Vol. II Appendix I: „Likely 'Historical' Elements of Jesus' Life"

Introduction

Strauß wrote in the 1835 *Life of Jesus Critically Examined*:

> [...] [W]hen we undertake to extract the historical contents which may possibly exist in narratives recognized as mythical, we shall be equally careful neither, on the one side, to place ourselves on the same ground with the natural interpreter by a rude and mechanical separation; nor, on the other side, to lose sight of the history by a hypercritical refusal to recognize such contents where they actually exist.[1]

Equally significant, however, is Strauß' observation that

> [...] the pure historic idea was never developed among the Hebrews during the whole of their political existence; their latest historical works, such as the Books of the Maccabees, and even the writings of Josephus, are not free from marvelous and extravagant tales. Indeed, no just notion of the true nature of history is possible, without a perception of the inviolability of the chain of finite causes, and of the impossibility of miracles. This perception which is wanting to so many minds of our own day was still more deficient in Palestine, and indeed throughout the Roman empire.[2]

It is not to be denied that what dominates in Strauß' writing is his emphasis on the unhistorical nature of the text. He maintains that that is because of the nature of the text and its claims, not his philosophical perspective. He offered four criteria (two 'negative' and two 'positive') for discerning the unhistorical in a passage. Negatively: [1)] "When the narration is irreconcilable with the known and universal laws which govern the course of events."[3] [2)] "An account which shall be regarded as historically valid, must neither be inconsistent with itself, nor in contradiction with other accounts." Positively: [3)] "If the form be poetical, if the actors converse in hymns, and in a more diffuse and elevated strain than might be expected from their training and situations, such discourses, at all events, are not to be regarded as historical."[4] [4)] "If the contents of a narrative strikingly accords with certain ideas existing and prevailing within the circle from which the narrative proceeded, which ideas themselves seem to be the product of preconceived opinions rather than of practical experience, it is more or less probable, according to circumstances, that such a narrative is of mythical

1. Strauß, *LJ:* 63.
2. Strauß, *LJ*: 74–75. See as well, Ziegler I: 225–226.
3. Strauß, *LJ*: 88.
4. Strauß, *LJ*: 89.

origin."[5] Strauß is careful to underscore that the likelihood of the unhistorical nature of an account is higher when two or more of these criteria apply to it.[6]

Nonetheless, where an account does not suffer from these limitations, Strauß acknowledged that in all likelihood the text was presenting historical material.

Strauß asks: "[…] [W]hat is the precise boundary line between the historical and the unhistorical?—the most difficult question in the whole province of criticism."[7] He proposes the following criteria:

> Where not merely the particular narrative and manner of an occurrence is critically suspicious, its external circumstances represented as miraculous and the like; but where likewise the essential substance and groundwork is either inconceivable in itself or is in striking harmony with some Messianic idea of the Jews of that age, then not the particular alleged course and mode of the transaction only, but the entire occurrence must be regarded as unhistorical. *Where* on the contrary, *the form only, and not the general contents of the narration, exhibits the characteristics of the unhistorical, it is at least possible to suppose a kernel of historical fact; although we can never confidently decide whether this kernel of fact actually exists, or in what it consists; unless, indeed, it be discoverable from other sources. In legendary narratives, or narratives embellished by the writer, it is less difficult, – by divesting them of all that betrays itself as fictitious imagery, exaggeration, etc. – by endeavoring to abstract from them every extraneous adjunct and to fill up every hiatus – to succeed, proximately at least, in separating the historical groundwork.*
> *The boundary line, however, between the historical and the unhistorical*, in records, in which as in our Gospels this latter element is incorporated, *will ever remain fluctuating and unsusceptible of precise attainment.* Least of all can it be expected that the first comprehensive attempt to treat these records from a critical point of view should be successful in drawing a sharply defined line of demarcation. In the obscurity which criticism has produced, by the extinction of all lights hitherto held historical, the eye must accustom itself by degrees to discriminate objects with precision; and at all events *the author of this work, wishes especially to guard himself in those places where he declares he knows not what happened, from the imputation of asserting that he knows that nothing happened.*[8]
> (emphasis added)

