

Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860)

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Ferdinand Christian Baur was born on June 21, 1792, in Schmiden, a village near Stuttgart in the Kingdom of Württemberg (now Baden-Württemberg, Germany), where his father was the Lutheran Pastor. He was educated at home until the age of fourteen, then sent to the lower theological seminaries of Blaubeuren and Maulbronn. In 1809, he entered the University of Tübingen to study philosophy and theology. His most influential teacher there was Ernst Gottlieb Bengel, member of the so-called Old Tübingen School, which employed Kantian ideas in support of theological supranaturalism. In 1812, Baur heard lectures *Über einen Grundriss der Philosophie, besonders der neueren* by Karl August Eschenmayer. After graduating in 1814, Baur initially went through a succession of smaller preaching and teaching posts until his appointment, in 1817, to a professorship at the seminary in Blaubeuren. He remained there until 1826 when, following Bengel's death, he was made Professor Ordinarius of Evangelical Theology at his *alma mater*. In this connection, he wrote a Latin dissertation, "Primae rationalismi et supranaturalismi historiae," a programmatic attempt to overcome the theological opposition of rationalism and supranaturalism through a historical study of Gnosticism. Baur remained in this post until his death, in Tübingen, on December 2, 1860.

Baur's acquaintance with the philosophy of German idealism dates to his time as a student. In a letter from 1822, he counsels a younger friend on suitable philosophical reading cautioning against Fichte but warmly endorsing Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism* (Hester 1993: 26–27). He read Schleiermacher's *Glaubenslehre* soon after its original publication in 1821; a letter to his brother from 1823 speaks of the deep impression this text made on him. Baur found in Schleiermacher a theory of religion that was profoundly historical in character. This theory, he believed, had the potential to overcome the dogmatism of supranaturalism and the ahistorical rationalism of Enlightenment theology. Yet Schleiermacher's version of this theory, Baur held, did not accomplish this result because it retained the dualism of (intra-mental) self-consciousness and the external reality of history (Hester 1993: 31–36).

Despite this fundamental critique, Schleiermacher's influence on Baur was decisive, especially in his earliest major work. This was a two-part, three-volume account of the history of ancient mythology published in 1824–25 under the title *Symbolik und Mythologie, oder die Naturreligion des Alterthums*. Evidently imitating the example of Friedrich Creuzer's celebrated work of the same title, Baur's originality lay in his much stronger willingness to employ the theoretical framework lifted from Schleiermacher's *Christian Faith* in his interpretation of the historical material. In the introduction, Baur justified this approach with words that have often been seen as emblematic for his overall scholarship. *Wissenschaft*, he insisted, has to choose between only one of two fundamental options. The analytic approach of "separation and isolation [...] necessarily leads to atomism, fatalism and atheism." Alternatively, there was the more speculative path recognizing "the spiritual life of the nations [...] in its great interconnectedness as a great whole, thus leading to an ever more sublime idea of the divine." Baur emphatically sided with the latter: "I am not scared of the well-worn charge of mixing philosophy and history. Without philosophy, history for me remains forever dead and dumb" (1824–25: xi). The project pursued in *Symbolik und Mythologie* was not carried forward in Baur's later works, perhaps a recognition of its overly ambitious cast and the limited suitability of the theoretical frame he employed in this attempt. Yet the goal of studying Christianity in the context of the history of religions, and the methodological principle of combining rigorous historical research with a philosophical interpretation of the empirical material remained foundational for Baur's subsequent work.

In 1832, Philipp Marheineke published posthumously Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*. Baur does not seem to have been aware of Hegel's philosophy prior to this date; the impact of this publication was quick and momentous. Primary evidence is provided by Baur's major philosophical work, *Die christliche Gnosis: Oder die christliche Religionsphilosophie in ihrer historischen Entwicklung*, which appeared in 1835. While the focus is more restricted than in the earlier *Symbolik*, the continuities are evident. In *Gnosis*, Baur uses the mythological texts and ideas contained in the writings of early Christian Gnostics to reconstruct a philosophy aimed at turning the Christian faith into knowledge (Greek: *gnosis*). This philosophy, in Baur's interpretation, was itself fundamentally historical; the Gnostics, Baur claimed, sought to justify the absolute truth of Christianity by describing it as the goal of a historical evolution. Gnosis thus was a historical philosophy of religion: religious truth emerged in historical perspective; but religion was in its turn the key to a philosophical understanding of human history.

Baur started from the ontological duality of nature and spirit (*Geist*) and the corresponding duality of nature religion (*Naturreligion* = paganism) and spirit religion (*Geistreligion* = Judaism). For the former, nature was the whole; for the latter, God was spirit and as such utterly transcendent. Gnosis attempted to prove the ultimate superiority of Christianity by presenting it as the unity of nature and spirit. Key to this argument was

the Incarnation, the principle that God became human at a specific point in time. For a philosophy of religion, Baur thought, this implied two tenets: the speculative idea of a union of spirit and matter, and the empirical reality of its historical occurrence. Gnosis, then, had to be philosophical *and* historical; speculative as well as empirical. While the Gnostics of the second century approached this task in several different ways, however, they all ultimately failed. The Gnostics were docetists; their saviour only seemingly became human. This weakness of their Christology, for which they were chastised by their patristic opponents already, was fatal from Baur's point of view as well. The Gnostic Christ did not *really* unify matter and spirit; he could not, therefore, symbolize the absolute truth of a religion that claimed to overcome the one-sidedness of the religions of nature and spirit. By the same token, however, the Gnostic Christ was not truly historical either, and the Gnostic philosophy of religion did not, therefore, establish a successful historicization of the philosophy of religion.

