

# ‘IS THIS NOT THE CARPENTER?’

THE QUESTION OF THE HISTORICITY  
OF THE FIGURE OF JESUS

EDITED BY THOMAS L. THOMPSON  
AND THOMAS S. VERENNA



COPENHAGEN INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR

**'Is This Not the Carpenter?'**

Copenhagen International Seminar

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equinox

Published by Equinox Publishing Ltd  
UK: Unit S3, Kelham House, 3 Lancaster Street, Sheffield S3 8AF  
USA: ISD, 70 Enterprise Drive, Bristol, CT 06010

[www.equinoxpub.com](http://www.equinoxpub.com)

First published 2012

Editorial matter and selection © Thomas L. Thompson and Thomas S. Verenna 2012.  
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ISBN: 978-1-84553-986-3 (hardback)

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

“Is this not the Carpenter?”: the question of the historicity of the figure of Jesus /  
edited by Thomas L. Thompson and Thomas S. Verenna.

p. cm.—(Copenhagen international seminar)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-84553-986-3 (hb)

1. Jesus Christ—Historicity. 2. Bible. N.T.—Criticism,  
interpretation, etc. 3. Jesus Christ—Biography—History and criticism.

I. Thompson, Thomas L., 1939—II. Verenna, Thomas S.

BT303.2.I88 2012

232.9'08—dc23

2011018102

Typeset by S.J.I. Services, New Delhi  
Printed and bound in the UK by MPG Books Group

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## Abbreviations

ANET	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i> . Edited by J. B. Pritchard. 3rd edn. Princeton, 1969
ANRW	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt: Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung</i> . Edited by H. Temporini and W. Haase. Berlin, 1972–
AThD	<i>Acta theologica danica</i>
AYBC	<i>Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries</i>
BASOR	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
<i>BibInt</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
BZ	<i>Biblische Zeitschrift</i>
BZAW	<i>Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
CBQMS	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series</i>
CIS	<i>Copenhagen International Seminar</i>
CS	<i>Current Studies</i>
DKNT	<i>Dansk kommentar til Det Nye Testamente</i>
EI	<i>Encyclopedia of Islam</i>
EQ	<i>Encyclopedia of the Qur'an</i>
FBE	<i>Forum for Bibelsk Eksegese</i>
FFC	<i>Folklore Fellows Communications</i>
FRLANT	<i>Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments</i>
<i>HibJ</i>	<i>Hibbert Journal</i>
HUTh	<i>Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JBTh	<i>Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie</i>
JHC	<i>Journal of Higher Criticism</i>
JSHJ	<i>Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus</i>
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSNTSup	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series</i>
JSOTSup	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series</i>



<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
JSP	Judea and Samaria Publications
<i>LAI</i>	<i>Library of Ancient Israel</i>
MdB	Le Monde de la Bible
<i>MTSR</i>	<i>Method and Theory in the Study of Religion</i>
NTM	New Testament Monographs
NovT	Novum Testamentum
<i>OTP</i>	<i>Old Testament Pseudepigrapha</i> . Edited by J. H. Charlesworth. 2 vols. New York, 1983
<i>RB</i>	<i>Revue biblique</i>
SBEC	Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SBLSymS	Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series
SBLTT	Society of Biblical Literature Text and Translations
SemeiaSt	Semeia Studies
SHANE	Studies in the History of the Ancient Near East
<i>SJOT</i>	<i>Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament</i>
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
SP	Sacra pagina
StANT	Studien zum Alten und Neuen Testaments
StPB	Studia post-biblica
TANZ	Texte und Arbeiten zum neutestamentlichen Zeitalter
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZNW	Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche



## **The German Pestilence: Re-assessing Feuerbach, Strauss and Bauer**

*Roland Boer*

What is the relevance or actuality, as the French like to say, of David Strauss and Bruno Bauer (and for that matter, Ludwig Feuerbach) today? In their own time they caused outrage, were sacked from university posts and denied positions. Outside Germany (Prussia) they were known as part of the corroding 'German Pestilence' that would ruin almost two millennia of facts about the Bible. No less a thinker than Nietzsche made a shipwreck of his faith after reading Strauss. In our own time, especially with the so-called minimalist position in biblical studies, we find a return to many of their concerns. It is as though the implications of the radical work of these nineteenth-century scholars have yet to be realized.

This essay concerns itself with three topics. First, it considers the reasons for the theological turn of German philosophy in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Why did all of the major debates concerning reason, republicanism, democracy, the nature of the state, freedom of speech and of the press, the relations of church and state and even economics take place on the territory of the Bible, especially the New Testament Gospels? An exploration of the context in relation to other European centres draws out the reasons for this distinct German turn to theology. I also argue that this was the situation which launched a century-long global domination of biblical criticism by German biblical scholarship.

Second, it explores the specific (and at the time explosive) contribution of Ludwig Feuerbach's theory of projection that was to be so influential in subsequent thought, David Strauss's argument concerning the mythic nature of the Gospel narratives and Bruno Bauer's radically sceptical New Testament criticism, which went hand-in-hand with his radical politics and

militant atheism. In each case I situate their arguments within the wider context of their thought and that of Germany at the time. Third, I sift through the dross to find a few gems that are still worth considering today. As for those items, we will need to wait for the close of the essay.

### **Context: The Biblical Terrain of Political Thought**

There are two kinds of facts which are undeniable. In the first place religion, and next to it, politics, are the subjects which form the main interest of Germany today. We must take these, in whatever form they exist, as our point of departure.<sup>1</sup>

So wrote none other than Karl Marx in 1844, but is a fair summary of the situation of public debate at the time. In what follows I draw a sketch of the intertwining of religious and political issues in the 1820s and 1830s in Germany.<sup>2</sup> Although it is going too far to argue that the idea of separating religion and politics was simply not possible in those years, it is true that there was a massive effort to make sure they stayed an inseparable married couple, however much they might have squabbled.<sup>3</sup> But we need to be more specific: at stake was not merely religion but theology, indeed not merely theology but biblical studies. As for politics, that took the specific form of the drive for a 'Christian state' under the pious Friedrich Wilhelm III and his equally reactionary son, Friedrich Wilhelm IV. Let me say a little about them before returning to biblical criticism.

When the new Prussian king, Friedrich Wilhelm IV, took power in 1840 he succeeded a father who had begun a process of ensuring the Restoration of authority in the monarchy. Frightened by those dreadful Frenchmen and their revolutionary fervour across the border, one after the other the two Friedrichs busily set about shoring up their domain against the hordes of barbarians keen to lop off their heads. In 1822 the devoutly Calvinist

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1. K. Marx, *Letters from the Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, in *Marx and Engels Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975 [1844]), III, 143.
  2. I know it is common knowledge for anyone with a smattering of knowledge about German history, but 'Germany' refers to a loose conglomerate of independent states: Prussia, Westphalia, the Rhineland and East Prussia. Westphalia and the Rhineland had been under the French for almost two decades, had absorbed French culture and politics (including the abolition of feudal social relations) and often looked to Paris rather than Berlin. However, in 1815 they were annexed to Prussia.
  3. For a good treatment of this period, although he tends to treat it in terms of the history of ideas, especially by means of the key motif of 'Christian personalism', see W. Breckman, *Marx, the Young Hegelians, and the Origins of Radical Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). For an insightful treatment of the tensions between an archaic bedrock and the reforming push by a small group of liberals in the Rhineland, see S. Kouvelakis, *Philosophy and Revolution: From Kant to Marx* (trans. G. M. Goshgarian; London: Verso, 2003), 243-46.