In his "Editor's Introduction" to the English translation of the *LJ*, Peter Hodgson gives the following summary of the material that Strauß took to be authentic history in the *LJ*:

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5. Strauß, *LJ*: 89. The negative formulation of this criterion would be what is called *the "criterion of dissimilarity"* for discerning authentic historical material attributable to Jesus: "If the contents of a narrative strikingly *contradict certain ideas existing and prevailing with the circle from which the narrative proceeded*, then the likelihood is great that they indicate an historical element." Examples: 1) Jesus speaking of the messiah in the third person contradicts the early church's insistence on his claiming to be the messiah. See Strauß, *LJEGP*: 222–230, esp. 223. 2) Strauß applies the criterion of dissimilarity to justify belief in Peter's having denied Jesus – although he points out that the cock's crow and three-fold repetition of the denial is "[…] legendary is not to be denied." Strauß, *LJEGP*: 546–547.

6. Strauß, *LJ*: 90.

7. Strauß, *LJ*: 90.

8. Strauß, *LJ*: 91–92.

The birth infancy, and childhood narratives are largely mythical (§§ 17–43). But (*sic*.) there is no question that Jesus came under the tutelage of John the Baptist, whose proclamation of a coming messianic kingdom he continued once John had been imprisoned. It was from the influence of John that Jesus first began to formulate his own messianic project, but at first he did not identify himself with the messianic figure anticipated by John [the Baptist]. Jesus remained the disciple of the Baptist and continued to pay him homage, even when he had far surpassed his predecessor. (LJ, 233, 239, 246, 286–287.) Although there was a period early in his ministry when Jesus referred to the messianic Son of Man as a future figure, different from himself, he came eventually to identify himself with that figure. "Jesus held and expressed the conviction that he was the Messiah; this is an indisputable fact' (LJ, 284; cf. 281–83, 288–90, 656). Here Strauss is curiously uncritical and brief in assessing the evidence, and he has no hesitation in attributing to Jesus messianic claims and titles (Son of Man, Son of God *Christos*) that more likely are produces of the early Christian community. The mythical interpretation would seem to apply in an obvious way to the messianic claims of Jesus [...] Possibly for two reason, one historical, the other theological, Strauss draws back from the mythical interpretation at this point. The historical reason is hinted at briefly: "... the fact that his disciples after his death believed and proclaimed that he was the Messiah, is not to be comprehended, unless, when living, he had implanted the conviction in their minds" (LJ, 284) [...] The theological reason resides in the fact that Jesus' messianic consciousness as interpreted by Strauss could be of only limited significance for Christian faith: his vision was restricted by Jewish theocratic expectations, which he attempted to spiritualize or depoliticize,[9] but only by means of an apocalyptic fanaticism. Such a Jesus cannot have been the God/Man of orthodox faith, and we are driven to the speculative conclusion that the idea of God/Manhood is properly realized only in the human races as a whole.

[...] Insofar as he interests himself in the content and meaning of these sayings at all [from the teachings of Jesus], the suggestion is that they contain little that is essentially original or profound, and that in this as in other respects Jesus shared the limitations and prejudices of his age (LJ, 359). Although supposing himself to be the Messiah, Jesus did not intend to break with Judaism but merely presented himself as a teacher in the Mosaic tradition (LJ, 338–39) his pronouncement of eschatological blessings and woes (regarded by Strauss as unquestionably authentic) had much in common with Ebionitism (LJ, 337, 351); the parables were analogous to rabbinic literature in form and content (LJ, 348, ed. n. 345*); his high estimation of external poverty can probably be traced to the Essenes (LJ, 351, 358); his controversies with the scribes and Pharisees were thoroughly rabbinic in argumentation (LJ, 358) [...]

