

Introduction to the Theology of the *Ring*

Wagner had an exalted view of art and despised the commercialisation of opera; but he did not hold to the view of “art for art’s sake.” Rather, he believed his art had the function of transforming not only the human person but also society, and this is especially true of his *Ring* cycle of four operas: *Das Rheingold* (*The Rhinegold*), *Die Walküre* (*The Valkyrie*), *Siegfried*, and *Götterdämmerung* (*Twilight of the Gods*). Regarding the individual person, his *Ring* addresses a whole gamut of existential issues, such as abandonment, loneliness, and anxiety. On a corporate level he addresses, among other things, the dangers of power and “capital,” the sickness of society, and the desecration of nature. Hence, his *Ring* addresses a vast spectrum of ethical issues all of which cry out for a theological analysis. The challenge that the *Ring* presents is not only to *understand* the artwork itself but how it may be used to make the world a better place. One could almost apply Marx’s dictum from his Thesis XI on Feuerbach: “The philosophers have *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point however is to *change* it.”¹ I therefore make the bold suggestion that through an artwork such as the *Ring* lives can be changed for the better and, in particular, such a work can endow them with genuine significance. All this requires a theological analysis, which this volume will seek to provide.

At the end of volume 1 I raised very briefly the significance of Wagner’s proposed opera *Jesus of Nazareth* for the *Ring*. Virtually every single issue of the *Ring* addressed in this volume is also addressed by the *Jesus of Nazareth* sketches.² These two works came to have these common concerns in the following way. In the Autumn of 1848 Wagner composed his outline of the whole *Ring* drama in the form of his *Der Nibelungen-Mythus: Als Entwurf zu einem Drama*, (*The Nibelungs Myth as a Sketch for a Drama*) and then wrote the libretto for *Siegfried’s Tod* (*Siegfried’s Death*) which was modified over the next years and renamed *Götterdämmerung* in 1856. Elements of these initial

1. Engels, *Feuerbach*, 84; *MEW* 3:7. The theses were written by Marx in Brussels in the spring of 1845 in an old notebook and found after Marx’s death by Engels, forty years later, who prepared them for publication.

2. Note, however, that the theme of nature, so prominent in the *Ring* (see chapter 4 below) is only discussed briefly in the *Jesus of Nazareth* sketches.

works fed into the *Jesus of Nazareth* sketches, which he composed shortly afterwards. But these sketches included so many other insights that then in turn fed into the *Ring* as it further evolved. Hence, *Jesus of Nazareth* and the *Ring* came mutually to inform one another and interpret one another on the issues of “god,” fall, power and “capitalism,” love, sexual ethics and law, death and immortality, freedom and necessity, and finally redemption. In this volume I will examine these themes together with Wagner’s central concern with nature and I will close by considering some essential issues of interpretation of the *Ring* in relation to myth and allegory. But first I turn to consider more closely the *Jesus of Nazareth* sketches, which provide a linchpin for a theological interpretation of the *Ring*.

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