Friedrich Wilhelm III had brought together the Calvinist and Lutheran churches to form the Prussian Union (*Preussische Landeskirche*). He enforced a single liturgy for the church, ensured a strict hierarchy and in all modesty promptly placed himself at the head of the church. One would have had to be a complete hermit not to notice the impression that theology and politics were united in a broad reactionary front, all of it concentrated in one person who was both political leader and Christ's representative on earth.<sup>4</sup> To use terms the Americans are fond of using, he was commander in chief and theologian in chief—all rolled up into one humble person. Despite a few vague hints at reform to keep the liberals hopeful, his son was perhaps even more reactionary, seeking to wind back the clock even more. The 'Christian state' would be restored no matter what stood in its way. One by one the reforms that had been imposed on his father in a moment of republican ferment after the unrest of 1805–15 (which in its turn followed in the wake of the French Revolution) were rolled back. In effect, what Friedrich Wilhelm III and then especially his son, number four, were trying to do was hold back the push for political power from a newly wealthy bourgeoisie. They did so by fighting rearguard actions to preserve political control in the hands of the leftovers of the feudal nobility and the idea of a Christian state (trailing the dust of the Holy Roman Empire). At all costs that anti-church, anti-aristocratic and democratic impulse had to be resisted in Germany.

For intellectuals this reactionary tendency had a real effect on livelihoods and opportunities. The monarch had a direct hand in university appointments, ensuring conservative appointments to positions in philosophy, law and above all theology. Feuerbach ran afoul of the system and ended up operating a porcelain workshop of his wife's family (Bertha Löw) in the small Bavarian town of Bruckberg. Bruno Bauer was removed from Berlin and then Bonn and ended up living on a farm. David Strauss struggled to be appointed in Switzerland. One of the most notable moments was the direct invitation from Friedrich Wilhelm IV to a retired and increasingly reactionary Schelling in 1841 to take up Hegel's chair of philosophy in Berlin in order to 'slay the dragon-seed of Hegelian pantheism'. The Young Hegelians, to which Strauss and Bauer belonged, were certainly not in favour.

So far the story is reasonably well known, at least for anyone with a passing knowledge of German politics in the early nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> However,

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4. It is this concentration that leads Breckman to speak of a type of personalism in German thought and practice, a personalism that became the focus of struggle.
  5. For more detail, readers may consult any number of histories of the period, although see especially, F.-L. Kroll, *Friedrich Wilhelm IV. und das Staatsdenken der deutschen Romantik* (Berlin: Coppel, 1990); R. M. Berdahl, *The Politics of the Prussian Nobility: The Development of a Conservative Ideology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); D. Blasius, *Friedrich Wilhelm IV. 1795–1861: Psychopathologie und Geschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000).

for my purposes the theological questions are even more interesting. In contrast to the radical anti-clericalism of the Enlightenment *philosophes* in France (where in response early socialism had a distinctly Christian flavour) or the Deism of English intellectual culture, Germany fought its cultural battles on a different ground, namely that of theology.<sup>6</sup> Or rather, theology was crucial to all three, but in very different ways. While the French radicals either rejected it and its institutions or developed a rather Christian form of communism, and while the radicals in England tended to slide from religious Dissent to Deism (with a good dose of anti-establishment polemic against the Church of England),<sup>7</sup> in a Germany still saturated with the Pietistic revival of the 1810s and 1820s as well as the well-known German backwardness in economics and politics, German intellectuals could hardly avoid fighting their battles with and through theology. Actually it was more specific than that: they waged furious controversies over the Bible, especially the New Testament and its Gospels. In short, the stories about Jesus in the Gospels were the gunpowder in the political powder-keg, precisely because political and ecclesiastical power hinged on this figure. If theology was nothing less than the *lingua franca* of public debate in Germany for most of the first half of the nineteenth century, then the Bible was the terrain of battle for the knot of political struggles—over the state, politics, freedom of the press, secularism, reason and religion.

This point seems to me glaringly obvious, so I find it passing strange indeed that those who write of the period speak of an amorphous 'religion' and its entanglement with politics. I hardly need to point out that religion in early nineteenth-century Germany designates the touchy relationship between various Protestant groups (most notably the Calvinists and Lutherans) and the Roman Catholics. But a careful study of what was being written and what generated the most controversy reveals that the key was biblical criticism.

The radical edge of the heated debates of the time came from the Young Hegelians, who met in the small Hoppel Café in Berlin from 1837, drank copious amounts of alcohol, perused pornography and debated Hegel, politics and the Bible into the early hours.<sup>8</sup> One feature of the writings (and

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6. Or, as F. Engels put it, 'the battle for dominion over German public opinion in politics and religion' is in fact a battle 'over Germany itself.' F. Engels, *Schelling on Hegel in Marx and Engels Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975 [1841]), II, 181.

7. See E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1966).

8. For some strange reason, we seem to be living once again in the time of the Young Hegelians. As A. Toscano put it to me (private communication), we in our own time have not yet reached 1840. That may explain why interest in these rabble rousers and party animals has revived somewhat. Three decades and more ago, a stream of works on the Young Hegelians appeared (e.g. I. Berlin, *Karl Marx: His Life and Thought* [Oxford: Oxford

limited teaching) of this energetic bunch cannot be emphasized enough: a good number of them were biblical scholars or at least theologians, and their chosen ground of battle was nothing other than the Bible. The decades of the 1830s and 1840s trembled and indeed rumbled with the seismic shift taking place. David Strauss had lain down the challenge with his *Leben Jesu* of 1835,<sup>9</sup> only to find that he could no longer find a teaching post.<sup>10</sup> Bruno Bauer added his deep challenges to the Bible, in studies on both the Hebrew Bible and the Gospels throughout the 1840s. Add to this what was perhaps the most influential work—Ludwig Feuerbach’s *Das Wesen des Christentums* of 1841—and we have a serious and sustained assault that was simultaneously biblical, political and philosophical.

The question, then, is why the Bible was so important for these debates? Let me suggest three factors, one from France and the other two relating to Germany itself. From France there came a distinct form of radical politics that the Prussian king and the nobles found so threatening: socialism with a distinctly Christian flavour. Or rather, arguing that the original form of Christianity was communist—as found in that legendary account of Acts 2:44-45 and 4:32—this French socialism sought to transform Christianity’s teachings into codes of ethics without all the supernatural trappings. So we find Saint-Simon’s critique of capitalism tied in with an argument that both the Protestant Reformation and medieval Catholicism had distorted the nature of early Christianity, which was really a religion of brotherly love and not a dualistic one that elevated heaven and debased earth. The communities that formed after his death established themselves as ‘church’ replete with a priesthood that proclaimed Saint-Simon himself as the messiah. Despite the inevitable fractions in the movement, the defections to Fourier, who had until then managed only a small band of followers for his phalanteries, and even the much-ridiculed venture to the Middle East to

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University Press, 1978, 4th edn], 47-76; D. McLellan, *The Young Hegelians and Karl Marx* [London: Macmillan, 1969]; S. Hook, *From Hegel to Marx: Studies in the Intellectual Development of Karl Marx* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1994 (1936)] and the unreliable L. Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism* [trans. P.S. Falla; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981], I, 81-95), but the interest waned. Breckman’s study of 1999 is the first of a small revival, but see also D. Moggach, *The New Hegelians: Politics and Philosophy in the Hegelian School* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) and the anthology edited by L. S. Stepelevich, *The Young Hegelians: An Anthology* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1997).

