



"Forward" to Theology and Revolution -- The 1839 Zurich Revolution: A Reader in the History of Theology for the Theology of History by [Douglas R McGaughey](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#).

Forward

It has been twenty-five years since the seeds of this project were sown during a Fulbright Research Grant year in Germany in 1992-1993. As part of my project on Alois Emanuel Biedermann, a "freisinniger" [Free Thinking], Swiss theologian, I visited Prof. Hans Geißer at the University of Zurich. In the 19th century, the Zurich Liberals' failed twice to appoint David Friedrich Strauß to a chair of New Testament Studies and Theology in 1837 and 1839. The second attempt of 1839 resulted in a bloody political revolution in the Canton of Zurich. It took four years for the Liberals to regain power, but it was not until 1850 that they were able to appoint a progressive theologian to the university. That theologian was Alois Emanuel Biedermann. In my discussions with Prof. Geißer, the topic of the 1839 revolution was raised, for obvious reasons. Prof. Geißer sent me with his graduate assistant, Ernst Friedauer, to the library, where I was handed a cardboard box filled with materials (newspaper articles, street pamphlets, commission reports, and even an account signed off by eye-witnesses from all sides of the 1839 September Revolution). Absolutely thrilled, I spent two days photocopying the contents of the box.

Once back in the United States, I began a translation of Colonel Schultheß' eye-witness account of the events of September 5/6, 1839, but my teaching and administrative duties as well as other writing projects intervened, and the uncompleted translation survived on my hard drive through years of hardware and software updates, and the documents in the cardboard box were stored in a filing cabinet, but, as part of my preparation for moving to Germany following my retirement, they along with the contents of five filing cabinets were digitized.

Although I didn't finish the translation of Schultheß' eye-witness account at the time, in 1994 I presented a paper at the AAR/SBL Pacific Northwest regional meeting, now included in this text, on the issues and events of Strauß' failed appointment and the revolution in Zurich. Unfortunately, I could find no journal interested in publishing it.

Since 1993, I have believed that the failed appointment of Strauß and the revolution it triggered was a text-book case of the fissures and fractures running through human consciousness that have resulted in unfortunate clashes not only among Christian theological perspectives themselves but also as a result of the sparks (but rarely light) generated by the conflict between post-Copernican worldview, Christianity, and religions generally. In addition, Zurich has the added dimension of academic freedom at its core. Now in retirement, I have tried to rekindle the long dormant embers in order to generate some light on a fascinating set of events that occurred in a democratically elected state all as a consequence of religious animosity and unfortunate misunderstanding on all sides a decade before the more highly profiled 1848 Revolution in Germany.

Although the focus of the failed Strauß appointment is Christianity and its relationship to scholarship and academic freedom, 1839 Zurich may also be treated as a text-book illustration of the crucial role in shaping perception, understanding (or lack of understanding), and, most importantly, (violent) action in religious life and on the part of religions against their opponents, generally. In what follows, I will suggest that Strauß underwent an apparent transformation from his initial Hegelianism at the time of the publication of his *Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (Vol. 1 1834; Vol. 2 1837) to a Kantian understanding of religion in *The Life of Jesus for the German People* (1864). Even leaving open whether or not that is in fact the case (!) as we must, I propose that the engagement of Kant not only allows a profiling of the Kantian roots of “de-mythologization” far more compatible with Strauß’ project than Hegelianism but also enables a universalization of the themes of 1839 for understanding the role of all religions in understanding and acting, their interface with scholarship and science, along with highlighting a perspective that can rise above “right,” “wrong,” and even “mediating” theological options.

Structure of the Text

The “Introduction” provides an account of who David Friedrich Strauß was, what he said, and why it could be relevant to today. Strauß’ *Life of Jesus Critically Examined* is two volumes with a total of some 1,800 pages. Perhaps the saddest aspect of the history of the reception (rejection) of the work is that not only his enemies but also his friends did not read it, and the litmus test for deciding whether or not they did is the notion of “myth.”

