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A table of contents for *The Expository Times* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expository-times\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php)

pdfs are named: [Volume]\_[Issue]\_[1<sup>st</sup> page of article].pdf

## Books that have influenced our Epoch.

### Renan's 'Life of Jesus.'<sup>1</sup>

BY THE REVEREND A. NAIRNE, D.D., REGIUS PROFESSOR OF DIVINITY, CAMBRIDGE.

FROM ancient days to modern, Lives of our Lord Jesus Christ have increased and multiplied. Our earliest Gospels prove that there never was a generation of Christians who only looked forward to the Advent and took little interest in 'the days of his flesh.' Analyse as far as you can, and still your earliest sources for those days will be the retrospective contemplation of the worshipping primitive Church. Fortunate that it should be so, for that puts later authors on the only possible line of writing comprehensibly and understandingly: these Lives cannot be common books: the mystery of the holy incarnation gives form to the very human story.

The three Galilean gospels, the Johannine; second-century romances; a long period of idylls; hymns of the medieval Church and passion plays; then more reflective works, aspiration towards real history; devotion to the true humanity, especially in and after seasons of trial—such as Hebrews and Apocalypse mark in the apostolic age; by the Wars of the Roses in England followed by the cult of 'The Name'; the present state of Europe after war, and the return to the unadorned designation 'Jesus' and the swift succession of homely sketches of the Life: so the course has run. Curious recurrences and coincidences appear. Such are the Romance-Lives, which tell a more or less frankly imaginative story generally accounting for the resurrection by a romantic rather than rationalizing incident of resuscitation, and this is nearly always connected with a society or monastery of Essenes. De Quincey wrote an ingenious essay on the Essenes as being the Christian Church under its aspect of loving secrecy, and a few years ago Mr. George Moore surprised his friends with a strange, daring, beautiful Life of Christ (*The*

*Brook Kerith*), romantic Essenean, redolent of the Good Shepherd.

It is remarkable that Dr. Sanday planned a *Life of Christ*. All his time and pains, all his eminent gifts of scholarship were to be bent to the purpose. And these were so bent: textual criticism, prelude studies, excursions into the philosophy of the nineteenth century—no means were spared for the creation of a genuine history. And that proved impossible—a pregnant omen for all adventurers on this boundless and still uncharted sea.

Dr. Sanday was even painfully conscientious: 'The spirit of Jesus' hindered. The Romancers slipped past the difficulty by postulating an imaginary witness of events. Dr. E. A. Abbott did something like that with his tale of *Philochristus*, a reverent scholarly picture of Galilean days told by an old Galilean disciple. In *Philochristus* the flavour of Elisabethan style just makes the convenient apology. The whole of the documentary readings receive consideration. And, in simplicity, this is perhaps the most complete of English essays on the theme. Latham's *Pastor Pastorum* and Seeley's *Ecce Homo* are noble presentations of special views, examples in their different measure of philosophic sketches. This present day is the heyday of brief sketchy Lives of Christ, clever, vividly portraying a man among men, sometimes a brother so homely natural as to be almost commonplace, just 'Jesus'—'How sweet the name of Jesus sounds!' Of a different quality indeed is Dr. Gore's *Jesus of Nazareth*. Readers who care for a self-abnegating author and his unaffected lustre will be inclined to apply certain phrases of his own, out of their context, to his labour. It is 'an instance of impressiveness through simplicity. The figure of Jesus stands in the midst with a majesty which confounds his adversaries and triumphs over ignominy.' Standing apart from the ready scribes, Dr. Gore writes 'with anxiety.'

As we look back we notice milestones on the road. One seemed quite lately to be still more considerable a boundary. Schweitzer in his very attractive review of the history of Lives of Christ, *Vom Reimarus zu Wrede*, makes Reimarus and Wrede types of the two extremes, the dilemma of

<sup>1</sup> *Vie de Jésus*, 1863; *The Life of Jesus*, English translation, 1864-5; and in Dent's 'Everyman's Library,' with Introduction by Charles Gore, 1928; *L'Avenir de la Science*, 1848-90; *Souvenirs d'Enfance et de Jeunesse*, 1883; *The Life of Ernest Renan*, by Madame James Darmesteter (Methuen), 1898; *Sur Ernest Renan*, by James George Frazer (Claude Aveline, Paris), 1923; *Renan et Strasbourg*, par Jean Pommier (Félix Alcan, Paris), 1926.