9. D. F. Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet* (Tübingen: C. F. Osiander, 1835), English: *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (trans. G. Eliot; London: Thames, 2006 [1902]). For an extraordinary discussion of Strauss and modernity, see W. Blanton, *Displacing Christian Origins: Philosophy, Secularity, and the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 25-66.
10. Even in Zürich, when he was elected to the chair in theology, there was such a storm of opposition that the city pensioned him off before he even began.

find a female messiah, this type of early socialism washed over the border to affect some German radicals. It was the moral vision and sense of progress in human society towards brotherly love that inspired characters like Heinrich Heine, August von Cieskowski and an early collaborator with Marx and Engels, Moses Hess. It also influenced some of the early leaders of the German communist movement, such as Wilhelm Weitling, Hermann Kriege, Karl Grün and Gottfried Kinkel.<sup>11</sup> These radicals based their vision on the Bible, especially the figure of Jesus in the Gospels. With texts like Weitling's *The Poor Sinner's Gospel*,<sup>12</sup> a radical reading of the Gospels in a communist direction, the reactionary German authorities and the Church were ready to pounce on anything that smacked of the mildest radical politics and of radical biblical criticism.

As for Germany, it is often pointed out that it was economically and politically backward, with industry barely established and the state engaged in a last gasp of absolutism. For this reason it did not feel the full effect of the radical anti-clericalism of France or the extremes of Deism in England. Yet this is far from the full picture, for there are a couple of other historical reasons, one much deeper and longer, and the other more immediate. In one sense, the controversies of the 1830s and 1840s provided yet another turn in the rumbling history of the Reformation. From Luther's defiance (and assistance by the Duke of Saxony) in the sixteenth century to the Thirty Years War (1618–1648) that raged over the German states, Italy and the Low countries, during which the Roman Catholics wrested some of the southern German states back from the Lutherans, Protestants in the north and Roman Catholics in the south had dug themselves in to become deeply conservative. The Roman Catholics looked to the pope, while the Protestants (a mix of Lutherans and some Calvinists in the far north) drew upon conservative streams of Pietism, marrying an inner walk with God to a tenacious hold on the Bible as the 'word of God'. Despite all the best efforts of the state to keep both Protestants and Roman Catholics in a civil if often fractious relationship, the mutual polemic ran deep.

A more recent factor was the Pietistic revival in the 1810s and 1820s. It was a confluence of the revivalist waves that rose across Europe in response

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11. See K. Marx and F. Engels, *The German Ideology: Critique of Modern German Philosophy according to Its Representatives Feuerbach, B. Bauer and Stirner, and of German Socialism according to Its Various Prophets*, in *Marx and Engels Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976 [1932]), V, 484–530; idem, 'Review (May to October 1850),' in *Marx and Engels Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1978 [1850]), X, 528–32; idem, 'The Great Men of the Exile,' in *Marx and Engels Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1979 [1930]), XI, 227–326.

12. Wilhelm W. Weitling, *The Poor Sinner's Gospel* (trans. D. Livingstone; London: Sheed & Ward, 1969 [1843]).



to Enlightenment rationalism and ‘Godless’ revolutionary republicanism and the longer history of German Pietism. The emphasis was on recovering one’s walk with God, the inner life of faith, the priesthood of all believers and the all-important role of God’s word, the Bible. The big difference from earlier moments of Pietistic fervour in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was that the nobility and intellectuals took it up with not a little enthusiasm. This combination of the aristocracy and bourgeois intellectuals meant that it was not merely a revival from above, but that it also took a nicely conservative turn. Misgivings in the Prussian state—for Pietism could easily reject the state in favour of one’s direct relation with God and others—soon gave way when it dovetailed nicely with obedience to God’s regent on earth and the purity of the Reformation itself. Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm declared himself in favour (why would he not?) and theology faculties became watchdogs for orthodoxy. Among these was Ernst Hengstenberg in Berlin, against whom Bruno Bauer directed his attack in *Herr Dr Hengstenberg* of 1839—one of his less than astute political acts, for it led to his removal from Berlin. In this context, the Young Hegelians were both cornered and became the champions of the liberal and republican cause. Indeed, when Bruno Bauer was eventually dismissed from the theology faculty at Bonn in 1842 (whither he was sent from Berlin), none of them was ever to hold a teaching post again. No wonder, then, the radical journal of the Young Hegelians, *Deutsche Jahrbücher für Wissenschaft und Kunst*, often fought theological battles with conservative journals such as the *Kölnische Zeitung*, the *Rhein-und Mosel-Zeitung*, the *Münchener politische Blätter* and the *Trier’sche Zeitung*.

In sum, due to the proverbial tardiness of German economics and politics, as well as the Lutheran doctrine of *sola scriptura* and the long history of struggles between Protestants and Catholics, the debates over religion, reason, secularism and politics took place on the territory of the Bible and biblical criticism. There is a dialectical point to be made here: the radicalism of German biblical and theological scholarship, engendered from the deep conservatism of their context, gave that scholarship a radical edge it was not to lose for some time. The result: the struggles over reason and supernaturalism, religion and secularism took place on the territory of the Bible. Instead of dismissing the Bible as a document of outmoded superstition, these scholars, radicals and politicians worked out their theories with the Bible itself. German critics took up with vigour the various uncoordinated strands of biblical criticism from the likes of Spinoza, Simon and Le Clerc and turned them into a sustained approach, full of differences, arguments and advances. By the end of the nineteenth-century German dominance in biblical criticism was almost unassailable. Indeed, German biblical and

theological scholarship was able to surge to the lead in biblical scholarship for about a century, until a good number of the leading figures moved to the USA before the Second World War.

### Feuerbach's Divine Projections

No assessment of the biblical scholarship of this volatile period is complete without some consideration of Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*.<sup>13</sup> Even though he did not work directly on the Bible, it is a deeply theological work that influenced a generation of radical thinkers. In fact, rather than debunking Christianity, Feuerbach sets out to improve Christianity by arguing that its truth lay in the fact that God does not pre-exist us but is the projection of all that is best in human beings. Using this one new idea (more than most have in a lifetime) he explores the full range of theology and practice from creation to immortality, drawing up unlikely subjects such as celibacy and miracles.

So what exactly did Feuerbach argue? Religion, or rather Christianity, is actually the projection or abstraction of human subjectivity. It takes what is best in human beings only to hypostatize them all into an entity or force that is exterior to human beings. That entity becomes a figure, a 'god' who appears to human beings as a being in his own right, one that returns love, saves and directs human life through providence. As Feuerbach puts it, theology is really anthropology: 'the divine being is nothing else than the human being, or, rather, the human nature purified, freed from the limits of the individual man, made objective—i.e., contemplated and revered as another, a distinct being'.<sup>14</sup> One way of putting it is that religion is an expression of the unrealized wishes of self-transcendence that each human being harbours, that they have not quite realized themselves in full. With this definition in place, Feuerbach shows how it illuminates one theological topic after another: wisdom, moral being, love, suffering, the trinity, logos, cosmogony, providence, creation, prayer, faith, resurrection, heaven and immortality, which is the perfection of unlimited personality. In short, 'the

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13. L. Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christentums* (Leipzig: Friedrichs & Bley, 1924); English, *The Essence of Christianity* (trans. George Eliot; Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1989 [1841]).

14. Feuerbach, *Das Wesen*, 18 = *The Essence*, 14. Similarly, 'In religion man frees himself from the limits of life; he here lets fall what oppresses him, obstructs him, affects him repulsively; God is the self-consciousness of man freed from all discordant elements; man feels himself free, happy, blessed in his religion, because he only here lives the life of genius, and keeps holiday' (Feuerbach, *Das Wesen*, 121-22 = *The Essence*, 98). His later work, *The Essence of Religion* (trans. Alexander Loos; Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2004), merely extends the insight to all religion and switches the projection from human beings to nature.

fundamental dogmas of Christianity are realised wishes of the heart'.<sup>15</sup> This at least is the argument of the first, positive part of the book. The second part focuses on a series of contradictions that are unresolvable within traditional theology; he claims that his own proposal does resolve them. In fact, he suggests that if one were to read only the second part, the conclusion would be that theology is mere illusion and falsehood. One needs to read the first part, too—which is why it is placed first—to see the benefit of theology.

