David Friedrich Strauss: A Centennial Comment

by Hamish Swanston

In a letter of November 1837 proclaiming the beauties of Agnese Schebest to his friend Rapp, Strauss declared 'Her speech, too, is thoroughly noble and intelligent'. It is common for a man to note in others his own defects, and particularly common for a clergyman to notice such defects, but Strauss here seems to be admiring a virtue others thought to be his own. George Eliot, for example, in 1858 at her second meeting with Strauss remarked that he spoke 'with very choice words, like a man strictly truthful in the use of language'. And it has become a commonplace of Strauss criticism in this century to praise the honest purpose of the *Life of Jesus*. This huge work, like the short attacks on the foxy Schenkel, was 'directed against counterfeiting'. Strauss was ever striving to state the truth of a matter.

But is honesty enough? Was Strauss' achievement merely, as Albert Schweitzer remarked, and Karl Barth approvingly quoted, 'uncertain truthfulness?' To the opening sentence of Schweitzer's appraisal in the *Quest,* 'Strauss must be loved in order to be understood', Barth, in his *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century,* put the caution: 'This can only mean that we must feel sympathy for him. Strauss is not a tragic figure'. He is not, perhaps, quite consistent enough in his statement of the truth to command our awed respect.

Barth's explanation of the uneven quality of Strauss' work was that he came across a great practical problem almost by accident, by a chance of mood. The problem was that of the relation of revelation and history. And Strauss himself admitted that he was not always ready to deal with it: 'I am too much dependent upon mood, and far too self-occupied'. His discovery and its disturbing effects made him 'probably the best-known and influential theologian of the Nineteenth Century in non-theological and non-church circles'. But many of the difficulties of Strauss' life, his dismissal from his university job, his quarrelsomeness, his falling in love with barmaids, his back-slidings and his revisings of his judgements, should be understood in connection with his frustrating incapacity to deal with this problem. Though he trained for the pastoral ministry from earliest youth, he was not a theologian. Though he ruined his eyes in deciphering a boxful of Frischlin's letters that he found in the Stuttgart archives, he was not an historian. And because he had found the problem by mood he did not know how to work it out consistently.

Strauss thought he had to start christian theology anew. And he thought he could start without any presuppositions. Contemporary theologians were quick to tell each other that Strauss was working

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with as many presuppositions as ever they had employed. They pointed out that he had offered no justification for his upturning of the received method other than his assertions that God does not intervene in history, that miracles do not happen, that narratives which include a miraculous element are not to be read as records of how things were. And certainly Strauss had very quickly contented himself with the offensive opinion that the New Testament (and its sources, if a man were to be interested in such dull matters as the synoptic problem), does not provide even an 'historical core' for the myth of Jesus.

He made a number of powerful enemies by this thesis. After the accidental vigour of the first edition of his *Life of Jesus* he found out just how powerful they were. He was shuffled out of one teaching post after another. He faltered. Upon attack, as Barth points out, he remembered that other saying of Hegel: 'In the forefront of all actions there stands the individual'. Strauss let go of his great problem. In the third edition of 1838 he attempted to indulge the powerful liberals with a milder language. But it was no use. His career was finished at his start. He was deprived of his Zürich professorship before he had given a single lecture. Surprisingly, even in 1864, when he knew that the academic establishment would never find him another job, he entertained the possibility of researching again into the history of Jesus. Revelation and history seemed for a while too difficult to manage. 'The mood was no longer there', he said. Something, however, of the early spirit was recovered in his writing of *The Old and New Faith*. This book, which has a section allowing as 'historical', in the liberals' use of the term, only Jesus' own belief in his Return, and the failure of that fanatical expectation, should be read as the significant sequel to the first *Life of Jesus*. In 1872, with only a couple of years to live, he had at last discovered how he might develop the ideas of his youthful enterprise.

A book which begins with the question 'Are we still Christians?', and immediately demonstrates its vitality in the response, 'Christians in what sense?', is evidently not dismissable as totally old-fashioned. In *Old and New Faith* Strauss demands that his reader consider just how important for his christianity the history of Jesus really is. It is difficult to fault his exhortation: 'The history is not enough . . . it must become your own intimate experience'. Difficult to fault, but difficult also to work out its implications for christian belief. It would after all be sad for most of us if belief were to be dependent upon research. John Austin Baker has, indeed, recently suggested in his book *The Foolishness of God* that if it could be proved that the New Testament narratives consisted in 'completely accurate material for a biography of Jesus' there would be nothing left of the traditional christian faith. The history is not enough. But what would be enough? The Revelation? 'Proper theology', said Barth, 'begins just at the point where the

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difficulties disclosed by Strauss and Feuerbach are seen and laughed at'.