gospel criticism. Wrede had lately proved that a picking and choosing criticism, allow it all the licence it may claim, still fails to reconcile the contradictions of the documents : for the actual life of a Jesus who really lived there is no trustworthy material. But Reimarus, mysterious sceptic of the seventeenth century, had already provided antidote to that despair. He had divined, what literary criticism now substantiates by placing Mark firmly in place as the earliest Gospel, that a crude tremendous faith in the immediate coming of the Kingdom of God to sweep away the kingdoms of this world, and in himself as the leading actor in that supernatural drama, is the key to all the words and acts of the Lord Jesus, and co-ordinates all those extravagances which disturb the reasonable modern mind. In England, Schweitzer won even more attention than in Germany. Dr. Burkitt, with his captivating scholarship, recommended the view to both learned and simple. He showed the consistent testimony of Mark's continuous narrative to its own character of unconscious faithfulness. He also preached, prophet even more than scholar, the force of 'apocalypse' in true religion, and so abolished the gulf between Galilee and Paul. So, till very lately indeed, it has happened (at least in England and among the moderately critical) that the gospel problem and the outlines of the Redeemer's Life have been so reshaped that Lives of Christ written before Schweitzer's illumination can retain little more than merely literary interest.

But such satisfactions are unsatisfactory. The critical process is a process. If allowed, it is only allowed on condition of never resting. Read Mr. Montefiore's introductory pages in the new edition of his *Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*. Let him orientate you among the still rising lights in the region of gospel history. The whole sky is once again open to the common view. New light is to be won, and help still comes from the great minds of old ; among whom Renan must be ranged.

The decisive dividing line between ancient and modern, reflective and scientific Lives of Christ was drawn by David Frederic Strauss with his *Life of Jesus* in 1838. Others before him had approached the position he boldly and completely seized. He broke up the modern historical form which popular devotion had gradually imposed upon the gospel story ; which cautious erudition had endeavoured to preserve by rationalizing the miracles, and abasing the enthusiasm of the records ; and which, frankly exposed, just came to this :

Everything narrated is literal fact ; it happened and it happened so ; some things are difficult for the modern mind to accept ; a decent criticism must be allowed which will prune away a few statements evidently false, will remove many discrepancies by extended harmonization, and will discover natural explanations of many acts that are presented by the evangelists as supernatural. Yet here and there appeal was made to that mythical characteristic of ancient narrative which had already been recognized freely in the heroic period of the Old Testament.

Strauss took up the myth wholly and boldly, and read the gospel history of Jesus Christ as an epic coloured by the mythic habit of the people through whom the tradition came to the Evangelists. By myth he meant neither fable nor allegory, but 'the presentation of a fact or a thought under a form which is indeed historical, but which is determined by the genius and the imaginative language of antiquity.' Nor is myth arbitrary or artificial : 'Its birth is devoid of artifice and calculation. The unhistoric element in myths of history is not the artificial product of premeditated fiction, but has slipped in by itself in course of time and tradition ; the myths of thought have not been invented for the sake of unphilosophic readers, but the old masters chose a historical envelope for their own easier expression of obscure ideas.' This is not the place to illustrate or discuss Strauss' theory. Brief reflection will suggest the freedom it allowed to a frank enjoyment of the charm and vigour of the gospel narrative. And a further reflection will indicate many a passage in the record where such treatment might bring out profound truths which the literal matter of fact interpretation must ignore. Strauss might on such terms compose a Life of Jesus rich in the genuinely wonderful. His refusal to accept miracle, his insistence on the human limits of the Saviour's powers, might be startling when he broke so much new ground in his book ; but to-day we read him with reopened eyes and muse on the many truths which he perhaps was planting for a later appreciation.