There are a few points I wish to stress in Feuerbach's argument. To begin with, the controversial genius of Feuerbach's argument is that we do not realize what is going on. We may think that God is a more powerful and eternal being who creates us and guides our lives, but that assumption only moves from God to ourselves. There is a prior step, namely the projection of the divine from our own subjectivity. So there are in fact three stages: the projection of religion and God by human beings; assuming that this being is superior to us and that we are beholden to him; believing that we are secondary and inferior creatures in relation to this God. Or, as Feuerbach writes:

God is the highest subjectivity of man abstracted from himself; hence man can do nothing of himself, all goodness comes from God. The more subjective God is, the more completely does man divest himself of his subjectivity, because God is, *per se*, his relinquished self, the possession of which he, however, again vindicates to himself. As the action of the arteries drives the blood into the extremities, and the action of the veins brings it back again, as life in general consists in a perpetual systole and diastole; so it is in religion. In the religious systole man propels his own nature from himself, he throws himself outward; in the religious diastole he receives the rejected nature into his heart again. God alone is the being who acts of himself,—this is the force of repulsion in religion; God is the being who acts in me, with me, through me, upon me, for me, is the principle of my salvation, of my good dispositions and actions, consequently my own good principle and nature,—this is the force of attraction in religion.<sup>16</sup>

A further point that is often forgotten is that Feuerbach stresses the way belief in a god diminishes human beings. The elevation of God leads to the depreciation of human beings: 'To enrich God, man must become poor; that God may be all, man must be nothing.'<sup>17</sup> This argument, modified and extended,

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15. Feuerbach, *Das Wesen*, 174 = *The Essence*, 140.

16. Feuerbach, *Das Wesen*, 39-40 = *The Essence*, 31.

17. Feuerbach, *Das Wesen*, 33 = *The Essence*, 26. He also points out that the illusion of religion is 'profoundly injurious in its effects on mankind' (Feuerbach, *Das Wesen*, 349 = *The Essence*, 274). Indeed, Breckman (*Marx*, 90-130) argues that Feuerbach is far more politically radical than many take him to be, but then Feuerbach is the real hero of Breckman's book. On Feuerbach's radical politics, see also D. Leopold, *The Young Karl Marx: German Philosophy, Modern Politics, and Human Flourishing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 203-18.

would of course gain much greater fame in the hands of Karl Marx. Indeed, Feuerbach's lasting presence is much due to Marx, even if Marx felt that he had achieved an *Aufhebung* beyond Feuerbach. But it is actually a small step from Feuerbach's point that Christianity diminishes human beings to Marx's argument that religion is a sign of human alienation in this world. From there, of course, they would diverge in the solution: for Feuerbach it was a case of showing how this feature led to the doctrines of sin and depravity and that we need to realize our full potential through a proper understanding of religion; for Marx we need to deal with the oppressive and exploitative conditions in which we live.

### Strauss and Myth

Only within this context, with the wide-open and furious public debates over religion and politics, spiced up with Feuerbach's argument that religion is a projection of the best in human beings,<sup>18</sup> can we understand David Strauss and his book, *Das Leben Jesu* (he is barely remembered for his many other works). Not so much a book, it was a bomb. After deliberately taking time off from his first teaching position at the theological faculty in Tübingen (where he taught for only three semesters from the summer of 1832 to autumn 1833 in logic, metaphysics and the history of philosophy since Kant and ethics) in order to focus on his writing, Strauss published in 1835 his *Das Leben Jesu kritisch bearbeitet* in two volumes. It really is the kind of work that most writers would dream of producing—a controversial, landmark text that makes its mark way outside the narrow confines of intellectual work.<sup>19</sup> I must admit, however, that I could have done without the stress. Although the liberals held Strauss up as something of a champion, he

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18. Even though Feuerbach's book came out in 1841, he had been developing his ideas throughout the 1830s.

19. In the shadow of such a great book, Strauss was never quite able to repeat the performance. Apart from the four editions of the *Leben Jesu* itself, in 1835, 1836, 1839 and 1840, he kept producing support works, responses to critics and further explorations: D. F. Strauss, *Streitschriften zur Verteidigung meiner Schrift über das Leben Jesu und zur Charakteristik der gegenwärtigen Theologie* (Hildesheim, 1980; original edn, Tübingen: Osiander, 1837); idem, *Die christliche Glaubenslehre in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung und im Kampfe mit der modernen Wissenschaft* (Tübingen: Osiander, 1840); idem, *Das Leben Jesu für das deutsche Volk* (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1864; Berlin: F. Duncker, 1865); idem, *Der Christus des Glaubens und der Jesus der Geschichte: eine Kritik des Schleiermacher'schen Lebens Jesu* (Waltrop: Spenner, 2000 [1865]); idem, *Der alte und der neue Glaube: Ein Bekenntnis* (Bonn: Verlag von Emil Strauss, 1873). Apart from these works, he devoted 20 years of his life—a hiatus from biblical criticism—to biographies: D. F. Strauss, *Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubarts Leben in seinen Briefen* (Königstein: Scriptor Verlag, 1978; original edn, Berlin, 1849); idem, *Christian Märklin: Ein Lebens- und Charakterbild aus der Gegenwart* (Mannheim: Bassermann, 1851);

was surprised to find himself vilified and roundly attacked by both Young Hegelians like Bruno Bauer (for ‘misreading’ Hegel) and a range of conservative forces in theology faculties, the churches and government, so much so that he lost any chance of further offers of positions in either university or church (he had been briefly, in 1830–31, a pastor’s assistant for a local parish in Kleiningersheim near Ludwigsburg, his hometown, after studying theology at Tübingen). The theology faculty at Tübingen sacked him as soon as the book came out. The closest he came to any university position at all was in Zürich the year after the book appeared. Some of the liberal burghers invited Strauss to take up a chair in Dogmatics and Church History. Twice their proposal was overcome by conservatives, but in January 1839, with a majority in the city government, they were successful. However, his arrival was anticipated with fear and trembling<sup>20</sup> and in the face of huge protests, the government gave him a lifelong pension in compensation. (I must admit that I wish I could pull off such a coup: a pension for the rest of my life in order to write, ride my bicycle and relax.)

So what was it about the *Leben Jesu* that so offended people? The book itself argued that the key to the Gospels and their depiction of Jesus lay in myth. He played off a double sense of myth: it did mean that we can never recover a distinct picture of the historical Jesus (fiction), but he also argued that myth should be read in a positive light, as a poetic expression of deeper truths that cannot be expressed in any other form. Focusing on the miraculous dimension of the Gospel narratives, from virgin birth through the various miracles performed by Jesus to the ultimate miracle of the resurrection, Strauss argued that both a supernaturalist and interventionist understanding was hopelessly wrong and that the rationalist effort to explain the miracles in naturalist terms (e.g. Jesus did not walk on the water but walked on a sand spit so that he seemed to do so) simply missed the point. If the former accepted the record at face value, the latter argued that the New Testament writers misrepresented or misinterpreted what had actually happened. For Strauss, however, what the New Testament writers did was draw deeply upon the mythical Jewish messianic traditions of which they were a part and used these to portray Jesus as the Messiah. Indeed, myth is the natural way in which life and indeed religion was understood

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idem, *Ulrich von Hutten* (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1858–1860); idem, *Hermann Samuel Reimarus und seine Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes* (Hildesheim, 1991; original edn, Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1862); idem, *Voltaire: 6 Vorträge* (Leipzig: A. Kröner, 1924 [1870]); along with the odd satirical and very polemical political work: D. F. Strauss, *Der Romantiker auf dem Throne der Cäsaren oder Julian der Abtrünnige* (Heidelberg: Manutius Verlag, 1992; original edn, Mannheim: Bassermann, 1847).