Barth judged that Strauss' contemporary opponents neither saw the difficulty nor were capable of the laughter. I doubt if Professor Horton Harris sees much to laugh at. He seems to be suggesting throughout his centenary monograph[1] that if belief in miracles is abandoned, then not only are the form critics given a free hand with the gospel stories, but christology becomes a vain enterprise, the doctrine of creation has to be surrendered, and, horror upon horror, a man is left accepting the Darwinian hypothesis. Like Eliot and Schweitzer, Professor Harris appreciates Strauss' plain speaking in his infidelity, but unlike Barth, he seems unable to sympathise. He cannot understand how Strauss came upon such nasty ways of exegesis. In his chapter on the 'Origin of Strauss' Mythical Interpretation' he makes the proper bows to the explorations of Heyne, Eichhorn, Gabler, G. L. Bauer, and de Wette, which have all been lucidly set forth by Hartlich and Sachs, and then he suddenly parades 'four little-known writings'. He gives some account of a 1796 article in Henke's *Magazin* by 'E.F.' on the Infancy narratives, an anonymous *Ueber Offenbarung und Mythologie* of 1799, Usteri's article on the Temptation narratives in *Theologische Studien und Kritiken,* and, 'the most significant work', a short anonymous piece on possible ways of writing a biography of Jesus which appeared in *Kritisches Journal der neuesten theologischen Literatur* in 1816. These are, he says, the real sources of Strauss' suggestions. But the evidence that Strauss ever read any of them is nowhere offered. Of the 1816 piece, 'probably the most important single factor in finally convincing Strauss that the mythical interpretation was the only feasible possibility', Professor Harris says (p. 46), that 'it must have been shortly after his return to Tübingen' in May 1832 that Strauss read this article, and (p. 270), that 'it must have been in the constant engagement with this literature' that Strauss decided on his particular form of mythic interpretation. Much virtue in a 'must have been'. But it may have been that his excited mood was caused by his getting to know the work of F. C. Bauer and Hegel. Of Bauer, Professor Harris says, 'there is no evidence' that he influenced Strauss in this matter, though 'it is true that Bauer lectured on mythology while Strauss was a student in the Blaubeuren lower seminary'. He says also that 'the mythical principle is entirely independent of Hegelian philosophy', though 'it is true that in 1835 Strauss thought of myth in Hegelian terms as one of the forms in which the Idea expresses itself'. Disputing with a lecturer or coming to terms with a hero seems as likely a start to an idea for a student as sitting down to read the periodical literature of the previous generation.

Whatever the source, it is at any rate evident that by the completion of his undergraduate prize essay for the Catholic faculty at Tübingen

[1]Horton Harris, *David Friedrich Strauss and His Theology,* Monograph Supplements to the Scottish Journal of Theology, C.U.P., 1973, 301 pp., £5.20.

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in 1828 Strauss was in his own mood: 'As I made the last full stop, it was clear to me that there was nothing in the whole idea of the resurrection'. No wonder when he needed that essay again to submit as a doctoral thesis in 1831 the Catholics had lost the only copy. However, he refurbished a piece from his curate days and went qualified on his way to Berlin to attend the lectures of his hero. Even then he was aware of difficulties in the Hegelian placing of Jesus. In a letter of 1832 to Marklin he outlined his plan for a Life of Jesus which should begin with an investigation of the significance of that moment 'when the contemplation of the divine as one life enters into a religion'. Gradually he came to see 'Jesus' as the construct of Jewish messianism. The gospel represented, as Cardinal Manning so nicely said on another occasion, 'the triumph of dogma over history'. Searching the Scriptures led to talk of the Christ. 'I know not what we ought to need beyond these Old Testament narratives to account for the origin of the evangelical anecdotes'. We have now to realise that what the Jewish disciples attached to one man because of his nobility and their own cultural limitations, is the wonder of many men. The Idea 'likes to unfold its wealth in a diversity of examples which complement each other'.

