

## CHAPTER VI

### BAUERIAN CRITIQUE OF THE GOSPELS

Engels wrote of Bauer that of all his intellectual and research activities, the most noteworthy was his valuable and significant contribution to understanding of the early days of Christianity.<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere Engels speaks of Bauer as the scholar who did more than any other to advance knowledge of the nature of the Gospels.<sup>2</sup>

It is, of course, possible to disagree with Engels' evaluation, which was based not so much on knowledge of New Testament texts and of the facts relating to the crystallization of Christianity, as on political and ideological considerations. But his opinion is important insofar as it is the evidence of a man who played an active part in the Young Hegelian movement and was closely acquainted with Bauer. The truth is that Bauer concentrated mainly on the study of early Christianity to which he devoted the bulk of his intellectual efforts, and his books aroused great interest among thousands of German intellectuals, many of whom regarded him as a trailblazer who had succeeded in uncovering some of the most hidden secrets of Christianity and mankind.

It should be noted that for scholars and students of the subject, the problem of the origins of Christianity was not merely an academic-historical issue. Schweitzer's view that the activity of those scholars who studied the life of Jesus was not inspired by historical and scholarly interests but rather by attempt to cast off dogmas<sup>3</sup> is valid where Bauer is concerned, more than as regards any other scholar. The link between the events which had occurred more than eighteen hundred years before in Palestine and the Roman Empire and the prevailing political and spiritual situation, was self-evident, however strange this may seem. Jesus, as depicted by historians, was obliged, in certain

<sup>1</sup> R 247.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 195.

<sup>3</sup> *Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung*, I, p. 47.

cases, to help people liberate themselves from the yoke of the Church. Other scholars go further and see Christianity, which led to the creation of the world of European culture, as the embodiment of false prophecy, which guided human development into the path of suppression of individuality and created a state of stagnation in Europe for many generations.<sup>4</sup> In his essays of the eighteen forties, Bauer tended increasingly towards total detachment from the traditional-orthodox theory on the evolvement of Christianity and all it entailed – and from the conservative-clerical regime which ruled the country and dominated the Theology Department in which he taught. Furthermore: Bauer, who was glad to leave Berlin where there were left-wing elements, more extreme than he was,<sup>5</sup> arrived himself at an extreme viewpoint after a very short time in Bonn. He began to regard Christianity (in *Das entdeckte Christentum*) as the factor bearing the blame for all the catastrophes which had been inflicted on mankind since the decline of the Roman Empire. And thus the circle was closed. Bauer, who had started out as a theologian, came naturally to deal with the Gospels and with early Christianity. He was no ordinary theologian, but rather a speculative, that is to say Hegelian one. His commentaries on Hegel's philosophy opened the way for his critique of Christianity and of religion in general. Within three years he became a most acerbic critic of theology and theism, perhaps the harshest in nineteenth century Germany.

It is interesting to note that in the first book he published after moving to Bonn: *Kritik der evangelischen Geschichte des Johannes*, Bauer denied that his research was guided by a philosophical approach and claimed that his critique was solely historical,<sup>6</sup> that is to say, based on empirical findings and on historical analysis of the text. His brother, Edgar, also noted that Bruno's critique was not based on presuppositions, which spell death to any scientific project.<sup>7</sup> Since these statements could mislead scholars, it would seem necessary to explain them. "Without presuppositions" – this was the slogan used by D. F. Strauss in *Das Leben Jesu*, and adopted by the Bauer brothers. But this phrase then held a totally different meaning from that which would be attributed to it today, and this was made very clear by

<sup>4</sup> Albert Camus: *L'Homme révolté*, pp. 52–53; Schnabel: *Deutsche Geschichte im 19. Jahrhundert*, III, pp. 510–511.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Bruno Bauer's letter to his brother Edgar, 15 March 1840 (BE p. 50).

<sup>6</sup> J, p. XII.

<sup>7</sup> Edgar Bauer: *Der Streit der Kritik mit Kirche und Staat*, pp. 43–44; *Bruno Bauer und seine Gegner*. Berlin 1842, p. 21.