CHAPTER THREE

THE ARCH-FIEND OF CHRISTIAN FAITH:

DAVID FRIEDRICH STRAUSS

AND NEW ENGLAND DIVINITY

Strauss’s *Leben Jesu*, as it was presented to New England audiences by Parker, not only changed the course of direction in the miracles controversy, it also brought up new charges of “atheism” and “impiety.” Strauss, New Englanders judged, put forward a “theory which substituted mythical figment for historic fact” and thus seemed to “make havoc of historical Christianity.”¹ But there was another threat issuing from Strauss’s work that “perfectly paralyzed” New England divinity “with terror,” as James Freeman Clarke observed in 1838.² This reaction was provoked by a crucial premise underlying Strauss’s “bold onslaught … upon historical Christianity.”³ Strauss not only asserted that the Gospel narratives were myths; more fundamentally, he also offered a reinterpretation of Christianity in which the historical Jesus was replaced by collective humanity as the true subject. The “key to the whole of Christology,” Strauss argued, is neither the rationalist view of Jesus as an exemplary teacher, nor Kant’s ideal of moral perfection, nor Schleiermacher’s conception of Jesus as the archetype of perfect God-consciousness, but rather the Christ-idea, the idea of God-manhood that found no realization in the historical Jesus. The unity of God and man, Strauss reiterated, is not manifested in any single individual: “In an individual, a God-man, the properties and functions which the church ascribes to Christ contradict themselves; in the idea of the race, they perfectly agree” (780). The Jesus of history is therefore

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not the Christ of faith; rather, the truth of christology resides in the fact that the human species is the God-man.

To the “theological world,” Frederic Henry Hedge judged, this speculative approach “seemed to be the last impiety of criticism” (316). Yet the “dread” with which Strauss was “regarded by … American divines” and the emotional shock that “[t]he German critic, terror of his time,” caused in devout Christians did not stem the influence of his life of Jesus in New England. From 1837 to 1865, the Princeton Review, the North American Review and, above all, the Christian Examiner participated substantially in the dissemination of Strauss’s book. In 1843, the first American edition appeared in New York, three years after the first French version but three years before the British translation by George Eliot. In the preface to the American edition, the publisher confidently asserted that Strauss “afforded every biblical student a rational interpretation, on which the disinterested of every sect [could] agree.” Yet American evidentialist theologians represented by Harvard Unitarians formed a strong phalanx of opposition to “the theory of Strauss, which resolve[d] the Gospels into mythical or legendary compositions [and] … regard[ed] them as unconscious exaggerations, spontaneous inventions of credulity.” For Norton, Jesus was a divine messenger who had taught a pristine system of religion. To reduce this character to the status of “fiction” was to leave Christianity “destitute of historical truth.”

According to Norton, Christianity was rooted in history and depended for its validity on the actuality of certain historical events. Norton therefore opposed Strauss’s attempt to deny all claims to the “genuineness” and historical factuality of the Gospel tradition by “an exhibition of the

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6 On publication history, see Pochmann, German Culture in America, 111.

7 The Life of Christ or, A Critical Examination of His History, By Dr. David Friedrich Strauss. Translated from the German (New York: G. Vale, 1843), “Preface by the American Publisher,” III.


9 Norton, Discourse, 23, 46. See also Brown, Rise of Biblical Criticism, 90–91.