Strauss makes us aware of the shaping work of the evangelists at every turn of the story. He makes us ask ourselves if there may not be present possibilities of liberation through the working of our own shaping imaginations.[2] He suggests that Paul's seeing of Jesus on the road to Damascus is interesting not for the impulse it gave to the formation of the historical community but for its power to provoke in us a sense that a man may perhaps even now, in the midst of the contradictions, uncertainties, and frets of experience, burst out to a new knowledge of himself and a new fellowship with others.

Few of us, of course, have such a creative understanding of ourselves and our world as Jesus seems to have possessed. And not many more of us have the power of articulating this understanding with anything like the sensitivity of John or Paul. We have, therefore, to turn to others if we are to discover the possibilities of being human in the modern time. The problem of revelation and history has been transformed into the problem of history and imagination. We have to turn to those who have realised the shaping power of imagination. To the poets, perhaps. To the musicians, certainly. We may come to an appreciation of whatever prompted Jesus' self-realisation, and his capacity to communicate this realisation in a religion of humanity, through the medium of music. This is the conclusion of Strauss' last important book.

Perversely, commentators on Strauss' work have generally had little time for musicians. Ziegler disapproved of Agnese Schebest as a 'light-

[2]This is a hope which has recently been attractively expressed in the work of the younger Princeton theologians, cf. e.gr. *Commitment without Ideology* by Batson, Becker and Clark, SCM, 1973.

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living Austrian' who was much too applauded for her good, Hausrath remarked severely that 'one may not marry an opera singer', and most ungallantly Professor Harris says of Strauss' engagement, 'Agnese had triumphed'. He says nothing of her other triumphs. I am not sure that he has looked up her entry in Fetis or Groves, but certainly he gives no sign of having read *Aus dem Leben einer Kunstlerin* in which this fine mezzo-soprano recounts her progress from her Dresden debut. Characteristically, Professor Harris does get right, as Schweitzer did not, the tale of Strauss' efforts to obtain a divorce from this very Catholic lady, but to the long and important final sections of *Old and New Faith* he gives but six lines of description, he misses Strauss' references to *Die Entführung,* says nothing of the essay *Mozart und Beethoven,* and omits Mozart from his index.

Strauss cannot be properly appraised if Mozart is to be put to the side. Hoffmeister recounts how Strauss chuckled happily at discovering a letter from Hegel to Nanette Endel in which the great man announced that since going to *Die Zauberflöte* he had felt 'more equal to the world again', and rejoiced that 'tomorrow they'll have *Don Giovanni*' (Letter 22, *Briefe* i, p. 49 with note on p. 442). Strauss knew what Hegel meant. He was not so optimistic, however, in his expectation of a fine performance. Whilst Mozart's 'idea always came to him in music', singer, conductor, and producer, might, each alone or in conspiracy, prevent the free expression of Mozart's shaping imagination: 'Mozart's parts should not only be sung, but acted by the players according to his notes, but they are usually performed to suit the text, and thus remain far below Mozart's intentions'. Better, at such times, to have remained at home. In Vatke's house as a student in 1831 and 1832, Strauss spent hours listening to his friend play Mozart's piano music. 'It was for Strauss', says Benecke the biographer of Vatke, 'immediate enjoyment without any reflection'. So he had excerpts from *Die Zauberflöte* played at his wedding, devoted almost the whole of the last section of *Old and New Faith* to an enthusiastic account of *Figaro, Don Giovanni,* and *Die Zauberflöte,* and the three Symphonies of the summer of 1788, and wanted at his funeral some of his own verses to be sung, as Professor Harris puts it, 'to the tune *O Isis and Osiris*'. Mozart, he said, is certainly the universal genius. Next to him the best of others only distinguish themselves by the fact that in them this or that single quality of mind or aspect of art has been further developed, but, for that very reason, developed one-sidedly'. Barth's competence in the criticism of Strauss is evident in his remark upon this judgement: 'Anyone who has understood that can be pardoned much tastelessness and much childishly critical theology'.