20. I feel for Strauss, since ‘fear and trembling’ was once used to characterize my own imminent arrival for an invited lecture in Adelaide in 2002.

by pre-scientific peoples—Lévi-Strauss was by no means the first to come up with this idea!<sup>21</sup> Strauss's challenge was to apply such a mode of mythic interpretation to the New Testament in as rigorous a fashion as possible.

The result: after a lengthy introduction that establishes the need for mythic interpretation, with a characteristically German propensity for trawling through all of the previous studies on both the Gospels and myth, Strauss painstakingly works through each episode in the Gospels. In each case he presents the supernaturalist position, negates it with the naturalist one and then offers a mythic interpretation in order to resolve the contradiction: in light of the lack of corroborating evidence, the contradictions with known physical laws, the presence of poetic language and the heavy use of prophecies from the Hebrew Bible, in both the narrative and in Jesus' mouth, what we have is mythic construction of the first order. If you picked up a Hegelian echo in his plan, then you are not mistaken.

He then takes the final Hegelian step in the third part of the book (the first two parts move through the Gospels) to offer his own positive proposal. In short, he wants to 're-establish dogmatically that which has been destroyed critically'.<sup>22</sup> His proposal is what he calls a speculative Christology, produced with a helping hand from Hegel. God is nothing other than the Infinite Spirit that moves out of itself to produce 'the Finite, Nature, and the human mind' from which it eternally returns to itself in unity.<sup>23</sup> Neither the finite spirit of man nor the Infinite Spirit of God has any reality without being in contact. So, the 'infinite spirit is real only when it discloses itself in finite spirits; as the finite spirit is true only when it merges itself in the infinite'.<sup>24</sup> The result is none other than Jesus Christ, for the following reason: 'If God and man are in themselves *one*, and if religion is the human side of this unity: then must this unity be made evident to man in religion, and become in him consciousness and reality.'<sup>25</sup> The catch is that such a union and such an appearance is not restricted to one person, as the Church would have it. By contrast, this dialectical unity of Infinite and finite can take place in every person, or preferably in the whole of humanity. Here is Strauss:

This is the key to the whole of Christology, that, as subject of the predicate which the church assigns to Christ, we place, instead of an individual, an idea;

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21. The key figures are the classicist Christian G. Heyne (1729–1812), and the biblical scholars Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (1752–1827), Johann Philipp Gabler (1753–1826), Georg Lorenz Bauer (1755–1806), Wilhelm Martin Leberecht de Wette (1780–1839) and Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860).

22. D. F. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus: Critically Examined* (trans. G. Eliot; London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1902), 777.

23. Strauss *Life*, 777.

24. Strauss *Life*, 777.

25. Strauss *Life*, 777.

but an idea which has an existence in reality, not in the mind only, like that of Kant. 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. Humanity is the union of the two natures.<sup>26</sup>

The question remains as to why this book, a lengthy and detailed work in New Testament criticism, in which it has had a lasting influence, should have had such a wide political impact. And why was it the text around which much of the ferment of the time took place, a ferment in which even the likes of Marx and Engels were also caught? There have been far more critical works that have hardly had the same impact. Here I draw on Marilyn Massey, *Christ Unmasked*,<sup>27</sup> where she argues that it was understood, championed and opposed as a text that espoused 'radical democratic politics'.<sup>28</sup> Not only did its undermining of any verifiable historical record of Jesus of Nazareth challenge the basis of both Protestant and Roman Catholic assumptions about the Bible and Christianity, it also shook up the theological justifications for the hold of the old aristocracy on power and of the Prussian king himself. Even more, in developing a Christology in which the divine and human rested not with one man but with all humanity, Strauss was giving voice to a theological agenda with radical democratic tendencies. Rather than God's chosen ruler being, like Christ, a chosen individual, all may potentially rule. In short, Strauss attempted a reinterpretation of Christianity that questioned its cosy relationship with the power of the state. In making a shift from the heroic individual to the general community, 'the potentiality seeming to belong only to one exalted human belonged, rather, to humanity itself'.<sup>29</sup> Massey's conclusion is, then, that by 'unmasking' Christ not as the God-man of Christian doctrine but as the democratic Christ, as the one who shows that the human species itself is the embodiment of God-man, Strauss pointed to a model of popular sovereignty instead of the monarchy.

There are a number of ways of reading such a situation. A conventional one is to suggest that Strauss used the dominant language of his time—theology and biblical studies—to make political points. Should he have lived in a different time, such as ours or perhaps in ancient Greece, his language may well have been economic or political. The Bible thereby becomes a code for something else—in this case the politics of German self-determination. Another approach is to argue that Strauss's purely biblical work had unforeseen and unexpected political consequences.

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26. Strauss *Life*, 780.

27. M. C. Massey, *Christ Unmasked: The Meaning of The Life of Jesus in German Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 12.

28. Massey, *Christ Unmasked*, 79.

29. Massey, *Christ Unmasked*, 149.



Strauss's own surprise and dismay at the massive reaction suggest that any political consequences were unintended byproducts.

A third possibility—the one that Massey pursues—is that Strauss clearly articulated despite himself the key tensions of the time. She points to the differences between the first and third editions. In the first (the one I have outlined all too briefly above) Strauss pursued his radical critique of existing scholarship and understandings of Jesus, concluding with a democratic reinterpretation of Christology. By contrast, in the third edition he made many concessions to his critics and elevated the individual figure of Christ. In this 1838 edition, Strauss 'offered the palliative of an aristocratic Christ, a genius Jesus, who was the epitome of the perfection of the inner life'.<sup>30</sup> He gave up a massive amount of ground, allowing for the unique unity of divine and human in Jesus' religious consciousness of himself and even granting a category of miracles based on the unusual powers of nature. Partly an effort to secure a teaching post, Strauss soon regretted his back-peddling and in the fourth edition of 1840 he returned to his former hard-hitting arguments. For Massey this tension within Strauss himself gave clear expression to the struggles within Germany between the liberal, democratic movements and the forces of reaction which waged a consistent campaign against Strauss and the liberals.

I would add that it is no surprise that such an articulation took place in the realm of biblical criticism. As I pointed out earlier, all of these furious debates were not purely the fussy and pompous struggles of academics, the hot air of intellectuals vainly feeling that they were important for shaking up a few of their colleagues in the Faculties of Theology at Berlin, Bonn or Tübingen. These debates hit at the crux of the idea and practice of the 'Christian state' at the time. They also fed off the long history of bitter struggles between Roman Catholics and Protestants, with their resultant conservatism, and the immediate situation of a reactionary king, Friedrich Wilhelm IV, who sought to recover the lost glory of Christendom. Apart from having a say in university appointments, he also oversaw the tightening of censorship regulations. Besides liberal and republican movements, one of the main targets of this censorship was the Young Hegelian radicals. Wilhelm IV had in fact called for an answer from Young Hegelians in response to Strauss's claim that he had made use of Hegel. Bauer was nominated to take up the attack, but the king was not altogether pleased with Bauer's effort. The conservative papers had a field day, feeling that their assaults on the Young Hegelians were fully justified in light of the crown's support.

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30. Massey, *Christ Unmasked*, 149.