One objection to his argument may occur even to those who hear it so jejune sketched as it has been in the paragraph just ended. A good deal of the *a priori* is threatened. Strauss starts from a formula, a philosophical formula, and is going to shape his use of the documents thereby : he is not going to consider and reconsider as he proceeds, reforming his formula as actual observation bids the scientific historian do. That objection is just. Strauss was more philosophically than historically

inclined; and he was a philosopher after the German pattern of his time. His book was translated at once into French, in an admirable edition by M. Littré. It was read avidly and produced wide effect. But it was a difficult book for the people of France. They wanted a pure and lucid Life, free from pedantic encumbrance, as well as from traditional prejudice. They would gladly listen to a scholar whom they could trust, and indeed recognize for themselves, as one who was talking scholarly of things he knew yet who kept all that in the background; who gave the public only what mattered to men who feared God. They wanted the timbre but not the tune of philosophy and theology. Above all, they wanted scene and atmosphere, a living story, the portrait of the hero, his deeds and words and character. And that was just what Renan gave twenty-five years later, in 1863.

The facts of his career had prepared him for the task. A thorough Frenchman, he understood the 'taste' of his countrymen, their insistence on lucidity, their impatience with the master who elaborates all he has to say. But he was no average Frenchman, and far from subservient to the rule of the multitude. 'Une école où les écoliers feraient la loi serait une triste école.' So he writes in the preface to that long treatise composed in youth and published in ripe age, *L'Avenir de la Science*. There he tells how, with tedious enthusiasm 'the little conscientious Breton, flying frightened from Saint-Sulpice, because he thought he perceived that half of what his instructors had told him was perhaps untrue,' spread his whole mind disorderly upon his pages and made an engaging exhibition which he now knew to be enormous in its faults. For now experience had taught him style, that dark forestry in the vast domain of thought. To be brief, pregnant, decided, was not to suppress truth or avoid mystery. Style is obedience to a grander will than self or fashion. And, thus he concludes not rhetorically, but with the independence of loyal scholarship, 'L'immortalité c'est de travailler à une œuvre éternelle.'

'Le petit Breton': that counted in his character. Ernest Renan was born at Tréguier on February 28, 1823, of old village Breton stock. Enduring, primitive, simply faithful to a catholic religion, full of reverie, the parents gave their thoughtful boy to the priesthood. The Breton schooling, Paris and the seminary courses, kind masters, the peace of the affectionate priesthood round about him, ensouling him—all this may be read in the *Souvenirs*, a book that will always live,

for, as is written therein, 'Ce qu'on dit de soi est toujours poésie. . . . On écrit de telles choses pour transmettre aux autres la théorie de l'univers qu'on porte en soi.' By that sentence we can partly measure the regret, courage, concentration of conscience, which led the boy away from his chosen to his necessary destiny; and the patient erudition together with reverence and godly fear, and the equanimity which faith conserves however faith change its form.

Difficult years followed. But the old friends in the priesthood were still kind. The young student was at real work. Enough employment came to live upon. Then published writings, and some first breath of fame. Commissioned by M. Victor Le Clerc to certain libraries, he visited Italy, a recreation indeed, relaxing the hard discipline of Brittany and renunciation. Renan describes this effect himself and quotes the hymn:

Flecte ramos, arbor alta,  
tensa laxa viscera,  
et rigor lentescat ille  
quem dedit nativitas.

'My religion,' he says, 'has always been the same, the progress of reason, of science.' But the 'sameness' has its 'other,' and that appears at this point. Renan the medieval becomes, by addition, the humanist. And that enlarges the definition of his religion just quoted. The definition is adequate, but has not always been generously understood. It was misunderstood when his *Vie de Jésus* appeared. The introduction prefixed by Dr. Gore to the translation lately included by Messrs. Dent in their 'Everyman's Library' indicates this more careful appreciation of Renan's faith which gradually wins way. But Renan's faith is not a creed. It is trust in God; and if some name of vaguer circumference but even more objective reality than God could be invented, it would make expression easier. It springs from the infinite good, and its goal is that infinity. It works and grows, not in the well-being but in the goodness and self-sacrifice of men. It imagines no gulf between man and God, and Renan, deny it who will, adores the Lord Jesus as Divine. A year or two before he wrote the *Life* he published a volume of *Essais de Morale et de Critique*. In the preface he prescribes the nature of his religious conviction. This preface would be a good introduction to a studious enjoyment of the *Life*. Its temperate logic breaks at the close into a hymn of praise and gratitude for the mystery of the Breton's heart and history: 'O pères de la tribu obscure au foyer de laquelle je

puisai la foi à l'invisible, humble clan de laboureurs et de marins. . . .'

