

CHAPTER THREE

ATHEISM, PROGRESS AND REVOLUTION

The criticism of Christianity, based on the mythological interpretation of Scripture and the recovery by the subject of the alienated contents, took its inspiration from Schelling and Hegel, but, in the works of Strauss, Feuerbach and Bruno Bauer, it took on more radical tones and lead to atheism. By denying the existence of a transcendental God in the name of man, these writers ended up by attacking Judaism even harder, since Judaism was held responsible for having introduced monotheism. The more attention turned from God to man, the more the religious point of view became insufficient also when considering Judaism. Judaism came to be judged on the basis of the need for civil and social emancipation. One significant example of this was the polemical work by Bruno Bauer, called The Jewish Question. Its harsh criticism of the parasitic nature and spiritual immobility of the Jews provoked the reaction of Marx. While Marx was prepared to accept certain criticisms about their fondness for money, he contested the charge of immobility: they were the most open expression of the modern world and were rooted in the very heart of the historical transformations. Although mainly concerned with anti-religious criticism, Feuerbach also found time for negative considerations about the Jews' inherent character. At first, he supported the bizarre historical reconstructions of Daumer and Ghillany, who gave a scientific semblance to a series of incredible falsehoods spawned by the vastly expanding anti-Jewish sentiment. Later on, Feuerbach disassociated himself from this movement and his comments took on a more positive tone. One example of the reaction against this wave of anti-Judaism was the position of Gotthold Salomon, who recalled

the great humanism of Mendelssohn, seeing it as synonymous with the values of progressive liberalism. On the other hand, Moses Hess, with his past in the radicalism of left-wing Hegelianism, rejected such humanism and sought to return to his own Jewish roots as an indelible patrimony, linked to birth and the aspiration for a homeland. The theme of Judaism as “the last nationalist question” revealed an urgent modernity. This urgency had rending side-effects, as Zionism was to show. A new era was beginning and growing racism was paving the way for tragic consequences.

1. *Judaism and myths: Schelling and Strauss*

The open criticism of Christianity, conducted by the Hegelian left, also brought about a sharp change in the consideration for Judaism. On the one hand, the direction inaugurated by the Enlightenment could be followed, exploiting, in an openly anti-Christian sense, the criticism of Judaism as the first monotheist religion, on the other hand, the refusal of abstractions in favour of a greater realism could involve the recovery of the revolutionary potential inherent in the experience of emargination.⁷³² This criticism was initiated by the *Life of Jesus* of David Friedrich Strauss, the first upholder of the internal division in the Hegelian school between a right and a left.⁷³³ In the Introduction, he explained the nodal concept of myth, referring back to Schelling, whilst it was only in the Conclusion that he turned to Hegel and Hegelism in order to incorporate within the concept of spirit and the human race the results of the reduction that he had carried out on the gospel accounts of myths. With regard to Schelling, Strauss praised the fact that he had recognised the myth as a category that was “universal, valid for the whole of ancient history, whether sacred or profane”.⁷³⁴ Later, many myths

⁷³² On the common aspiration to change of Jews and radical intellectuals, see Hans Liebeschütz, *German Radicalism and the Formation of Jewish Political Attitudes during the Earlier Part of the Nineteenth Century*, in *Studies in nineteenth-century jewish intellectual history*, ed. Altmann, 142-67. This does not mean placing the Jews only on the side of the radicals and revolutionaries, a stereotype used against them by Nazi propaganda, in this regard see Gay, *op. cit.*, 101, 107, 136-137, 161-162, 166.

⁷³³ *Streitschriften zur Vertheidigung meiner Schrift über das Leben Jesu und zur Charakteristik der gegenwärtigen Theologie. Drittes Heft*. Tübingen, 1837, 95, 126.

⁷³⁴ David Friedrich Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu*. Tübingen, 1835-36, repr. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1969, I, 28. On the progressive approach of classical mythology to the tales of Jewish literature in Michaelis and Herder, while still maintaining

were recognised in the Bible, overcoming the usual confusion between myth and fable, between “the necessary depositories of the first impulses of the human spirit and voluntary lies”. Pointing out “the spontaneity and the ingenuousness” of the process of myth formation, Schelling had already, to some extent, re-dimensioned the abstract distinction between historical myths and philosophical myths, observing that, in the former, “the non-historical was not an artificial product of voluntary invention, but had insinuated itself over the course of time and through tradition” and that the latter were not only intended for the people and their sensibility, but were also a help for the “wise men of the most ancient times”, in expressing “the obscurity of their representation by means of a perceptible demonstration in the absence of abstract concepts”.⁷³⁵ Strauss quoted Schelling’s *Über Mythen, historische Sagen und Philosopheme der ältesten Welt* (1793),⁷³⁶ a work in which the latter had exalted the oral tradition as a living contact between father and son, and this not only in continuity with Herder, but also in agreement with Mendelssohn.⁷³⁷

In fact, Schelling had taken up the polemic present in *Jerusalem* against the *Buchstabenmenschen* and against those scholars who applied hermeneutic criteria that were valid for the historical books of their times.⁷³⁸ Referring frequently to Mendelssohn’s work, he had emphasised that “the oral philosophy is more ardent, richer, alive, whilst on the contrary, the fact of using writing had accustomed man to a colder, more tenacious and more profound examination”.⁷³⁹ Myths were strictly linked “to the sensitive character of the ancient world”.⁷⁴⁰ On the one hand, they were associated

their differences, see Valerio Verra, *Mito, rivelazione e filosofia in J.G. Herder e nel suo tempo*. Milano: Marzorati, 1966, 34-40, 43-9.

⁷³⁵ Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu*, 29, 31.

⁷³⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁷³⁷ On the importance of Schelling and this work for the elaboration of the myth concept in Strauss, see Jean-Marie Paul, *D.F. Strauß (1808-1874) et son époque*. Paris: Société Les Belles Lettres, 1982, 90-5, 100-01, who also underlines the differences. Strauss had actually eliminated the mythical stories and emphasised the role of invention compared to the naivety of myth.

⁷³⁸ Schelling, *Werke*, I, Historisch-kritische Ausgabe (HKA), ed. H.-M. Baumgartner *et al.* Stuttgart: Frommann, 1976–, 198. For the importance that this concept of Mendelssohn’s had in Herder and Schelling, who revaluated the listening cultures with respect to the reading ones, see W.G. Jacobs, *op. cit.*, 117-18, 194.

⁷³⁹ *Werke*, I, 219. See also p. 223 in which he refers again to the concept of teaching as a generating influence.

⁷⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 229.

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