It is notorious that Nietzsche could not pardon Strauss. Professor Harris thinks that Nietzsche was jealous of Strauss' fame as a prose stylist, that he hated Strauss for dismissing Wagner, that he was in-

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fluenced by Strauss' theological opponents. It is more likely that Nietzsche's antagonism was prompted by the 1870 incident of Strauss' correspondence with Renan. That wartime year, on receiving Strauss' book about Voltaire, Renan wrote thanking the author for his gift and incidentally expressing the hope of greater friendliness between their countries. Strauss replied that it was obvious to all sane men that France was selfishly hindering the rightful hopes of the German people. Renan countered with some pointed references to Alsace and Lorraine. Strauss wrote again to explain to the obtuse Frenchman the destined glory of Prussia. He then published the correspondence and enjoyed, for the only time in his life, a popular triumph.

Nietzsche had nothing in common with 'those bigotted opponents of Straussian doctrines' in theology. He was already dimly aware of those elements of bourgeois aggression which were to find expression in the opulent parades of sausage and sable at the Bayreuth intervals. He was simply appalled that Strauss, having retired from the Württemberg Chamber in disgust at radical attacks on middle-class values, having written wrong-headed articles on Goethe, and even worse on Gluck and Haydn, was now talking of 'we Germans', of 'the highest vocation for music', and of Mozart as 'one of us'. He felt that he must do something about the 'fusty little chapters' at the end of *Old and New Faith.*

Strauss seemed to Nietzsche to encourage a vulgar nationalism at just that moment of victory when a man should think of his share in the elevating possibilities of humanity. Strauss had, for example, likened *Don Giovanni* to 'a musical *Faust*'. They were both, he suggested, attempts to shake the confines of mortality, they were both attempts accomplished by a genius which touched those confines. 'It is a triumph of modern, and of German art, moreover, that both these tasks were solved with equal completeness in recent times, and both of them by Germans'. *Old and New Faith* seemed a proclamation of a new philistinism, and, anticipating Barth, Nietzsche declared Strauss' offering to be 'the most attractive of all religions—one whose followers do honour to its founder by laughing at him'. And in the midst of such merriment Nietzsche rescued Mozart from the philistine, from those who read newspapers, from those who go on Sunday to the zoo, from those who teach in universities. 'As to Mozart, what Aristotle says of Plato ought really to be applied here, "Insignificant people ought not to be permitted even to praise him" '.

To Strauss and Nietzsche the problem of the possibilities of popular culture was as generally interesting as that of revelation and history. It has an interest for us. What kind of thing, we might ask ourselves, are we doing when we support the Arts Council, the National Gallery, and the Barrow Poets? And for us Mozart may be a test case. If for Barth the question was 'Why is it possible to hold that Mozart has a place in theology, especially in the doctrine of creation and also in eschat-

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ology?,' (*Church Dogmatics,* III, 3, 50.2), for us it is how may the subtleties of *Figaro* be made open for a people that knows not even Sweeney Todd. And if the answer for Barth was that in the music of Mozart 'we have clear and convincing proof that it is a slander on creation to charge it with a share in chaos', is the answer for us to be discovered in Strauss' remark that in *Figaro* 'the characters and their actions are sufficiently ordinary'? And if we did manage something in the New Faith manner could we realise the Old? If we came to appreciate the shaping power of Mozart, of Paul, and of ourselves imagining, could we then expect to see 'the real Jesus?' Could we see, freed from the obscurities of confessional theologies, the first man of those who enjoy the vitality of the divine, the transfigured man of our future proclaimed by Strauss in the concluding paragraphs of the *Life of Jesus?*

It would have been useful if Professor Harris had considered Strauss' contribution to this discussion, but Strauss' interests are not always his interests. Since there is nothing of a proper scale in English dealing with the themes of Strauss' theology—no translation of Jörg Sandberger's study of Strauss' relation to Hegel, or of Gotthold Müller's monograph, nothing at all for the student except the chapters of Schweitzer and Barth and the 1961 article in *Church History* by Van Harvey (which Professor Harris doesn't mention)—it is a pity that this book is so unsympathetically written. The English reader who would understand Strauss had better read the *Life of Jesus* in the recent SCM reissue of George Eliot's translation (another book Professor Harris doesn't mention) and, if he can find it, the 1873 translation of Strauss' vigorous criticism of Schleiermacher's *Life of Jesus* lectures. And, of course, he should cultivate the habit of singing in his bath a verse or two of his own to the tune *O Isis and Osiris.*

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