Renan told his Director in one of those intimate colloquies which precluded his departure from Saint-Sulpice, that he had fancied a possible reconciliation with the faith if he had belonged to one of the Protestant countries with their varieties of freedom. A fancy, surely, and no more. No liberalism, no modernism would have met his need at all. He must have made a thorough renunciation and become an absolutely free thinker ; and he did so : and if any readers belittle his *Vie de Jésus* as artistic or what not, but facile and unsinewy, let them think again whether the clearness and naturalness they so suspect, are not the fruit of absolute freedom won by no ordinary pain. Moreover, it would be a displeasure to imagine Renan getting over the *desiderium* of his catholic idea, and settling down among the shadows of compromise. No, the idea lived and inflamed him with a steady fire. The Church renounced him, as he the Church, in all due form. Perhaps his masters at Saint-Sulpice knew better. Perhaps he himself did. Certainly, as we read his books and mark the practical temper of his religious ethic, we recognize again the catholic, the absolute. And as with deity and manhood, resurrection and eternal life, so here with communion, sacrament, and Church we find somewhat to muse upon, and a more masculine theology than in Strauss.

In 1861 opportunity was offered Renan of a voyage to Syria. He accepted and spent a year in Lebanon, Galilee, Judea, and Jerusalem with his sister, Henriette. With her, a dear and most intelligent companion, with a richly stored and strenuously disciplined scholarship, with all the gifts of artist, linguist, historian, with what, but for his equable faith, might have been the tragedy of his religious fate, behind him, Renan entered the Holy Land, well prepared to make the most of an immense happiness. The result has been so perfectly described by Madame Darmesteter in her *Life of Ernest Renan* that it would be mere affectation to attempt a like statement in fresh words :

'The implacable sun of Beyrout drove the Renans to the hills. At Ghazir they found green pastures, fresh snow from the mountains, wholesome springs, and a little house with a pergola. Here in the utmost peace conceivable Renan began his *Life of Jesus*. All day long he sat in the cool shadows of his Syrian home absorbed, intoxicated by that inner dream which little by little took shape and lived before his eyes. A New Testament and

Josephus comprised his library ; but the book of the East was open before him ; but the very past familiar through a hundred texts and inscriptions rose before him more real than the actual moment. Thrown full length on his Syrian rug, his books and papers scattered before him, he wrote hour after hour in the fervour of a veritable inspiration. Henriette was his perpetual confidante, as soon as the page was written she copied it fair. When at last the night fell, brother and sister rose and sought their terrace on the house roof. There they would speak at last of the day's silent work, and she would make her reflections, often profound, always pregnant with that fine moral tact of which she had the secret. "Many of them," her brother has said, "were to me as veritable revelations."

The sequel was indeed sad. Both brother and sister fell ill ; all but died ; and Henriette did die. Who can forget the solemn dedication of the book : 'A l'âme pure de ma sœur Henriette morte à Byblos, le 24 Septembre 1861. . . . Te souviens tu du sein de Dieu où tu réposes. . . . Tu me dis un jour que ce livre-ci tu l'aimerais, d'abord parce qu'il avait été fait avec toi et aussi parce qu'il te plaisait. . . . Tu dors maintenant dans la terre d'Adonis. . . . Révèle-moi, o bon génie, à moi que tu aimais, ces vérités qui dominent la mort, empêchant de la craindre et la font presque aimer.'

The *Life* was no mere brilliancy, improvised. Beside the ordered mass of gathered knowledge lying behind it, there was also a large plan of which it was to be the vestibule. Renan had in his mind a great epic, *Les Origines : The First Beginnings of Christianity*. And the *Life of Jesus* was hardly published before he was at work on the *Apostles* and *S. Paul*. For five-and-twenty years he laboured at the series, carrying it on to *Marcus Aurelius*, a history of the nascent church, unique in its kind, so shining and so well proportioned that the artist has been sometimes praised to the detriment of the historian ; which is quite unfair. A few faults of taste—*lentescens vigor*—have earned the sarcasms of hasty critics, as though this obstinate scholar were a sentimental romancer. With surer penetration Madame Darmesteter notes how 'the strongest bent of his genius inclined him to consider the origin of things. He loved the delicate rooty fibres.' Delicate handling, deep searching in the common soil, vigour and taste, and no fastidious conventions ; but always determination to have a finished work, truth attested by simplicity :

that is Renan's historian-conscience. He took his own line masterfully.