But what about the value of Strauss's Gospel criticism? His arguments do not want to lie quietly in the grave with him. Many have tried to assassinate this argument, hurriedly burying it in a shallow grave and scampering from the scene in the hope that biblical criticism will soon forget it. But it was not to be, for this corpse at least keeps on gaining new leases of life—Lazarus has nothing on *Das Leben Jesu*. Indeed, recently we have witnessed a return not so much to Strauss's arguments as they stood in 1835, but to the mythical nature of such narratives, either in terms of their ancient Near Eastern background or in terms of social location, anthropology and comparative religion.<sup>31</sup> But then this renewed interest begs another question, namely the nature of myth itself. Does it become a distortion of language we need to resist? Is it a more sublime way of expressing truth? Is it a tribute to the greatness of the human imagination? Possibly, but I would suggest we might better understand these myths as playing a double game, operating with a fair degree of cunning and subterfuge.<sup>32</sup>

### Bauer, Scepticism and Atheism

The second great polemicist and radical biblical critic is one of my favourites—Bruno Bauer. He was primarily a New Testament scholar and sometime theologian and political commentator. The works that got him into no end of trouble were those on the Gospel of John and the Synoptic Gospels.<sup>33</sup> Appearing during the first great wave of German critical work on the Bible that would launch German biblical scholars into a position of global leadership, Bauer's work was at the edge of that work and beyond. For a time he was widely regarded as the leader of the Young Hegelians. Bauer's genius was to combine painstaking attention to biblical texts within their historical and cultural context and his own development of Hegel's philosophy.

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31. See, for example, T. L. Thompson, *The Messiah Myth: The Near Eastern Roots of Jesus and David* (New York: Basic Books, 2005) and B. Mack, *Myth and the Christian Nation: A Social Theory of Religion* (London: Equinox, 2008). I mention but two examples of these current works. Mack has been working on this question for what is a lifetime of scholarship; see B. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament? The Making of the Christian Myth* (New York: Harper, 1996); idem, *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998); idem, *The Christian Myth: Origins, Logic, Legacy* (London: Continuum, 2003).
32. See further, R. Boer, *Political Myth: On the Use and Abuse of Biblical Themes* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).
33. B. Bauer, *Kritik der evangelischen Geschichte des Johannes* (Bremen: Karl Schünemann, 1840); idem, *Kritik der evangelischen Geschichte der Synoptiker* (2 vols.; Leipzig: Otto Wigand, 1841); idem, *Kritik der evangelischen Geschichte der Synoptiker und des Johannes, Dritter und letzter Band* (Braunschweig, 1842); idem, *Kritik der Evangelien und Geschichte ihres Ursprungs* (3 vols.; Berlin: Gustav Hempel, 1850–1851); idem, *Die theologische Erklärung der Evangelien* (Berlin, 1852).

This combination led him to argue that Christianity only emerged in the second century CE, that the Gospels contain virtually no historical records, and indeed no record of a historical Jesus, being primarily the products of religious consciousness embodied in individual authors who composed them freely, that they are saturated with the spirit and thought of Hellenism (the key ideas may be traced to Stoic, Philonic and neo-Platonic ideas), and that the crucial tension was between free self-consciousness and religious dogmatism. He took consistent aim at the ossified established church and the repressive state, especially in light of their dirty and corrupt hold on power—so much so that his book *Das Entdeckte Christenthum (Christianity Exposed)*<sup>34</sup> was banned, hunted down and destroyed until it was reprinted in 1927.

I will come back to the content of *Christianity Exposed* and his treatment of the Gospels in a moment, but let us now back-track a little in order to understand how Bauer approached the Gospels. While Bauer taught at the Friedrich Wilhelm University in the late 1830s, he published a two-volume work on the Hebrew Bible called *Kritik der Geschichte der Offenbarung: Die Religion des alten Testaments in der geschichtlichen Entwicklung ihrer Prinzipien dargestellt (Critique of the History of Revelation: The Religion of the Old Testament Explained according to the Principles of Its Historical Development)*.<sup>35</sup> It was the only work he wrote on the Hebrew Bible, for the rest concerned the New Testament and politics. Here Bauer was developing his argument that religion, or rather, religious experience, is the result of (a Hegelian) self-consciousness. Not only was such religious experience a transcendental affair, but one could also trace in a phenomenological fashion the development of the various forms of that experience. Following the assumption that the legalistic priestly material (designated by P) was the oldest literary source of the Hebrew Bible, he argued that this material lies at the earliest stage of such a development. Here we find an authoritarian deity who demands a law-bound subordination. In contrast to this largely external relation, the later prophetic and messianic books mark a much higher stage: over

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34. B. Bauer, *Christianity Exposed: A Recollection of the Eighteenth Century and a Contribution to the Crisis of the Nineteenth Century* (trans. E. Ziegler and J. Hamm; Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2002).

35. B. Bauer, *Kritik der Geschichte der Offenbarung: Die Religion des alten Testaments in der geschichtlichen Entwicklung ihrer Prinzipien dargestellt* (Berlin: Ferdinand Dümmler, 1838). At the time Bauer was also editing the *Zeitschrift für spekulative Theologie*, which ran only to three issues, and writing for the *Jahrbücher für wissenschaftliche Kritik*. Here he tried to develop an alternative theology that categorized Christian doctrines in terms of logical categories. In 1839 he also happened to teach Karl Marx a course on Isaiah at the university.

against the crass and oppressive particularity of the earlier material, here the universal is immanent in community.

In one sense, of course, Bauer simply sought to take the relatively new developments in critical biblical study he inherited a step further—Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, Wilhelm de Wette, Johann Vater, Heinrich Ewald and Hermann Hupfeld, and then later Wellhausen and the rest of the gang on JEDP. But then he also gave them a decidedly Hegelian twist—something for which he tends to be criticized and dismissed as a bit of a crackpot (which often seems to be par for the course for academics). Bauer came in at the earlier point of these debates, assuming that the Priestly material was the crassest and earliest. Religion struggles to rise above this state until it reaches the prophets and then the New Testament.

Yet soon enough, Bauer was to argue that even the prophetic texts of the Hebrew Bible had not yet arrived at the moment of overcoming the estrangement of externalized and legalistic religion. That, of course, would come with the New Testament, to which he was to direct all of his biblical concerns from the beginning of the 1840s. At this point in his thought he argued that the difference between the Old and New Testaments was that Christianity managed to free the religious consciousness from its limited and particular form in the Old Testament. What his work on the Hebrew Bible enabled him to do was define his key idea of religious consciousness, namely the un-mediated identity of particularity and the abstract universal, which he translated in terms of the immediate identity of the universal with a particular subject or community.

Now, while this position—the immediate identity of particular and universal—may seem like a positive assessment of Christianity and religion in general, Bauer was soon to argue that it is in fact the core of the problem. Already in *Herr Dr. Hengstenberg*,<sup>36</sup> published in the year he taught in Berlin, he had come to argue that the oppressive and narrow-minded sectarianism of the Church—especially the German Lutheran Church—lay in this claim by the particular to the universal. The logical core of his argument, which developed over his various works on the Bible, was that Christianity was a ‘hubristic particularism’ which made an unmediated identity between a specific subject (in this case Jesus Christ) or a community (the church) with the universal. What happens then is that the universal becomes completely other, divorced from communal and individual life. God and heaven become alienated and abstracted universals from human existence. This meant that any claim by a specific individual or group to be the exclusive representative of this universal inevitably produced a brutal, sectarian monopoly

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36. B. Bauer, *Herr Dr. Hengstenberg: Ein Beitrag zur Kritik der religiösen Bewußtseins. Kritische Briefe über den Gegensatz des Gesetzes und des Evangeliums* (Berlin: Ferdinand Dümmler, 1839).

that excluded any other particular, whether that is religious or political. In short, Christian monotheism is an exclusive rather than an inclusive universal. This ultimate hubris of particularism, characteristic of the state Church at the time and the reactionary Friedrich Wilhelm IV (1840–61), let alone of both Christianity and Judaism, is the essence of religion as such. The Prussian state was only the latest manifestation of this brutal universal, for it traced it all the way back to the *polis* of ancient Greece.