Baur's analysis of ancient Gnosis, then, is highly critical: the Gnostics of the second century set themselves the correct task but they failed correctly to solve it. They rightly recognized that the Christian claim of absolute religious truth depended on the philosophical proof that in the Incarnation matter and spirit had become completely one, but offered an account of the person of Jesus Christ that denied his true materiality. These conclusions are underpinned by painstaking analyses of a large number of extant Gnostic texts, and while this research is now inevitably outdated, it testifies to his ethos as a historical scholar.

Yet for Baur's overall argument in *Christian Gnosis*, his analysis of second-century Gnosticism was only one plank. While he sought to show that Gnosis was best understood as a Christian philosophy of religion, he also advanced the even more ambitious theory that all Christian philosophy of religion was Gnostic at heart. For all its flaws, the second-century heretics, he held, developed the conceptual pattern that later attempts philosophically to underwrite the Christian faith also had to follow. There were, Baur, admitted, some who pursued a very different path, such as the natural theologians of the eighteenth century, but such a philosophy, he insisted, had nothing to do with Christianity. The Christian philosophy of religion whose history he writes in *Christian Gnosis*, instead, moves via Jacob Boehme to F. W. J. Schelling, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and G. W. F. Hegel in Baur's own time.

Baur's book therefore culminates in an extensive analysis of these three thinkers, and it soon becomes obvious that it is Hegel's philosophy that to him now offers the most promising, most sophisticated attempt to solve the dual intellectual challenge posed by the Incarnation: the speculative synthesis of matter and spirit, and the vindication of history as the medium in which this union becomes possible. Baur's own concern for a methodological bridge between historical research and idealist philosophy inevitably made Hegel's philosophy of the absolute spirit appear as the objective perfection of Schleiermacher's more subjective theory. In fact, Baur himself acknowledged that his historical analysis of second-century Gnosticism had already been guided by the conceptual tools provided by Hegel's philosophy of religion. His historical account from the Gnostics of the Early Church to Hegel's philosophy of religion is, therefore, inevitably teleological if only because Baur's narrative was set up on Hegelian terms from the outset.

This does not mean, however, that Baur's use of Hegel's *Philosophy of Religion* is uncritical or indeed straightforwardly affirmative. In fact, his main charge against the Gnostics and Schleiermacher, their separation of the historical Jesus from the Christ of faith, is equally directed at Hegel's theory as well. He observes that, according to Hegel, "Christ is the God-man only through the mediation of faith. What is behind faith, the objective reality of history [...] is cloaked in a mystery into which we ought not to enter" (1835: 712). Ultimately, Hegel's philosophy too is a philosophy of the spirit (*Geistphilosophie*); it is therefore not truly compatible with historical research. "What the spirit is and does", Baur quotes Hegel, "is not history" (1835: 715). Hegel thus perfects the Christian philosophy of religion, but he does not solve its long-standing tensions; on the contrary, his achievement, in Baur's view, is to have brought these tensions into full relief. For Baur, Hegel is therefore paradigmatic not in his systematic conclusions but in his exemplary demonstration that the systematic and historical theologian must aim to bring historical research and philosophical speculation together while accepting the impossibility of an ultimate solution to the methodological, ontological, and theological difficulties this approach engenders.

The account Baur offered in *Christian Gnosis* provided the conceptual backbone to his concurrent research trajectories in several other academic fields. His pioneering but controversial studies on New Testament criticism grew out of his philosophical imperative that any understanding of Christianity depended on the reconstruction of its *historical* point of origin. In these studies, Baur emphasized the need for purely historical research without recourse to miracles. Secondly, a number of extensive histories of major doctrines sought to show how the fundamental intellectual principles of the Christian religion developed over time. In 1838, Baur published a history of the doctrine of reconciliation (*Die christliche Lehre von der Versöhnung*), an account of the doctrine of salvation; in 1841–42 appeared a massive three-volume history of the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. Both works are companion pieces to *Christian Gnosis* based on the intuition that

Christianity's doctrinal history was the theological outgrowth of its internal religious principle, the union (or reconciliation) of matter and spirit in the Incarnation.

Baur's work soon attracted followers from among a younger generation of theological scholars. Over the years, their work was seen as complementing his own research on the basis of similar philosophical and, more importantly, historical assumptions; admirers as well as critics referred to the group as the Tübingen School. Most significant was David Friedrich Strauss, whose *Leben Jesu*, first published in 1835, caused one of the most notorious academic and public controversies in nineteenth-century Germany. Strauss offered a radically critical account of the gospel stories from which he concluded that there was no historically reliable information available about the person of Jesus of Nazareth; instead, he reconstructed the gospel as a mythical story of human redemption that *could* be presented in a historical narrative, but should now be translated into philosophical terminology. Baur was soon drawn into the ensuing debate about the theological and religious consequences of critical exegesis. His attempt to defend his former student while insisting on the differences between their scholarly perspectives won him few friends. To a large group of conservative churchmen and theologians, he was the teacher who instilled anti-religious principles into his disciple, whereas Strauss and his supporters suspected him of opportunistic maneuvering. In the course of this controversy, Baur wrote passionately in defence of his own scholarly principles and the right of historical and philosophical criticism, but his position became increasingly precarious and lonely. By the time of his death, none of his immediate students held theological chairs. Eduard Zeller, Baur's close collaborator from the 1830s, who in 1847 married Baur's daughter Emilie, was moved from the Theological to the Philosophical Faculty at Marburg University in 1849 following intense political opposition to his appointment. The one member of the Tübingen School whose work dominated German Protestant theology in the final third of the nineteenth century, Albrecht Ritschl, radically and publicly broke with Baur's ideas in the mid-1850s.

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