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Introduction

Scope and Significance of the *Ring*

Dawson-Bowling is not alone in making this sort of comment on Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (*The Ring of the Nibelung*):[1] "[i]n its scope and its reach, in its grandeur of conception and abundance of episode, in its universal relevance and its richness of suggestion [. . .] it has no near rival anywhere in art."[2] Even if one does not share such an assessment of the tetralogy one can make the simple point that of works regularly performed, the *Ring* is the longest work of Western classical music,[3] lasting around fourteen to fifteen hours. Derek Cooke writes that the poem of the *Ring* "still stands as the most prodigious 'opera libretto' ever written."[4] He continues: "It compresses into thirty-seven scenes, with the most decisive dramatic clarity and point, a story of phenomenal intricacy, involving thirty-four characters, sixteen of them main ones, each of whom has a sharply defined individuality [. . .]."[5] This poem is then "married" to highly complex music,[6] the orchestration alone being the most sophisticated up until that time.[7] Even if one does not like Wagner's *Ring* (and there are great musicians who do *not* like it) its creation must nevertheless be considered a consummate achievement.

My own view is that the *Ring* is one of the greatest of all artworks of Western civilization and is certainly one of the most comprehensive in what it attempts to achieve. It addresses the fundamental concerns that have faced humanity down the

1. Subsequently referred to as *Ring*.

2. Dawson-Bowling, *Experience*, 2:147.

3. Cf. Deathridge, "Beginnings," 7.

4. Cooke, *End*, 74.

5. Cooke, *End*, 74.

6. As we shall see in the discussion of sexuality and gender in volume 2, Wagner considered the "masculine" poet to "fertilise" the "feminine" music in his marriage of word and tone.

7. The size of the "base" orchestra (excluding any extra players on stage or say the addition of the organ for the Prelude to *Rheingold*) is 107: sixty-four strings; fifteen woodwind, seventeen brass, five percussion, and six harps (*SW* 10.I.1: X). A number of these players double on other instruments such that the orchestral size is even greater in terms of the instruments.

millennia, such as power and violence, love and death, freedom and fate. The work, despite being set in what sometimes appears to be medieval times,[8] is remarkably modern and has the capacity to address a whole gamut of issues from capitalism and the ecological crisis through to issues of gender and sexual ethics. It is understandable that Wagner took great pride in his *Ring*, presenting as it does a vast canvas of mythicized world history. He began work on the libretto in Autumn 1848 and when it was completed at the end of 1852 he had fifty copies privately published, one of which he sent to Franz Liszt on 11 February 1853, enclosing a letter in which he wrote: "Mark my new poem—it contains the world's beginning and its end!"[9] Three months earlier he wrote in a letter to Uhlig (18 November 1852), as he was completing the libretto: "The whole thing will then be—out with it! I am shameless enough to admit it!—the greatest poem I have ever written."[10] He then had the Herculean task of setting this to music, this being completed as late as November 1874.

Studying the Theology of the *Ring*

The artwork of four operas *Das Rheingold* (*The Rhinegold*), *Die Walküre* (*The Valkyrie*), *Siegfried,* and *Götterdämmerung* (*Twilight of the Gods*) is based on Norse and Germanic mythology and epic which has been radically modified in the light of Greek epic, lyric, and tragedy, and a case can be made that Wagner appropriated this Greek tradition through the lens of Hegel.[11] In the *Ring* we appear to be dealing with inner worldly events, beginning as it does with a remarkable representation of the evolution of the natural order, moving then to the birth of consciousness, then to the "fall" of humankind through the theft of the Rhinegold.[12] The cycle finally culminates in the death of the heroic couple Siegfried and Brünnhilde which is followed by the death of the gods as their heavenly abode, Valhalla, is engulfed in flames. But although the work appears to be dealing with "inner-worldly events," it is, as in all myth, attempting to point beyond this world. As Bultmann wrote: "Mythology is the use of imagery to express the other worldly in terms of this world and the divine in terms of human life, the other side in terms of this side."[13]

To some extent my interests in this work parallel what I attempted in my 2013 study *Parsifal,* which involved a theological appreciation of the artwork in the light of the composer's intellectual development.[14] However, the *Ring* will pose some special

8. As we shall see, Wagner often strips figures such as Siegfried of his medieval courtly background.

9. *SL* 281; *SB* 5:189.