This position developed over Bauer's studies of the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John (written over an intense period from 1840 to 1842), only to receive full expression in his *Christianity Exposed*.<sup>37</sup> Through the writing of these works Bauer eventually recognized his own atheism, arguing that free self-consciousness must be released from the constraints of all religion and that the only way for self-consciousness to realize itself is through historical and social transformation. The Gospels themselves are a long way from historical records, being the products of creative and unknown individuals. Within the restrictions of the religious consciousness, these authors responded to the needs of the Christian communities for an understanding of their own nature and origins. So Mark, the earliest Gospel, presents a basic picture of Jesus' adult life and death, while the later Matthew and Luke fill out that story with birth narratives, additional material and the resurrection. By the time we get to John we already have the full expression of a dogmatic monopoly. But why are these stories problematic? Here is Bauer:

The gospel reports are nothing other than free, literary products, whose soul is the simple categories of religion. What is specific to these categories, however, is that they reverse the laws of the real, rational world. They alienate the universality of self-consciousness, rend it violently away, and restore it in the form of representation as an alien, heavenly, or as an alien, limited, sacred history.<sup>38</sup>

Christianity denied the truth that could only come from self-consciousness by identifying such truth with another being and a heavenly realm alien to that self-consciousness. Even worse, Christianity claimed that its ultimate form of alienation was the absolute and universal truth, thereby exacerbating the problem. It cranks up such alienation until it becomes unbearable,

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37. Bauer, *Kritik des Johannes*; *idem*, *Kritik der Synoptiker*; *idem*, *Kritik der Synoptiker und des Johannes*; *idem*, *Christianity Exposed*. For an excellent discussion that traces the way Bauer's position developed over these works, see D. Moggach, *The Philosophy and Politics of Bruno Bauer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 59–79. Unfortunately D. Leopold (*The Young Karl Marx* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007], 101–105) skips by the importance of Bauer's biblical criticism.

38. B. Bauer, *Hegels Lehre von der Religion und der Kunst von dem Standpunkte des Glaubens aus beurteilt* (Aalen: Scientia Verlag, 1967: original edition, Leipzig: Otto Wigand, 1842), 61.

thereby opening the way for a final resolution. Thus, in good Hegelian fashion, Christianity was both the best and worst of all religions. It may have provided a revolutionary breakthrough, freeing people from the ties of nature, family and spirits, but it was also the highest form of alienation. What was needed then was a sublation (*Aufhebung*) of the necessary stage of Christianity in order to see that the truth came from a free self-consciousness. Only 'criticism' is able to release such a universal self-consciousness. But it also meant that any state or church that laid claim to Christianity would have to go, too. Religious monopoly and the Restoration under way with the German monarchy merely reinforced his views, so much so that by 1840–41 he rejected all forms of religious representation in favour of an emancipated philosophical self-consciousness.

Needless to say, Bauer's radical biblical criticism and theology went hand-in-hand with a radical political republicanism. But in the context Bauer was an *extreme* radical. This one-time favourite of Hegel, who recommended Bauer for a royal prize for an essay on Kant in 1829, was removed from his post as licentiate at the Friedrich Wilhelm University in 1839. His crime: the aforesaid book, *Herr Dr. Hengstenberg*. Hengstenberg happened to be a leading Pietistic theologian, colleague and former teacher. Bauer, it seems, could not suffer fools gladly. Fortune was with him, for the Minister of Culture, Altenstein, was favourable to the Hegelians and moved him out of harm's way—or at least so he thought—to Bonn. But fortune did not smile on him much longer. Altenstein died in 1840, the same year Friedrich Wilhelm III gave up the ghost. Along with the new king came a new Minister for Culture—or as his title was known in full, for Religious Worship, Education and Medicine—by the name of Eichhorn. This enlightened bureaucrat had no time for the Hegelians and was certainly not going to protect the young radical. Bauer had lasted five years in Berlin (1834–39), but he lasted barely three in Bonn. At the end of March in 1842 his *licentia docendi* was revoked by Eichhorn and he was dismissed by direct order of the new king.<sup>39</sup> With no options left in a university, he purchased a small farm, ran a tobacco shop and wrote—as prolifically as ever—in the evenings until his death in 1882.

However, I am interested here is a particular feature of Bauer's work, namely the argument that the form of Christianity that has come down to

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39. The story of his dismissal as Privat-Dozent of Theology at Bonn is a little confused. Initially he was put under investigation for his radical views on the New Testament by a consultation that included the ministry of education and the theology faculties of the six Prussian universities, but the investigation was unable to achieve consensus. In an astute moment of ill-timing (a characteristic, it seems), he attended a banquet in honour of the South German liberal, Karl Welcker, in 1841. Bauer proposed a toast to the Hegelian concept of the state, but the king decided to sack all those who attended the banquet and who were in state employment.

us has little, if anything, to do with its earliest forms. Of course, once you have taken such a position, the next step is to account for that well-known final form. Bauer argues that what we know as Christianity now is the result of a combination of vulgar and popularized versions of the neo-Platonism of Philo of Alexandria, Seneca's stoicism and Roman imperial beliefs about the emperor as son of God. But why did Christianity catch on? Bauer argued that a part of Christianity's appeal lay in its reversal, for it despised wealth, power and privilege, seeking its disciples among the rejected—the poor and slaves. As we shall see, this is one of the most enduring contributions from Bauer, not least because Friedrich Engels took it up and gave it his own spin. But what of earliest Christianity? Bauer argues that Revelation is the best window into that strange phenomenon. Assuming a date of composition between late 68 and early 69 CE, it presents a group of Jews (not Christians) who believed the end would come soon. There is no Trinity, for Jesus is subordinate to God, and certainly no Holy Spirit. There is no doctrine of original sin, no baptism or sacrament of communion, no justification by faith, and no elaborate story of the death and resurrection of Christ. And there is no religion of love, for the author preaches sound, honest revenge on their persecutors. The author is unknown (certainly not the legendary disciple by the name of John) and all of the 'visions' find precursors in the Hebrew Bible and other apocalyptic documents that preceded it.

How has this reconstruction stood the test of time? It is easy to dismiss it as reliant on out-of-date scholarship and to suggest that Bauer was too extreme in his scepticism. We can hardly blame Bauer for immersing himself in the biblical scholarship available at the time. I would be in a similar situation if someone a century from now were to read a position I take today in relation to contemporary biblical scholarship. The strange thing is that the underlying assumptions of Bauer's work are the same in historical critical scholarship of the Bible today (which no longer has the hegemony it once had). The tides of some forms of scholarship may come and go, but the basic assumptions remain unchanged: one must be very careful when using the Bible for any historical reconstruction, since it is unreliable to some degree (by contrast to the Tübingen school—Ferdinand Christian Bauer, Heinrich Ewald, Friedrich Lücke et al.—Bauer takes a more sceptical option which is only now coming back in vogue); the overwhelming concern is with origins, whether that of early Christianity or early Israel; archaeology plays a crucial role, since it provides evidence external to the text; and one spends an inordinate amount of energy discussing authorship and dates, which, like the fashion in skirts, can go in only one of two directions—up or down. Bauer, the Tübingen School and historical critical scholars today all share the same assumptions. Further, some of Bauer's concerns are still very much

alive in biblical criticism, such as the influence of Stoicism and the relation to Philo.<sup>40</sup> His argument that the letters of Paul predate the Gospels, which come from the second century CE, still holds water, although his theory on Revelation as the earliest document has little credibility. However, his radical scepticism has returned to biblical scholarship, especially through the so-called ‘minimalist school’ which finds little that is historically reliable in the texts of the Hebrew Bible and which has been making headway in New Testament research.<sup>41</sup>