As his brief career drew toward its denouement, Jesus predicted (according to Strauss) that shortly after the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple and within the term of the contemporary generation, he would visibly make his second advent in the clouds of heaven as the messianic Son of Man and terminate the existing dispensation (LJ, 296, 585, 589–90, 596). Although he may at first have thought that he would attain his messianic glorification without the intervention of death (LJ, 565, see ed. n. 596*, 656*), he later came to recognize that suffering and death were part of the office and destination of the Messiah, the means by which the messianic age would be ushered in through the supernatural

9. Hodgson notes here: "Strauss consistently refuses, in contrast with Reimarus, to attribute a political or revolutionary role to Jesus, and he overlooks any possible relation of Jesus to the Zealots (*LJ,* 293–96, 331, 402, 558, 584)." (xxxii, n. 48)

> power of God rather than by political revolution; and he sought to prepare his disciples for this eventuality (LJ, 572–73, 633–34, 565) […]
> Strauss's treatment of the passion story need not be summarized in detail. He considers large segments of it to have been reworked from the mythical point of view of the early church […] Nevertheless, he holds it likely that "Jesus on that evening in the garden experienced a violent access of fear, and prayed that his sufferings might be averted" (LJ, 640); that when queried by the Sanhedrin and by Pilate he openly acknowledged his messianic claim (LJ, 565, 670–71); and that if the cry of God-forsakenness is authentic (which Strauss doubts) Jesus would have died bitterly disappointed at the failure of his messianic plan (LJ, 687–89). That Jesus really did die, and was not physically resuscitated after a merely apparent death (as the rationalist claim), cannot be doubted (§ 139). […] The empty tomb reports are shown to be the product of legend (§ 137), while the appearances of the crucified Jesus to the disciples are subjective visions or hallucinations, which may be interpreted psychologically as instances of primitive Christian enthusiasm (LJ, 739–44), and which also engendered the myth of his visible ascension into heaven (§ 143).[10]

In his own introduction to his *Glaubenslehre*, Strauß suggests that, above all is certain, that Jesus rejected ‚Alexandrian' ascetism (the Essenes), but even here Strauß acknowledges a hint of uncertainty – indicative of his awareness of the texts inability, historically, to carry the weight of dogmatic teaching and supports his understanding of the generative development of the gospel narratives by means of the '*genetic mythical principle*':

> "As near as we can establish with certainty from the New Testament, the point of view of Jesus and the disciples, is far from the morbid spiritualism (of asceticism) and had not yet forgotten the [this worldly] healthy realism of the ancient Hebrew religion and custom. The dark asceticism of the Baptist, his fasting and drinking of water, Jesus opposed with the principle of cheerful enjoyment of earthly pleasures (was he an Essene, or in tune with Philonian views, whom people called a ἄνθρωπος φάγοσ καὶ οἰνοπότης [a man who was a glutton and a drunk] because of that impartial enjoyment of natural pleasures? Matth. 11.19); in his contemplation of nature, in his way of taking the cares of this life kindly – nowhere does that gloomy background of Alexandrian teaching found." Yes, to his way of thinking also belongs the contrast between this Aeon and the one to come is very curious, and all reality is transferred to the beyond. However, this is by no means a specific Alexandrian way of thinking [= Essene/Philonic], and the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, by which the form of this hereafter is determined, is even contrary to the spiritualism of Alexandria, although its spiritualizing influence could be found in the ἰσάγγελοι (like an angel) of Luke 20:36). That Alexandrian way of thinking is more pronounced in the aversion to wealth (Matthew 19:21 ff, James 5:1 ff), in the non-Jewish valuing of unmarried life by his own example (Matthew 19:12) as well as later in Paul (I Cor. 7:32 ff.) and the peculiar form of the opposition between ' this world and the next' as we find in Luke and the parable of the rich man – where suffering in this life will be compensated with joy in the next and vice versa – that is related to the later teaching of Ebionism, who as is generally known were influenced by the Essenes.[11]

10. Hodgson's "Editor's Introduction' in *LJ*: xxxi-xxxiv.
11. Strauß, *Glaubenslehre* I: 33–34.

What Christianity uniquely added to this material was the following:

> The expected Messiah, the extra-human creature, has already appeared as a conceived human being by the Holy Spirit or as the incarnation of God's Word [Logos]. However, rather than to liberate Israel by his own power and God's miraculous assistance and the subjugation of other nations, instead of raising the dead to open the new age, he first renounced his higher power in order, in part, through ethical-religious teaching, by means of authentication by miracles, to make it possible for his people to enter the messianic kingdom, in part, through expiating their sins by freely choosing to suffer and die, in part through leaving the proclamation of the coming messianic age to appointed emissaries. Thus, after half completion of his messianic work, he withdrew from the human world to God, in order to return in full messianic power and majesty, when the invitation to participate in his kingdom, together with the gift of the Holy Spirit, will have been issued to all, to close the old world time by a general judgment, and to open the new time of immortal bliss for his believing followers by means of the most intervening natural revolutions.[12]

> God appeared in the flesh, but he endured particular testings, renounced use of the fullness of his divine power, and experienced through persecution and suffering all that in this world constituted what is inappropriate for the divine. Furthermore, he took on the burden of the sins of his followers and dispensed his spirit on them. However, in light of their mortal and sinful flesh, these deeds could not bring about a satisfactory state but could only be the temporary pledge of future glory.[13]

Likely Historical Elements of Jesus' Life and Teaching

In *LJEGP*, Strauß indicates more extensively some of the *likely* 'historical' elements of Jesus' life and teaching as preserved in the Gospels – although this material is not sufficient for a biography or for establishing the certainty of Jesus' teaching. Especially the teaching material is more an aggregate of elements integrated by what Strauß calls Jesus' 'internal religious authority' without any accounting of the grounds for that authority. Without identification of an internal architectonic that both grounds and provides coherence to a set of material, one cannot escape what Jürgen Habermas calls 'systematic distortion' for the sake of a community's self-interest:[14]

> That Jesus came from Galilee and was born in Nazareth.[15]

12. Strauß, *Glaubenslehre* I: 34–35.
13. Strauß, *Glaubenslehre* I: 35.
14. See, especially, Kant's discussion of the importance of an architectonic *Critique of Pure Reason* B 860–879 in his 'transcendental methodology' that consists of the strategies of the "discipline, canon, architectonic, and history of pure reason" in *Critique of Pure Reason* B 788–884 and Jürgen Habermas, Jürgen. "On Systematically Distorted Communication." *Inquiry* 13 (1970): 205–18.
15. Strauß, *LJEGP*: 191.

That Jesus belonged to the lower class.[16]
That Jesus had both brothers and sisters.[17]
That Jesus' originality, freshness, and distance from all influence by a 'school' suggests the probability of Jesus' independent development.[18]
That Jesus was not perfect.[19]
That Jesus did not share John the Baptist's threat of divine judgment.[20]
That Jesus did not claim Messiahship (at least originally) but viewed himself as a prophet.[21]
That Jesus asked his disciples "for whom do the people take me to be?"[22]
That Jesus originally taught in Galilee and only at the end of his career went to Jerusalem.[23]

That Jesus taught that the 'blessed' are the poor, the mourners, the hungry and thirsty;[24] that true happiness is not achieved through power and conflict or insistence upon one's 'rights' but through meekness, peacefulness, and patience;[25] that "[...] compared to the old world, this is an inverted world, in which the exterior and the presupposition of its conformity with the interior are not taken as a starting point, but the interior is regarded as the only essential thing, so much so that it is able to outweigh even an opposite exterior, and is even most willingly connected with such an exterior;"[26] that one should not insist on retribution but love, even of one's enemies;[27] that God is to be understood to be a 'Father' over against humanity;[28] that, when humans are children of God, then they are all 'brothers;'[29] that he taught the 'Golden Rule' as the main idea of humanity;[30] that he taught a serene lack of concern over food and clothing, contentment with a wanderer's life, indifference to external status or shame, fondness for children, willingness to go the 'second mile' and to forgive seven times seven;[31] that humanity is liberated from bondage into freedom in a purely spiritual and moral harmony with God;[32] that he taught, although in the prophets but