10. *SL* 275; *SB* 5:118.

11. See chapters 4 and 6 below.

12. Also in *Götterdämmerung* we learn of the devastation of nature by Wotan, the chief god (*WagRS* 281).

13. Bultmann, "Mythology," 10 n. 2.

14. Bell, *Parsifal*, 2013.

challenges for Christian theology since it lacks the clear Christian symbolism found in *Parsifal* (e.g., the "holy grail" and "holy spear") and it could be legitimately asked whether seeking any Christian theology in the work is a fruitless exercise. There is the added problem that whereas Wagner on a number of occasions affirmed that *Parsifal* was a Christian work,[15] we have no such unambiguous utterance for the *Ring*. However, even if Wagner did not set out to present Christian theology in the *Ring* (and this can be debated) the power and mystery of Wagner's creation was such that even he himself felt he stood before his work "as though before some puzzle."[16] In short, we are presented with an artwork whose avenues of self-disclosure are incalculable and whose interpretation is inexhaustible.

If one avenue of interpreting the *Ring* is as Christian theology, how can this be discerned? The first way is by studying Wagner's appropriation and development of myth and saga, whether that be Norse, Germanic, Greek, or that found in literary sources. In my enquiry I will employ the sort of methods of "tradition history" employed by "biblical theology." Here we are not concerned with an abstract, timeless sense of revelation[17] but rather with a dynamic process occurring within the Testaments, Old and New, or across them. One approach is to seek "revelation" in the mutations (and even contradictions) that are perceived in this development.[18] For the *Ring* I will be concerned with two sorts of tradition and mutations within that tradition. First, there is Wagner's highly creative appropriation of a vast range of sources and here special attention will be paid to how, for example, Prünhilt of the *Nibelungenlied* and Brynhild of the Norse sources "mutate" into his Brünnhilde. The second set of traditions and mutations is the development of the *Ring* itself. As he worked on the libretto from 1848 to 1852 significant changes occurred, seen for example in the changing roles and character of Wotan, Siegfried, and Brünnhilde.

A second way of discerning Wagner's theology is by studying his whole world of thought fashioned by the many philosophical and literary giants in which he immersed himself, either by his reading their work or by simply breathing the intellectual air in which he found himself. Two such figures to consider are Goethe and Hegel. He clearly knew Goethe's *Faust*, a serious work of theology, very well, perhaps even knowing sections by heart. He may not have read so much Hegel, but even if he had never read a single work, the philosopher was in the very air he breathed. Wagner may not always be very good at acknowledging his debt to Hegel, and his debt may

15. Bell, *Parsifal*, 224–27.

16. Letter to August Röckel, 23 August 1856 (*SL* 356–57; *SB* 8:152).

17. Cf. Knight, "Revelation through Tradition," 180.

18. A stark example to consider is the way the idea of "life after death" developed in the Psalms: it is denied in Psalm 88 but then affirmed in Psalms 49 and 73 (cf. Gese, "Schriftverständnis," 17). An example across the Testaments is how the sacrifices of the Old are mutated into the sacrifice of Jesus Christ in the New.

not always be intentional, but I will argue that the philosopher has influenced the very fabric of the *Ring*.[19]

A third way of discerning Wagner's theology is in his use of allegory. This could answer an obvious objection to the current enterprise that if there is any theology it is primarily Norse and Germanic polytheism. By considering "allegory" (and "myth") it may be that a Christian theology can be found not *despite* the pagan background but *through* it. So one of my central contentions is that Brünnhilde in various respects is a figure who points *beyond* herself to the redeemer figure of Christian theology.

