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The Life of Jesus

Ernest Renan

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“An epoch, not for the Catholic world only, but for general literature….The essay on the sources of the Life of Jesus with which it opens is itself a literary masterpiece.” -Albert Schweitzer, The Quest of the Historical Jesus, 1906

“A rhetorician of great skill, a master of the fervid and sympathetic style of disquisition.” -The New York Times

“Renan’s ‘Life of Jesus’ was destined to become a classic of French literature. When it first appeared in 1863, the book created an immediate sensation. Some 66,000 copies were printed within the first six months, and the book was translated into a dozen languages by the end of 1864….Renan’s approach can be seen in a preface, written under the shadow of unfavorable criticism…Most important, he reaffirms his intent to write scientific history in the face of every form of supernaturalism.” -William Baird, History of New Testament Research: From deism to Tübingen, 1992

In this persuasive and classic work, renowned rationalist and scholar of religion Ernest Renan was the first biographer of Jesus to present him as entirely human. Renan describes Jesus as a popular religious leader and self-proclaimed Messiah who increasingly advocated the overthrow of Roman rule and the establishment of a theocracy. To support his apocalyptic vision, Renan's Jesus was not above using trickery and deception, as in the raising of Lazarus. The impression left by Jesus on his disciples was so profound that they began to proclaim his Resurrection and presence among them shortly after his death. Even conceding Christ's historicity, it is still seriously debated by modern biblical scholars whether a reliable life of Jesus can be gleaned from the gospels. For this very reason, the questions raised by Renan a century ago about the facts surrounding Jesus' life and the authorship of the gospels are still less from settled. The Life of Jesus has provoked both contention and praise since its publication in 1863.

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