Almost one fancies more than that : a guidance trusted, some influence not quite unlike inspiration. Beauty and origins worked upon him together in Palestine to make him fall in love with Galilee. Hence he begins the holy story with Galilee ; keeps Galilee as the creative and recreative idea throughout ; and in the later histories is ever dreaming of a pure Galilean Church and Creed as the goal of all the wandering roads. Hence he fills up that period which the Synoptists appear to pass unnoticed, the early months or years, before John Baptist was delivered by the Jews to Herod. He fills it from the Synoptists themselves, redistributing their narrative according to the developing nature of the Lord's words and ways. Nor is this perhaps too audacious, for the Evangelists do provide very few notes of time and sequence.

Thus his plan falls into three divisions. (I.) The early Galilean period ; serene, favour with God and man, happy, gracious consolation and goodwill. Then (II.) our Lord becomes the friend of John Baptist. And in this friendship of the two young men the stormy Baptist is the leading spirit. He fills the mind of Jesus with apocalyptic dreams, of the Son of Man from Daniel, of his own awful eminence and responsibility. A period of trouble and inward strife ensues, strife between the need of effective compromise and the old childlike trust, between ambition and the absolute : 'Thou art the Christ.' What then ? 'The tone he had adopted could not be sustained more than for a few months ; it was time death came to liberate him from an endurance strained to the utmost, to remove him from a blind alley, and by delivering him from the peril of trial too prolonged, usher him henceforth sinless into the peace of heaven.' And then (III.) death, kindly, opportune, draws on, solving these transient problems, deepening all to perfect peace and power, eternalizing.

The mystery of soul, and of this supreme soul, is profound. But 'this at least is certain. His divine nature soon gained the upper hand. He could still avoid death but he would not. Love of his work carried him onward. He took the cup and drank it to the dregs. Henceforth, effectually, Jesus is himself, complete, unclouded. Controversy, miracle, the evil spirits, fade away. Alone abides the incomparable hero of the Passion, the finished pattern and refreshment of all suffering souls.'

Bold theology : very like the Epistle to the

Hebrews. Large, open-air design, fashioned according to that earliest ante-nicene criticism which distinguished the Fourth Gospel from the Three by its filling of the gap between Nazareth and the imprisonment of the Baptist. Its fuller history rather than its philosophical theology struck those naïve scholars. And so, too, Renan, rejecting the hellenizing theology, the threatening development (as he fancied) of dogma, used the Gospel according to S. John freely as contributing most valuably to history. None of his personal judgments gave more offence. To the schools of his day that was heresy indeed. And when his critics saw how conveniently for his purpose he extended or contracted his freedom—rejecting generally, but sometimes quoting discourse ; accepting generally, but often altering the record of events ; leaving nice problems of date and authorship in the vague ; and speaking of historical accuracy in divining past events with unbecoming scepticism—'petites sciences, conjecturales, les sciences historiques'—they saw him delivered into their hands. He is praised, ironically, as artist ; almost ridiculed by the less intelligent for sentiment. 'One would fancy,' wrote a really reverent pupil, Réville, 'that M. Renan feels lively displeasure whenever he is forced to yield to critical argument, and cut out something which suited his manner of writing history. It seems to him that a significant thread is being eliminated from his pattern.'

Has M. Réville just missed the very centre ? Not his own arbitrary pattern, but the character of the sublime person he studies, was Renan's impulse. Neither the theology (which was far nearer to his own than he suspected), nor the narrative (which was too deeply tinged with the miraculous in its most enigmatic form for Renan to follow frankly), drew him to the Gospel according to S. John. Talk to any of your friends about our Lord Jesus Christ, His words, deeds, traits of character, His disciples, their names and relations with their Master, you will always find that the illustrative details are drawn from S. John. That is the Gospel of human character, of *Ecce Homo*. That is the Gospel which added to the charm of the Galilean scene the living person of the hero, 'le héros incomparable de la Passion.' Neither the artist nor the critic in Renan bade him use that Gospel as he did. Like Paul on the road to Damascus, like the meditative author of that Gospel himself, so Renan actually saw the Lord, the Word, the Character, and selected evidence accordingly.