Fourthly, theological themes could be found in the way the composer portrays various ideas through music and specifically through his use of leitmotifs, many of which are related to each through some family resemblance (e.g., the various nature motifs). Further these motifs mutate as when the "Rheingold" motif, first heard in its unforgettable joy and orchestration of *Rheingold* Scene 1 (bars 540–41–42; 556–57) in C major, and repeated in E♭ major in *Götterdämmerung* as Siegfried journeys down the Rhine (bars 843–44), mutates into a darkened and sinister form as the interlude comes to an end (bars 883–84), indicating "that the rest of the journey will be ill-fated."[20] Such transformations of motifs are able to indicate not only the dramatic action or atmosphere but also theological ideas; the same is true when motifs are combined to present a canvas of related ideas as in the Prelude to *Siegfried* Act III. In addition, the music can have certain associations as when Brünnhilde approaches to announce to Siegmund his death and his hope of immortality; the music is reminiscent of solemn Church music and the orchestration resembles the "Posaunenchor," popular to this day in German Churches.[21]

Fifthly, Wagner can be found to do his theology through the very form of his poetry. As he started work on the libretto of the *Ring* in 1848 with *Siegfried's Tod*[22] (later renamed *Götterdämmerung*) he had moved from a style of verse writing we find in *Lohengrin* with its characteristic end-rhyme to one of alliteration.[23] The term he used for such alliterative verse was "Stabreim," probably adopting the term from Ettmüller, whose *Die Lieder der Edda von den Nibelungen; Stabreimende Verdeutschung* he had borrowed from the Dresden Royal library.[24] This interest in Stabreim

19. It may also be worth adding that the debt of "biblical theology" to Hegel is also often unintentional (and hence often unacknowledged), a clear exception being Vatke, *Biblische Theologie* (Bultmann, "Vatke").

20. Holloway, "Motif," 19.

21. Cf. Bell, *Parsifal*, 98 n. 66.

22. Throughout I will, according to Wagner's own orthography, use the apostrophe in *Siegfried's Tod* (*Siegfried's Death*).

23. Note that any rhyming in the first version appears to be accidental. See the very opening: Third Norn "Was wandest du im Western"; Second Norn "Was wobest du im Osten" (Haymes, *Ring of 1848*, 66, 68).

24. He borrowed this work 21 October 1848 to 29 January 1849 and he started using the term "Stabreim" in his 1849 essay *Artwork of the Future* (*PW* 1:132; *GSD* 3:102).

was to intensify as he worked further on the *Ring* in that in revisions to *Siegfried's Tod* further Stabreim was introduced and he argued that this form of poetry was demanded by the subject matter[25] and in the later stages of writing the libretto we find examples of intense and sophisticated Stabreim.[26] The expression in his poetry, which can actually stand alone as a work of art, is then able to be intensified by the way he combines it with the music.

A sixth way in which his theology (together with ethics) is discerned is through his politics which he believed was mediated by his art. Wagner's theology was the very opposite of a pietist quietism.[27] His political convictions were inextricably woven into his art and whatever moral censure one may make of the composer one can at least acknowledge that he was concerned to make the world a better place through his art; he genuinely believed that through his *Ring* Germany could be remolded and indeed transformed. It is no accident that as Wagner started work on the *Ring* he was very much bound up with political action, and that of a revolutionary nature.[28]

