In providing background to how I began to understand the Bible once I realized that it was not an inerrant revelation from God, I have been giving a kind of history of scholarship on the Gospels, explaining how it was that, before the Enlightenment, virtually everyone understood the Gospels to be Supernatural Histories, and that during the Enlightenment there were scholars who maintained they were Natural Histories. Now I can complete this short survey by talking about a significant development, one of the most significant in the history of the entire discipline of New Testament studies, in which the Gospels came to be understood as Myths. Let me stress that I am not saying that everyone started accepting this new view or, more germane to this series of posts, that I agree with this view as I’m presenting it: I’m simply indicating what happened in the field of New Testament studies. Later I’ll explain its relevance for my views. This, again, is taken from my book Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium.

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The Gospels As Myths

Prior to the 1830s, just about everyone understood the Gospels as either supernatural histories or natural histories. All that was to change in 1835-36 with the earthshattering publication of a two-volume book called The Life of Jesus Critically Examined (the German title was Das Leben Jesu kritisch bearbeitet) by the famous German theologian David Friedrich Strauss. This was an amazing book: nearly 1500 pages of detailed and meticulous argumentation involving every story in the Gospels. It completely stood the field on its head: a remarkable feat, considering that the author was only 27 years old. (Its English translation was done by none other than Mary Ann Evans — a.k.a. the novelist George Eliot — herself at a ripe young age of 26. This was before she teamed up, so to say, with George Lewes and started her own writing career, which was no less brilliant than Strauss’s, though markedly less germane to the subject at hand!).

Strauss disagreed with both of the prevailing ways of understanding the Gospels in his time. On the one hand, he agreed ...

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The Gospels as Natural Histories