Strauß’s exegesis and theological development will be carefully examined. With respect to his exegesis, then, the question of just what he claimed about the New Testament texts will be examined. We will find that Strauß not only defended the “mythic” nature of the New Testament (note: myth does not mean “untrue” or the denial of history) but also that he engaged in three distinct and insightful readings of the individual gospel stories: “Supernatural,” “Rationalist,” and “Mythic.” New Testament scholars today can yet benefit from his insights. Unlike the so-called “Jesus Seminar’s” limited focus on historical issues, primarily on the basis of Rudolf Bultmann’s criteria of dissimilarity (unacceptability to the Judaism of its day or to the theology of the early church), coherence (with the material of dissimilarity), and multiple attestation (frequency with which one encounters the material), Strauß engages a far more subtle reading of the text that the literal and the rationalist readings of the text not simply to argue that they are “wrong” but to illuminate the difficulties that they generate. He does not present the “Supernaturalist” and “Rationalist” readings merely to replace them with the “truth” that the New Testament is mythic fantasy. *In short, there is more to “history” than just facts that are true, false, or maybe.*

My former colleague, Lane McGaughey, frequently proposed that the criterion of multiple attestation makes it likely that Jesus performed miracles. Whether or not he did is not something that empirical evidence can decide in light of the limits to human reason. However, Strauß already pointed out in his first *Life of Jesus* that the purported miracles performed by Jesus can all be seen as at the least equivalent to, but more often than not superior to, miracles “performed” by individuals in the Jewish scriptures. In other words, the presence of miracles in the accounts of Jesus’ ministry may have more to do with portraying Jesus’ theological (!) *significance* for his early followers than they have to do with factual events.

Rather than make a claim for which there can be no empirical evidence capable of deciding the issue, we can ask what is *necessary* for us to experience a miracle and what is the *historical purpose* served by the miracle. When we ask about necessity and purpose in this sense, though, we open up the possibility of a profound, existential notion of religious faith relevant for our everyday lives that goes far beyond the parameters of mere dogmatic assertions.

Finally then, the discussion of Strauß will address how Strauß can be appreciated constructively today. Although the “early” Strauß of *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* ends with a theological proposal for understanding Jesus in terms of Hegelian “Absolute Philosophy,” it will be proposed that, by 1864 and his *The Life of Jesus Prepared for the German People*, Strauß had revised his dismissive reading of Immanuel Kant of the 1835/7 *The Life of Jesus* to defend a Kantian notion of “pure” religion at the core of “historical” religion. This permits our reading Strauß’ theology not as some “substitution” for Christianity as an ethereal, abstract intellectual scheme but as the quintessential example of the religious nature of universal human experience, understanding, and responsible action. The crucial point here, though, is not that religion is “reduced” to morality, but religion and faith characterize all of life. Explicitly, one does not sacrifice a pastoral ministry of care for the suffering and anxieties of humanity, when one grasps the insights of “pure” religion.

The introduction is followed by an overview of the issues and events that led to the revolution in Zurich on September 5/6, 1839, with “On D.F. Strauß and the 1839 Revolution in Zurich.” It, then, turns to the eye-witness account by Lieutenant/Colonel Friedrich Schulthess, “Explanatory Notes on the Strauss Movement and September 6, 1839.” This is an unusual historical account because it is signed-off as accurate by eye-witnesses from the other two perspectives (the religious faction and the government) to the conflict.

Having engaged the historical aspects of the events of the 1839 revolution, Part II provides translations of materials both in support of and in opposition to Strauß’ appointment to the university in Zurich. The final entry in Part II is a translation of a letter in response to the charges leveled against him by the Committee of Faith by the Superintendent of Schools, Ignaz Thomas Scherr, who had been given a life-appointment in 1832 with the task to improve the reputation of teachers and to reform the curriculum of the entire school system. Along with Strauß, he was a lightning rod for drawing the ire of the opposition to the new public order that arose with the election of the Liberals in 1831 and the founding of the university in 1833 as the flagship of progressive education.

Part III provides a collection of readings in the *theology of history* that provide greater breadth and depth to the Kantian understanding of religion, which had come to shape Strauß’ reflections at the end of his life.

The volume concludes with the translation of the initial report of the Aid Society established to respond to the needs of victims and their survivors from the revolution.

All of the translations are from this author, Douglas R. McGaughey. The German originals are available at <https://criticalidealism.org>.

NOTE on citations:

The Life of Jesus Critically Examined from 1835 is cited according to the English translation (mostly by George Elliot) of the fourth edition and is indicated by “LJ” followed by page number.

The Life of Jesus Prepared for the German People of 1865 is cited according to the German edition of *Das Leben Jesus für das Deutsche Volk bearbeitet* (Leipzig: F.A. Brockhaus, 1874) and is indicated by “LJGP” followed by the page number.

The works of Immanuel Kant are cited to the Akademie Ausgabe (Academy Edition), as is customary with the exception of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which Kant published in two editions. These editions are indicated by “A” and “B” followed by the page number.