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Robert D. Priest, *The Gospel According to Renan: Reading, Writing and Religion in Nineteenth-Century France*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. 265 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$110.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN: 978-0-1987-2875-7.

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Ernest Renan: once the name was sufficient to frighten clerics and believers. His enduring book, *Vie de Jésus* (1863), was the first biography to present Jesus of Nazareth simply as a human being, not as the absolutely singular God-Man whose teachings and sacrifice have atoning power. A century and a half since the revolutionary book appeared it no longer upsets most of its readers, even if they are firm believers, and so Renan has joined the cast of others who once threatened Christianity at its root. Today, only scholars recognize the names of Celsus, author of *The True Word* (c177), who was exhaustively combated by Origen, and Eunomius of Cyzicus (d. c393) whose ultra-Arian writings brought forth voluminous refutations by Basil of Caesaria and Gregory of Nyssa. Chances are that, outside Departments of Theology or Religious Studies, the name of David Strauss, whose *Das Leben Jesu* (1835-1836) once shocked the Christian world by denying the miracles of Christ, is known today only by students who read George Eliot, who translated the work into English, or Nietzsche, who attacked Strauss's late work *Der alte und der neue Glaube* (1872) in his *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen* (1876).

Why does Renan's name no longer send a shudder of fear or delight through the prospective reader, even if he or she is a devout believer? Perhaps because many mainline Christians have made peace with the historical criticism, even if that peace has been achieved passively for the most part. One does not have to study in a college or a seminary to learn that the Gospels are not biographies of Jesus but rather testimonies of faith. One has only to attend with care to mainline Protestant and Catholic sermons by better-educated clergy. Of course, not even the most well-trained priests or ministers are likely to talk in church about how the Gospels of Matthew and Luke rely on Mark and Q—it's the business of the professor, not the preacher—but this knowledge, and far more about the composition of the New Testament, will condition how things are phrased in the pulpit.

Doubtless some conservative evangelicals and certainly all fundamentalists would be outraged by Renan were they to read him. The center group and liberal wing of the faith, though, are more likely to endorse the historical criticism or to turn its assumptions about scientific rigor against it when those assumptions are held dogmatically. Do historical critics have the right simply to deny the virginal conception and bodily resurrection of Jesus just because these things seem scandalous to a secular sensibility? Should one not look steadily and evenly at all the available evidence and then come up with a considered view? That at least would be the position advocated by a historical critic as eminent as Raymond Brown.[1] When the higher criticism is fueled by dogmatic secularism or extreme rationalism, it remains vulnerable to philosophical criticisms of precisely that dogmatism or that extremism. Yet when it is sensitive to the probing of philosophical criticism, the higher criticism can be seen as liberating the Christian from naive ideas about Scripture and indeed helping him or her to understand the competing theologies within the New Testament.

Robert Priest's splendid study of *Vie de Jésus* does not attempt to situate Renan within the history of biblical criticism. It does something equally interesting, however, something that biblical scholars should find rewarding, if sometimes discomfiting: it uncovers many of the forces that quietly shaped Renan and his book, and in doing so should give biblical critics today a lively sense of what may well be influencing them even when they claim to be neutral and scientific in their work. That one of those forces is gender politics has been known and studied for some time, with Renan's sister, Henriette, often being regarded as the prime inspiration for the femininity of Renan's Jesus. For Priest, though, "Renan's sympathetic depiction of the femininity of the first Christians reflected prevailing ideas about gender complementarity" (p. 16), although Priest is quick to add that Renan remained convinced "that women would always remain essentially religious" (p. 16). Perhaps that too was a prevailing idea.

Similarly, Renan does not merely present Jesus as an individual; that enterprise is bolstered by the view common to the Goncourt brothers, Sainte-Beuve, and Tain that one's peers and shared circumstances help to form individuals. *Vie de Jésus* "repeatedly depicted a process of dialogue and negotiation between Jesus and his contemporary audience" (p. 83). With regard to methodology, Renan is very much a scholar of his day in granting high authority to philology, which he tends to assimilate to the natural sciences. Priest refers us to the *Histoire générale* for an apt example: "consonantal roots [are like] chemistry's molecules" (p. 43). With supreme self-assurance, Renan figures the Jewish mind as determined by its language. Hebrew simply does not have, he thinks, the capacity for metaphysics; it does not lend itself to abstract thought. His remarks on "the rabbinical imagination" make it pretty plain that Jewish thinking cannot rise above the discussion of legal minutiae.[2] Jesus, however, saw beyond such things and spoke of love. Yet, for Renan, "Neither the Jew nor the Mussulman has understood this delightful theology of love." [3]

With admirable care, Priest builds up a convincing picture of what Renan wished to achieve in the *Vie de Jésus* and how the cultural politics of the Second Empire assured that it was a success. Renan sought, Priest tells us, to appropriate in a comprehensive manner "the biblical past for the historical discipline," and he "employed its full modern armory in this effort: ethnic determinism, contextual analysis, textual criticism, and individual psychology" (p. 108). Yet Renan's book is far from being perfectly clear in its claims, even when they are stated with all the conventions of sincerity. Indeed, its fundamental ambiguities allowed it to be read (and attacked or defended) from competing positions. Was Renan destroying Jesus by historical criticism or using those techniques to reconstruct him for Second Empire sensibilities? Was Renan's Jesus a mere magician or a sublime moral teacher? Does he reject Judaism or affirm it? Was Renan seeking to undermine religion by means of the historical criticism, or was he proposing a new way to understand Jesus, as a proponent of "eternal religion"? [4] Is *Vie de Jésus* a work of exacting scholarship or an historical novel (or, as the Abbé Gratry acidly quipped, a "non-historical novel" [quoted on p. 115])? More, was Renan writing biblical criticism or presenting the public with a coded criticism of the politics of the Second Empire?