### Conclusion

What, in conclusion, is still of value in the work of Strauss and Bauer? As far as both of them are concerned, radically sceptical biblical critics are still not assured of employment or acceptance in the academy. The recent story of Gerd Lüdemann is a case in point. Until 2009 he was a professor of New Testament in the theology faculty at the University of Göttingen. In February of 2009, Lüdemann wrote a terse email message to many colleagues and friends, telling people that the German Supreme Court had decided to reject his appeal against the decision by the university to ban him from teaching. This was his last court of appeal and the decision saw the blogosphere run hot over issues such as academic freedom and church control over theology. But why was Lüdemann, a respected New Testament scholar and tenured professor in his early 60s, prevented from teaching students? The reason was that he had come to the conclusion that the claims of Christianity are a fabrication and have no basis in fact. Nothing new in that, for Strauss and Bauer had made similar arguments, but the catch is that Lüdemann was

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40. For example, see T. Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul and the Stoics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000). M. Lee, *Paul, the Stoics, and the Body of Christ* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); W. Loader, *The Septuagint, Sexuality, and the New Testament: Case Studies on the Impact of the LXX in Philo and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); B. Winter, ed., *Philo and Paul among the Sophists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
41. N. P. Lemche, *Ancient Israel: A New History of Israelite Society* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988); idem, *The Israelites in History and Tradition* (London: SPCK, 1998); idem, *Prelude to Israel's Past: Background and Beginnings of Israelite History and Identity* (trans. E.F. Maniscalco; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998); T. L. Thompson, *Early History of the Israelite People from the Written and Archaeological Sources* (Leiden: Brill, 1992); idem, *The Mythic Past: Biblical Archaeology and the Myth of Israel* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); idem, *The Messiah Myth*; P. R. Davies, *In Search of Ancient Israel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992); idem, *Memories of Ancient Israel: An Introduction to Biblical History—Ancient and Modern* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008); idem, *On the Origins of Judaism* (London: Equinox, 2009); R. M. Price, *Deconstructing Jesus* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2000); F. R. Zindler, *The Jesus the Jews Never Knew: Sepher Toldoth Yeshu and the Quest for the Historical Jesus in Jewish Sources* (Austin: American Atheist Press, 2003).



teaching students training for ministry in the Evangelical Church. Fearful that the frail faith of their students might suffer under the hands of such a scholar, the church leaned on the university, and Lüdemann was axed. And this from a university that was established on Enlightenment principles, has prided itself on free inquiry unhindered by external constraints and has boasted some of Germany's leading theologians such as Albrecht Ritschl (at least when German theologians led the world).

Apart from issues of academic freedom, of which I am sceptical, or indeed tenure, which seems to have the reverse effect and squashes originality, what emerges from the Lüdemann case is a crucial question. Can one be a student of sacred Scriptures and be an atheist? Indeed, can one be a theologian (as distinct from a biblical critic) and an atheist at the same time? In other words, does theology require one to be a believer first, so that, in the words of Anselm, theology may be defined as *fides quaerens intellectum*, a reasoned and systematic exploration and explanation of one's faith?

A further implication concerns the role of myth in the New Testament, especially in the accounts of Jesus. Many have wanted to argue that Strauss went too far, that there may be some mythical elaboration around the historical core, whatever that is. To my mind, there is far greater value in pursuing the argument from myth (taken in its dual sense of fiction and an alternative genre and mindset), for that gets us beyond the somewhat futile searches for the historical or unhistorical Jesus. What is the function of that myth, I would like to ask, especially in its political register? How does it function in terms of what I have elsewhere called a political myth, both in its original form and in its multiple uses and abuses?<sup>42</sup>

As for Bauer, I have already discussed the implications of his historical scepticism concerning the origins of Christianity and how he may be read in our own time as a forerunner of a minimalist position; alternatively, we may view recent arguments as part of an effort to recover the radical edge of Bauer's biblical criticism. But there is another, perhaps surprising, element of his work that remains very much part of the current debate: the appeal of Christianity to the lower classes, especially slaves, its despising of wealth and property, power and its exercise and its attraction to the dispossessed. That argument has a currency not directly due to Bauer, but to one who remained fascinated by Bauer and drew heavily from him for his own work on early Christianity. I speak of Friedrich Engels, who penned a number of seminal works under Bauer's influence.<sup>43</sup> Engels gives Bauer's

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42. Boer, *Political Myth*.

43. F. Engels, *Bruno Bauer and Early Christianity*, in *Marx and Engels Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1989 [1882]), XXIV = *Bruno Bauer und das Urchristentum*, in *Marx Engels Werke* (Berlin: Dietz, 1973 [1882]), XIX; idem, *The Book of Revelation*, in *Marx and*



arguments a twist, arguing that it was not merely the later, fully-fledged form of Christianity that appealed to the poor, but its raw, earliest form, before all the accretions. Or, as Engels put it, ‘Christianity was originally a movement of oppressed people: it first appeared as the religion of slaves and freedmen, of poor people deprived of all rights, of peoples subjugated or dispersed by Rome.’<sup>44</sup> Apart from a few general comments about the effect of Roman imperialism, which he argues crushed older social structures of clan and *polis*, imposed a new juridical system, exacted punishing tribute, and exacerbated the hopeless state of the vast majority of slaves, impoverished peasants and desperate urban freemen, there is relatively scarce attention given to the details of this crucial point.

Despite this scarcity, it is the point that has stuck. In fact, Engels is also the source of the idea in New Testament studies and church history, especially in terms of class analysis rather than the dominance of ideas such as despising the rich (Bauer’s position). Mediated and elaborated by Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Kautsky,<sup>45</sup> this position became by the early twentieth century the consensus among New Testament scholars<sup>46</sup> and among sociologists,<sup>47</sup> holding sway until the 1960s,<sup>48</sup> taking a dip for a while and returning with a vengeance in the new wave of anti-imperial studies of the New Testament. The problem, of course, is that which faces any effort to find some firm ground in the New Testament: the lack of conclusive evidence.

Finally, what about the issue of context with which I began this discussion? In the cases of Feuerbach, Strauss and Bauer, they found themselves in a Germany depressed economically and politically, a situation that generated a dialectical leap in biblical criticism that was to launch it into global

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*Engels Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1990 [1883]), XXVI = *Das Buch der Offenbarung*, in *Marx Engels Werke* (Berlin: Dietz, 1973 [1883]), XXI; idem, *On the History of Early Christianity*, in *Marx and Engels Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1990 [1894–95]), XXVII = *Zur Geschichte des Urchristentums*, in *Marx Engels Werke* (Berlin: Dietz, 1972 [1894–95]), XXII.

44. Engels, *The Book of Revelation*, 447; idem, *Zur Geschichte des Urchristentums*, 449.
45. R. Luxemburg, *Kirche und Sozialismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Stimme-Verlag, 1982 [1905]) = *Socialism and the Churches*, in *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks* (edited by Mary-Alice Waters; New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970); K. Kautsky, *Foundations of Christianity* (trans. H. F. Mins; London: Socialist Resistance, 2007 [1908]) = *Der Ursprung des Christentums: Eine Historische Untersuchung* (Stuttgart: J. H. W. Dietz, 1977 [1908]).
46. See, for instance, A. Deissman, *The New Testament in the Light of Modern Research* (Garden City: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1929); idem, *Light From the Ancient East* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978 [1908]).
47. See E. Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (2 vols.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992 [1911]).
48. See R. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 29–48.

leadership. What, then, of our own situation and its return to the questions raised by Strauss and Bauer? The context is not quite comparable, for that scholarship comes from what seems to be the global centres of economic and political power. Or does it? Might it not be seen as a symptom of a slip in confidence, the loss of global leadership as the USA and Europe stumble in the Middle East and are burdened with the weight of an economic shift to the East, to China and India? And with those stumbles, perhaps even on the crumbling battlements of the West, it is a good time to return to a more sceptical position in relation to the founding documents.



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