communication to my Friends', in *PW* 1:379).

¹¹⁸ See *PW* 8:286: 'Barabbas catechises Jesus. (Cæsar's-pence.) Undeception of Barabbas' (*DTB* 242: 'Barabbas sucht Jesus zu erforschen. (Der kaiserzins.) Enttäuschung des Barrabas'). Mt. 22:16b-17 is in fact quoted in section II.2 (*PW* 8:325; *DTB* 260). Presumably Barabbas is disappointed because Jesus has failed to support his opposition to paying taxes. Note that in the gospels it is the Pharisees who put the question (Mk 12:13-17; Mt. 22:15-22; Lk. 20:20-26).

seen in the drama of Jesus as redeemer, must question the view that Wagner conceives of Jesus preaching a purely worldly religion of ‘commonality and communism’, advocating ‘freedom from law and thus liberation from the shackles of the state’.¹¹⁹ Wagner’s Jesus, as we have seen, is definitely not a political messiah, and ‘his kingdom’ is ‘no earthly sovereignty’.¹²⁰ Nevertheless one can say that Wagner presented Jesus as a ‘social revolutionary’, this being particular clear in the commentary rather than in the drama itself.¹²¹ However, the view that Wagner presents Jesus ‘*purely* as a social revolutionary’¹²² has to be rejected; being a social revolutionary is just one aspect of Jesus’ ministry and in the drama is a minor aspect.

There is therefore a fundamental discrepancy between the Jesus of his drama and Wagner’s activities on the barricades of Dresden. In view of Wagner’s revolutionary fervour at the time of composing the sketches¹²³ it is striking how little is made of any political role of Jesus in the sketches. In a letter of 1849 to his first wife Minna, Wagner claims to have become ‘a revolutionary, plain and simple’¹²⁴ and his revolutionary zeal, although going back to at least 1830, seemed to have come to a head in 1848-49.¹²⁵ On 14 June 1848 Wagner delivered his (*Vaterlandsverein*) (Fatherland Society) speech,

¹¹⁹ Ulrike Kienzle, ‘*Parsifal* and Religion: A Christian Music Drama?’ in *A Companion to Wagner’s Parsifal* (ed. William Kinderman and Katherine R. Syer; Rochester: Camden House, 2005), pp. 81-130 (84).

¹²⁰ *PW* 8:291; *DTB* 244.

¹²¹ In the commentary Wagner shows clear sympathy for the views of Proudhon (i.e. property should be fairly distributed). For Wagner’s debt to French socialism, especially Proudhon, see Manfred Kreckel, *Richard Wagner und die französischen Frühsozialisten: Die Bedeutung der Kunst und des Künstlers für eine neue Gesellschaft* (EH 3.284; Frankfurt am Main/Bern/New York: Peter Lang, 1986).

¹²² Martin Gregor-Dellin, *Richard Wagner: His Life, His Work, His Century* (trans. J. Maxwell Brownjohn; San Diego/New York/London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), p. 161 (my emphasis).

¹²³ The very fact that he used a Latin script changed his script with virtually no capital letters in December 1848 (note the lack of capitalised nouns in any German quotations I have included) may even be a sign of his revolutionary mind set (Barth, Mack, and Voss, *Wagner*, p. 75).

¹²⁴ Letter to Minna (*Richard Wagner: Sämtliche Briefe Band II* (ed. Gertrud Strobel and Werner Wolf; Leipzig: VEB Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1980), p. 653). The postmark is Weimar 14 May 1849 (p. 657 n. 3); after fleeing Dresden he reached Weimar on 13 May.

¹²⁵ Three anonymous articles (written by Wagner) appeared in Röckel’s *Volksblätter*, all of revolutionary fervour, appeared at the end of 1848 and beginning of 1849, precisely when Wagner was composing the *Jesus of Nazareth* sketches: ‘Germany and its rulers’ (‘Deutschland und seine Fürsten’), (15 October 1848; *SSD* 12:414-19); ‘Man and Existing Society’ (‘Der Mensch und die bestehende Gesellschaft’) (10 February 1849; *SSD* 12:240-44; *PW* 8:227-31); ‘The Revolution’ (‘Die Revolution;’) (8 April 1849; *SSD* 12:245-51; *PW* 8:232-38).

published two days later in the *Dresdener Anzeiger*, and can be considered one of his more ‘moderate’ political writings of this time. In a passage in which he calls for the aristocracy to be abolished, he appeals to Jesus: ‘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’.¹²⁶ His point appears to be that the yoke of the aristocrats must be thrown off for the benefit of the whole ‘Volk’. A little later he argues that 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 [. . .]’.¹²⁷ Such ideas of the abolition of capital are not put forward in the dramatic outline although they do appear in a less extreme form in the commentary. And as many have realised, much of the Ring cycle, especially Rheingold, is a critique of capitalism.

We are still left with some fundamental questions about Jesus and his teaching and I will address these on Wednesday and Thursday and relate them to the *Ring* cycle. So on Wednesday we will look, among others things, at Wagner’s contribution to sexual ethics and on Thursday we will consider a fundamental Wagnerian constellation: love, death and immortality.

But for now it just remains to thank you all for your attentiveness.

¹²⁶ PW 4:137 (Wagner’s emphasis).

¹²⁷ PW 4:139 (Wagner’s emphasis).