

4.14

Early “Lives of Jesus”: An Adventure in Scholarship

During the period following the Enlightenment, scholars embarked on what came to be called “the quest for the historical Jesus.” They wrote biographies known as “lives of Jesus.” These works typically imposed some grand scheme or hypothesis upon the biblical material in order to interpret everything in accord with a consistent paradigm (e.g., “Jesus was a social reformer” or “Jesus was a religious mystic”).

Hundreds of these “lives of Jesus” were produced during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. What follows here is a sampling of some of the most influential views.

HERMANN SAMUEL REIMARUS (1694–1768). Herman Reimarus believed that Jesus was an unsuccessful political claimant who saw it as his destiny to be established by God as king of the restored people of Israel. Reimarus was a respected professor of Eastern languages at the University of Hamburg, and his works on Jesus were not published until after his death. Apparently, he feared retribution for his controversial views during his lifetime.

In any case, fragments of a large unpublished manuscript were printed between 1774 and 1778, and these mark what many consider to be the beginning of the quest for the historical Jesus.

Reimarus interpreted all the passages in the New Testament where Jesus speaks of the “kingdom of God” or the “kingdom of heaven” as references to a new political reality about to be established on earth. Thus, Reimarus said, Jesus believed he was the Messiah (Christ), but he meant this in a worldly sense. Jesus thought that God was going to deliver the people of Israel from bondage to the Romans and create a new and powerful kingdom on earth where Jesus himself would rule as king. This is why he was charged with the crime of claiming to be the King of the Jews and executed (Matt. 27:37). When he died, he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46) because he realized in his last moments that God had failed him and that his hopes had been misplaced.

His disciples, however, were unable to accept this outcome. Not wanting to return to their mundane lives in Galilee, they stole his body from its tomb, claimed he had been raised from the dead (see Matt. 28:11–15), and made up a new story about how Jesus had died willingly as an atonement for sins. The message of the kingdom was spiritualized, and the teaching of the failed religious fanatic was transformed into a religion promising salvation after death to those who joined an organization led by his followers.

HEINRICH EBERHARD GOTTLOB PAULUS (1761–1851). Heinrich Paulus was a veteran rationalist who became best known for offering naturalistic explanations for miracle stories reported in the Gospels. As professor of theology at the University of Heidelberg, he

published a two-volume work on the life of Jesus in 1828. Paulus accepted the miracle stories as reports of historical events but reasoned that a primitive knowledge of the laws of nature led people in biblical times to regard as supernatural occurrences what the advancement of knowledge has rendered understandable. For example, Jesus may have appeared to walk on water when he strode along the shore in a mist, and he may have received credit for stilling a storm when the weather coincidentally improved after he awoke from sleep on a boat trip. Jesus healed people by improving their psychological disposition or, sometimes, by applying medicines mixed with mud (John 9:6) or spit (Mark 8:23).

Likewise, Paulus said, Jesus's disciples were provided with medicinal oil to use for curing certain ailments (Mark 6:13). The story of the feeding of the five thousand recalls a time when Jesus and his disciples generously shared their own provisions with those who had none, inspiring others in the crowd to do the same until everyone was satisfied.

DAVID FRIEDRICH STRAUSS (1808–74). David Strauss appealed to modern understandings of mythology to steer a middle course between naive acceptance of Gospel stories and the sort of simplistic explanations for these stories offered by Paulus. In 1835, Strauss published *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, a two-volume work over fourteen hundred pages long. He called for unbiased historical research to be done on the Gospels, establishing

an orientation for scholarship that is still followed by many today. He discerned, for instance, that the stories in the first three Gospels are less developed than those in John, which, accordingly, is the least valuable book for historical reconstruction.

Still, Strauss regarded most of the stories in all the Gospels as myths, developed on the pattern of Old Testament prototypes. The point of such tales is not to record historical occurrences but rather to interpret historical events in light of various religious ideas. For example, the story of Jesus's baptism includes references to the Spirit descending as a dove upon Jesus and a voice speaking from heaven. These things did not actually happen in the strict historical sense, but they interpret the significance of something that did occur. Jesus really was baptized by John, and his sense of mission was somehow related to what he experienced on that occasion.

ERNST RENAN (1823–92). Ernst Renan combined critical scholarship with novelistic aesthetic appeal to create what was probably the most widely read life of Jesus in his day. The book, published in 1863, broke with rationalism in its attempt to discern the emotional impact of the Jesus tradition and to trace the reasons for this to the passions, individuality, and spontaneity of Jesus himself. Regarding the Gospels as “legendary biographies,” Renan sought to uncover the personality that inspired the legends while also displaying his own penchant for poetic, even sentimental, description. For example, since Jesus is said to have ridden into

Jerusalem on a mule (in modern Bibles, an ass or a donkey), Renan imagined that he typically traveled about the countryside seated on “that favorite riding-animal of the East, which is so docile and sure-footed and whose great dark eyes, shaded with long lashes, are full of gentleness.”¹

Renan also attempted to fit the Gospel materials into an overall chronology for the life of Jesus. He described the initial years as “a Galilean springtime,” a sunny period in which Jesus was an amiable carpenter who rode his gentle mule from town to town, sharing a “sweet theology of love” that he had discerned through observation of nature. Renan dismissed the literal historicity of miracles, suggesting that the raising of Lazarus was a “staged miracle,” a deliberate hoax designed to win acclaim for Jesus. In any case, Jesus eventually visited the capital city of Jerusalem, where his winsome message met with opposition from the rabbis. This led him to develop an increasingly revolutionary stance with a harsher tone, to despair of earthly ambitions, and at last to invite persecution and martyrdom.

Some Conclusions

What lessons are to be learned from these “lives of Jesus”?

Reimarus’s writings were overtly hostile to Christianity, while the other three authors viewed themselves as Christian theologians who sought to discover or salvage something in the biblical tradition that could be recognized as universally true. All four were skeptical of the

miracle stories, displaying a reluctance to accept anything that deals with the supernatural as a straightforward historical account. All questioned the accuracy of the Gospels at certain points and sought to supplement the stories with what they thought were reasonable conjectures at other points.

The most important lesson, however, was noted with verve by Albert Schweitzer in 1906. All of these authors (and numerous others) managed to produce portraits of Jesus that they personally found appealing. For the non-Christian, the historical Jesus rather conveniently turned out to be a fraud. And for the Christians, the historical Jesus seemed in every case to end up believing whatever the individual biographer believed and valuing things that the individual biographer valued. The so-called quest for the historical Jesus had tended in fact to become a quest for the relevant Jesus.

Adapted from Mark Allan Powell, *Jesus as a Figure in History: How Modern Historians View the Man from Galilee* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 13–16. Used by permission.

1. Quoted in Albert W. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 161.