Through these various means I claim that Wagner, intentionally or unintentionally, expresses his views on a whole range of issues such as death and immortality, sin and redemption, power and love, freedom and necessity, nature and creation, law and sexual ethics, and sexuality and gender. In order to discern these views we can, in addition to considering the above six points related to the *Ring* itself, consider the vast array of sketches (prose, poetic, musical) not only of the *Ring* but of other works, together with essays, diaries, and letters where, among other things, the composer reflects on his own creative process as well as his theological and philosophical views. All this material can be invaluable in discerning the theology of the *Ring* and I consider three examples. First, as he started work on the *Ring* he wrote *Die Wibelungen* (*The Wibelungs*), which functions as a preliminary study for his *Ring* cycle. One of the striking aspects of this "World-History as Told in Saga" ("Weltgeschichte aus der Saga") is that the composer appears to make no clear distinction between history and myth and this raises various questions for the *Ring* in relation to myth and history. Secondly, around the same time, he composed prose sketches for an opera *Jesus of Nazareth* and although the work was never completed the material was not wasted since much of it ends up on the stage of the *Ring*.[29] Thirdly, he wrote essays on aesthetics such

25. See chapter 3 below.

26. See Siegmund's "Winterstürme wichen / dem Wonnenmond [. . .]" (*Walküre* Act I Scene 3 (*WagRS* 134), discussed volume 2 chapter 3).

27. I will return in volume 2 to how Wagner's approach to theology and politics parallels that of Ernst Käsemann.

28. This concern with politics continued throughout Wagner's life although his views changed to some extent. Political concerns, often of a rather odious nature, are also propagated in the *Bayreuther Blätter*, a journal which ran from 1878 to 1938 under the editorship of Hans von Wolzogen, and Wagnerians are often prone to employ the composer to further their political aims (see the example of Enoch Powell, discussed in Bell, "Redemption," 73 n. 8).

29. See chapter 7 below and volume 2 chapter 2

as *Opera and Drama* where, among other things, he discusses his "total art-work" ("Gesamtkunstwerk") as a combination of music, drama, and "dance."

Wagner's *Ring*, I will argue, not only coheres with much Christian theology but also presents many challenges. To illustrate this I consider how Wagner's theology relates to the towering figure of St Paul. Sometimes we find a similar message in both Paul and in Wagner's *Ring*. Both stress the need for redemption through sacrifice: for Paul the sacrifice is that of God's own Son, Jesus Christ (Rom 8:32); for Wagner, the sacrifice is that of Siegfried and Brünnhilde.[30] But there are also differences, and the example of the law is a good one to consider. Paul and Wagner share common elements in that both understand the law to have a condemning function and relate law to sin, something that I will explore in detail in volume 2. But their ethics are rather different. It is the case that when Paul discusses ethical issues he rarely appeals explicitly to Old Testament law[31] and in 1 Corinthians 5–6 where he discusses ethical issues, including sexual ethics, he does not appeal to Old Testament law when he could have done so.[32] However, Paul alludes to a number of Old Testament texts and his argument is guided to some extent by the Old Testament law.[33] One such case regards his negative teaching on homosexuality, which has caused so much controversy both within and without the Church, and a theme I will discuss in volume 2. In 1 Cor 6:9 the very word *arsenokoitai* (men who have sexual relations with men)[34] is formed from Lev 18:22.[35] Further in Rom 1:26–27, where Paul again condemns same-sex practices, he is guided by Old Testament views on homosexuality, even perhaps appealing to Lev 20:13 in Rom 1:32,[36] something which conservative Christians may need to consider in their utterances on the authority of scripture.[37] So although Paul was in many respects a radical theologian and radically reinterpreted the Old Testament with reference to justification by faith, we see clear elements of his past life as a Pharisee in his discussion of ethics. Wagner, by contrast, is much more iconoclastic (and incidentally may help the Church in its current controversies). Not only does he hold to the Lutheran view of justification by faith and that salvation is not ultimately dependent on "works" but he is in many respects against the Jewish law in matters of ethics. This does to

30. See volume 2 chapter 11.

31. For rare cases where he does quote the Old Testament to make a theological point, see Rom 13:8–10; 1 Cor 9:9; 14:34–35; Eph 6:2. The Pauline authorship of the last two texts has been questioned.