16. Strauß, *LJEGP*: 191.
17. Strauß, *LJEGP*: 192.
18. Strauß, *LJEGP*: 194.
19. Strauß, *LJEGP*: 195.
20. Strauß, *LJEGP*: 196.
21. Strauß, *LJEGP*: 197.
22. Strauß, *LJEGP*: 198.
23. Strauß, *LJEGP*: 198. Strauß indicates that he shares this judgment with Baur.
24. Strauß, *LJEGP*: 204.
25. Strauß, *LJEGP* I: 204.
26. Strauß, *LJEGP* I: 204. See also, 205–206.
27. Strauß, *LJEGP*: 206–207.
28. Strauß, *LJEGP*: 206–207. Strauß employs the ‚criterion of dissimilarity' here.
29. Strauß, *LJEGP*: 207.
30. Strauß, *LJEGP*: 207.
31. Strauß, *LJEGP*: 207.
32. Strauß, *LJEGP*: 207.

with an edge, that God expects mercy and not sacrifices (and the worthlessness of all external service to God),[33] that ever more non-Jews were included in his circle of concern.[34]

That Jesus' 'sinlessness' is understandable only in the sense that his character emerged 'naturally' out of himself without conversion and 'commencement of a new life,' which of course included, naturally, fluctuations and failures inescapable for consistent effort of self-improvement that makes understandable his own rejection of the predicate 'good' (Matthew 19:17; Strauß suggests that the original text has been redacted here to fit Pauline teaching).[35]

In contrast to contemporary Judaism that viewed divine forgiveness to require sacrifices, Jesus forgave sins "out of the authority of his religious consciousness."[36]

That Jesus embraced the Mosaic law[37] internally and 'spiritually,' however rejecting all external formalities[38] and means of demonstrating one's piety.[39] Jesus rejected, especially, the 'sacrifice' system of the Temple.[40]

That Jesus did not speak of himself as the 'Son of David;'[41] he rejected worldly political power;[42] that he never directly employed the title "Son of God";[43] accepted the title of 'Messiah,' but as if to say: "Yes, I am the Messiah but not your royal Son of David; I am the Son of God, but He will glorify me by suffering and death, contrary to your expectations;"[44] that Jesus preferred the title "Son of Man" in the sense of "entrusted with high revelations but still weak and lowly";[45] that his 'messiahship' was an internal, moral ideal;[46] that his goal was the elevation of humanity to authentic piety and morality "[…] by means of that spiritual and moral elevation in that new, no longer servitude but naïve relationship with God by which they will find their

33. Strauß, *LJEGP*: 210.
34. Strauß, *LJEGP*: 220–221.
35. Strauß, *LJEGP*: 208–209.
36. Strauß, *LJEGP*: 209.
37. Strauß, quotes here Matthew 5:19 ("[…] the man who infringes even one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be considered the least in the kingdom of heaven; but the man who keeps them and teaches them will be considered great in the kingdom of heaven.") *LJEGP*: 211.
38. Strauß cites Matthew 9:14–17 and the rejection of fasting, celebration with the bridegroom while he is present, and the need to put new wine into fresh wine skins to reject Essene asceticism and Pharisaic boasting piety based on the Mosaic Law. See Strauß, *LJEGP*: 213.
39. Strauß, *LJEGP*: 209.
40. Strauß, *LJEGP*: 214–215.
41. Strauß, *LJEGP*: 222–223.
42. Strauß, *LJEGP*: 223.
43. Strauß, *LJEGP*: 223–224.
44. Strauß, *LJEGP*: 224.
45. Strauß, *LJEGP*: 225.
46. Strauß, *LJEGP*: 229.

happiness, which is desirable in itself, [but] at the same time contains the natural germs of all external improvement."[47]

That Jesus originally thought of himself as a religious teacher/prophet but came to understand himself as having a martyr role to play;[48] self-understanding, perhaps, as a 'teaching messiah,' which given his Jewish tradition (Isaiah 50, 52, 53), was easily combined with the role of a martyr given the hate generated against him.[49]

Viewed the Kingdom of God as a natural development of humanity's spiritual and moral elevation although that did not exclude the possibility of another other-worldly epoch for the completion of the Kingdom[50]

47. Strauß, *LJEGP*: 229–230.
48. Strauß, *LJEGP*: 227, 233–234.
49. Strauß, *LJEGP*: 233–234.
50. Strauß, *LJEGP*: 229–230, 240–241.