That Renan suffered for his views about Jesus is well known. He was suspended from his Chair at the Collège de France after his inaugural lecture of February 1862 in which his skeptical views about the divinity of Jesus were all too evident, and he became subject to ad hominem attacks of every sort thereafter. To those appalled by his book, he was a rat, a fox, a serpent; his smooth prose allowed him entry to the homes of good Catholic families, but his intent was bad from the start: such was the burden of much criticism from churchgoers. Offered a post at the Bibliothèque Impériale by way of compensation for losing his Chair, Renan tersely declined: "pecunia tua tecum sit" [keep your money] (quoted on p. 111). If the Roman Catholic Church condemned Renan for eroding public morality, Renan responded by aspiring to become a moral paragon in other terms. He would henceforth live by his pen: his *Histoire des origines du christianisme* was completed in 1883, and he died before finishing the five volumes of *Histoire du peuple d'Israël*.

Yet *Vie de Jésus*, along with its popularization *Jésus* (1864), assured him of a higher income than the salary of a professor could ever provide. By the end of 1864, the book had sold 168,000 copies, bringing Renan over a hundred thousand francs. Editions of the book kept coming over the years. In 1867, there appeared the revised thirteenth edition of the book, and, three years later, the popular edition was reprinted with illustrations. The scholarly edition of 1867 restated Renan's disbelief in miracles, and doubtless the remark was made (and read) with the Marian apparitions at La Salette (1846) and Lourdes (1858) in mind. No Catholic of the day could seriously engage with the book—it had been placed on the *Syllabus Errorum* in December 1864—and, among Christians, Renan could look only to liberal Protestants for any critical dialogue with it. Indeed, he continued to learn from their biblical criticism, especially of the fourth gospel. By 1869, Renan was sufficiently confident of his appeal to the people that he stood as an opposition candidate for the département of Seine-et-Marne. He did not meet with success. His forte was always writing, and his studied self-presentation as liberal icon allowed him to survive the initial success of *Vie de Jésus*.

Scholars of the historical Jesus today are likely to read *Vie de Jésus* and find themselves unimpressed by Renan's confidence in linguistic determinism, by the ambiguities condensed in his image of Jesus, and by his reliance on anecdote where narrow textual criticism would be far more appropriate. One does not have to be a New Testament scholar, though, to notice how sharply Renan separates Jesus from the Jews. French historian Maurice Olender sees *Vie de Jésus* as “a rescue operation designed to save Jesus from Judaism” (quoted on p. 52). It can come as no surprise to read that Renan's contemporary Jewish critics took exception to his treatment of Judaism, a treatment that was all too common in mid-nineteenth-century France. Of particular interest is Talmudic scholar Israël-Michael Rabbinowicz's communication in 1863–1864 to *Archives* about Renan's book and its reception by French intellectuals. “The French,” he wrote, “are obviously the most enlightened men on earth: the proof is that stories about the water of La Salette, or flying Capuchins, or faces of the Holy Virgin with moving eyes, all find no echo in France” (quoted on p. 145). Touché.

Renan was elected to the Académie Française on June 13, 1878. Was this accolade the triumph of scholarship over mystification? Some thought so, yet Zola was more acute in his assessment of the appointment than they were, urging that one should “distinguish between the Renan of legend and the Renan of reality” (quoted on p. 191). The former is the author of *Vie de Jésus*, who symbolized “science killing faith” and who incarnates “our scientific century,” while the latter is a man who has become “the refuge of religious souls whom dry, bare science disturbs” (quoted on pp. 191–92). These souls were the people of the Third Republic who turned away from the Catholic Church while wishing to forge a *foi laïque*, and for them Renan had provided comfort and encouragement. J.-L. Lemaitre had pointedly observed of Renan, “he seeks to suffocate his victim with a bunch of flowers” (quoted on p. 119), and the freethinkers of the Third Republic tended to remember the flowers more than the suffocation. Three years before Zola spoke, a lapidary judgment had been made in Larousse's *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle*: *Vie de Jésus* is the work “of a freethinker who has done free-thought very few favors” (quoted on p. 196).

Throughout *The Gospel According to Renan*, Robert Priest is scrupulously attentive to his sources, and especially valuable is his research into the regional reception of *Vie de Jésus*. His book makes us able to see, better than before, “an important seam of French culture that wished to accommodate both the nation's Christian heritage and the demands of modern criticism rather than set the two forces in opposition to one another” (p. 5). It also enables us better to understand the pre-history of theological modernism in France. Indeed, Priest reminds us of the importance of *Vie de Jésus* to Alfred Loisy. Priest ends his fine book by applying Renan's words about Jesus to the man who wrote them, “His ideas were fertile because they had two sides” (p. 232). Those ideas stretched into theological modernism, and were folded differently there, to be sure, yet we may nonetheless wonder if their duality does not mark the project of theological modernism in its heart and soul.

NOTES

[1] See Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narrative in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), p. 25.

[2] Ernest Renan, *The Life of Jesus* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1991), p. 199. Also see p. 117.

[3] Renan, *The Life of Jesus*, p. 62.

[4] Renan, *The Life of Jesus*, p. 129.

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