32. In fact, his argument may sound a little strange. E.g., he argues you cannot be one flesh with a prostitute since you are one flesh with Christ (1 Cor 6:15–17).

33. The actual extent of this influence is hotly disputed. Rosner, *Ethics*, 3–13, gives an excellent overview of the debate. Rosner's own view (which actually focuses on 1 Cor 5–7) is that Paul was very much guided by Old Testament scripture and his approach contrasts to that of Harnack, "Briefen," Lindemann, "Toragebote," and others.

34. On the translation, see Schrage, *I Korinther I*, 432.

35. Lev 18:22: "You shall not lie (*koitēn*) with a male (*meta arsenos*) as with a woman."

36. See Loader, "Romans 1," 145.

37. Lev 20:13 declares the death penalty for a man who "lies with a male as with a woman."

some extent reflect his anti-Judaism[38] and we see how he confronts a religion of law in both his *Jesus* sketches and in the *Ring*. The sketches present the fundamental opposition of "law" and "love." Jesus "slays the law"[39] (cf. Siegfried's destruction of Wotan's spear in *Siegfried* Act III Scene 2) and sets forth "love," which is the "law of life for all creation" ("das gesetz des lebens für alles erschaffene").[40] This opposition of "law" and "love" is acted out in *Walküre*. The love of Siegmund and Sieglinde is opposed by Hunding who calls upon the "law," embodied in the goddess Fricka, to defend his "rights." In Act II Scene 1 Fricka is appalled to discover that her husband Wotan, who is supposed to uphold law through his "contracts," advocates what one could call "situation ethics," the view that whatever one does should be guided not by "law" or "rules," but by "love." As Wagner's mouthpiece, the god points out that "those two are in love" and Fricka should "bestow that blessing on Siegmund's and Sieglinde's bond." It is not surprising that the stage direction accompanying Fricka's following entry is "breaking out in the most violent indignation."[41] This opposition of "law" and "love" that we find in the sketches of *Jesus of Nazareth* and in the *Ring* is reflected in the discussions today about sexual morality; and it does not take much imagination to guess where the composer would stand if he were here today.

I suggest that although regarding salvation one could hold to the Reformation view of *sola scriptura*, this is simply naïve in regard to ethics. An ethics based solely on the Bible would lead to a catalogue of positions that few (fortunately) would hold to today: capital punishment, beating children with sticks, regarding the institution of slavery as morally acceptable. Ethical issues have to be addressed not only by considering the biblical traditions (which I and countless others value) but also the traditions of the Enlightenment and those in artworks such as the *Ring* cycle; indeed such traditions can enable one to read the Bible from a new perspective.[42]

As well as challenging biblical ethics Wagner challenges Christian theology by raising issues that can be fundamental for Christian experience but which the New Testament witnesses simply do not address. I take the example of Brünnhilde calling Siegmund to Valhalla in Act II of *Walküre*. When he discovers that his beloved, Sieglinde, cannot follow him to Valhalla, he rejects immortality. He puts his love of Sieglinde first. It is in a way an expression of the decision many have taken regarding whether to put their love for a human being before their religious beliefs.[43] When

38. I use the term "anti-Judaism" for a negative view of the Jewish *religion* and "antisemitism" (deliberately not hyphenated) for a negative view of the Jewish *people*.

39. *PW* 8:300; *DTB* 249.

40. *PW* 8:301; *DTB* 249.

41. *WagRS* 142.

42. It is worth emphasizing here that among the many reasons for abolishing slavery in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century were Enlightenment values, which in turn enabled a new reading of scripture (e.g., Phlm 15–16). One also wonders whether the movement to ordain women in the Church of England would ever have happened without the earlier rise of feminism.

43. If I may give an example from my personal experience, a single woman in a Church in which

Siegmund rejects this offer of immortality and life in Valhalla we hear the leitmotif that has been described as "Siegmund's Rebellion."[44] This recurs at Siegmund's death and in Brunnhilde's dialogue with Wotan in Act III Scene 3.[45] It was a decade and a half after composing this scene that Wagner was to relate it to the story of Radbod: "He tells of Radbod, the Prince of Frisia, who, with one foot already in the font, leaped back when he heard that he would not meet his heathen father in Heaven (Siegmund!)"[46] So Siegmund decides that he will choose "Hella" rather than be separated from his beloved. Wagner is not, of course, unique among dramatists and novelists in addressing such situations, although the way he does so is unique by his combination of drama, music, and "dance."

Sources and the Study of Wagner

In Wagner's later life we often know exactly what he was reading and when thanks to Cosima's diaries.[47] Such detail may not be available for the key years of the genesis and development of the *Ring* but we still have so many sources available in the form of letters, diaries, essays, and sketches. Further, we have his Dresden library, which now contains 408 volumes, and his Wahnfried library of 2,301 volumes,[48] although we are often in the dark as to what he read and possessed in the years between leaving Dresden (May 1849) and his more settled existence after 1864 when he was "rescued" by King Ludwig II. In comparison with St Paul's writing his letters, something I have researched for a number of years, we have so much more material for the composition of the *Ring*. But there is also a distinct disadvantage in researching Wagner: he was very good at covering his tracks. This is seen in a number of ways. First, he was very good at drawing a veil over his indebtedness to other composers, most notably Berlioz and Mendelssohn. His obscuring of his debt to Berlioz will be discussed in chapter 5 in relation to his *Faust Overture*. In relation to Mendelssohn, a good example is his probable debt to Mendelssohn's Overture *Die Märchen von der schönen Melusine*,

I worked had some years previously fallen in love with a non-Christian but decided not to marry him largely because St Paul enjoined Christians not to be "mismatched with unbelievers" (2 Cor 6:14). Putting her faith before her love had led to much distress and unhappiness in her life. Paul provided the principle but did not address (at least in his extant writings) the serious existential issues that arise from it.

44. Sabor, *Walküre*, 113. See Act II bar 1619 (in subsequent references to bars I will use the nomenclature II.1619). The motif then recurs at II.1621ff.

45. *Walküre* II.2001, 2003; III.1019–25. See the discussion of this scene in volume 2 chapter 11.

46. *CD* 21 July 1871.

47. I found this extremely helpful in studying his use of Gfrörer's *Geschichte des Urchristenthums* in relation to *Parsifal* (see Bell, *Parsifal*, 212–15).

48. I am grateful to Frau Kristina Unger of the Richard-Wagner-Museum for providing me with these precise figures. A number of volumes are missing from the Dresden library (see the list of twenty-nine titles given in Westernhagen, *Bibliothek*, 111–13) and, as I will argue in chapter 5 below, fourteen volumes now in the library were added after Wagner fled the city in May 1849.

where the arpeggios remind one immediately of the accompaniment to the Rheinmaidens in *Rheingold* Scene 1.[49] He does elsewhere refer to the myth of Melusine[50] but nowhere is there any extant reference to Mendelssohn's Overture. Secondly, in addition to his silence on such issues he even went to the point of falsifying his life history and artistic development not only in his *Autobiographic Sketch* and autobiography *My Life* but also in his rewriting of his *Annals*. We will see an example of this in the next chapter as we consider the development of the *Ring*.

49. This similarity was brought to my attention by Roger Allen. It is also discussed briefly in Nattiez, *Androgyne*, 285.

50. See "Annalen 1866–1868" (*KB* 2:3): "Melusine; fontaine de soif." He had "christened" a stream near Triebschen "Fontaine de Soif" (*CD* 23 September 1870) from the legend of Melusine. Cf. letter to Cosima 17 April 1866 (*SB* 18:122; Bauer, *Briefe*, 444). See also *CD* 27 July 1871; 23 June 1872; 13 June 1873.