

## Notes on Quest for the Historical Jesus

When, at some future day, our period of civilization shall lie, closed and completed, before the eyes of later generations, German theology will stand out as a great, a unique phenomenon in the mental and spiritual life of our time. For nowhere save in the German temperament can there be found in the same perfection the living complex of conditions and factors—of philosophic thought, critical acumen, historical insight, and religious feeling—without which no deep theology is possible.

And the greatest achievement of German theology is the critical investigation of the life of Jesus. What it has accomplished here has laid down the conditions and determined the course of the religious thinking of the future.

Opening lines of Schweitzer's *Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906)

### Gotthold Lessing (1729-1781)

Wrote the play "Nathan der Weise" (1779).

"Lessing's Ditch" Historical truths which are in doubt cannot be used to prove metaphysical truths (such as God's existence). As Lessing says it: "That, then, is the ugly great ditch which I cannot cross, however often and however earnestly I have tried to make that leap."

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. "On the proof of the spirit and of power." *Lessing: Philosophical and theological writings*, p. 87. H. B. Nisbet (translator and editor). Cambridge University Press, 2005

Published Reimarus's "Fragmente"

"Von dem Zwecke Jesu und seiner Jünger." *Noch ein Fragment des Wolfenbüttelschen Ungenannten. Herausgegeben von Gotthold Ephraim Lessing*. Braunschweig, 1778, 276 pp. (The Aims of Jesus and His Disciples. A further Instalment of the anonymous Wolfenbüttel Fragments. Published by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. Brunswick, 1778.)

### David Friedrich Strauss (1808-1874)

*Das Leben Jesu* 2 vols. (1835/1836) 1480 pp. Age 27.

First edition, 1835 and 1836. 2 vols. 1480 pp. The second edition was unaltered.

Third edition, with alterations, 1838-1839. Fourth edition, agreeing with the first, 1840.

One reviewer called it "the Iscariotism of our days" and another "the most pestilential book ever vomited out of the jaws of hell."

Schweitzer on historical Jesus research: "It falls, immediately, into two periods, that before Strauss and that after Strauss."

Opening lines of Chapter 7: "In order to understand Strauss one must love him. He was not the greatest, and not the deepest, of theologians, but he was the most absolutely sincere. His insight

and his errors were alike the insight and the errors of a prophet. And he had a prophet's fate. Disappointment and suffering gave his life its consecration. It unrolls itself before us like a tragedy, in which, in the end, the gloom is lightened by the mild radiance which shines forth from the nobility of the sufferer."

Opening lines of Chapter 8: "Considered as a literary work, Strauss's first Life of Jesus is one of the most perfect things in the whole range of learned literature. In over fourteen hundred pages he has not a superfluous phrase; his analysis descends to the minutest details, but he does not lose his way among them; the style is simple and picturesque, sometimes ironical, but always dignified and distinguished."

Chapter 8: "They marked out the ground which is now occupied by modern critical study. And they filled in the death-certificates of a whole series of explanations which, at first sight, have all the air of being alive, but are not really so. If these continue to haunt present-day theology, it is only as ghosts, which can be put to flight by simply pronouncing the name of David Friedrich Strauss, and which would long ago have ceased to "walk," if the theologians who regard Strauss's book as obsolete would only take the trouble to read it."

Chapter 9-opening, re: Strauss's Opponents. "Scarcely ever has a book let loose such a storm of controversy; and scarcely ever has a controversy been so barren of immediate result. The fertilizing rain brought up a crop of toad-stools. Of the forty or fifty essays on the subject which appeared in the next five years, there are only four or five which are of any value, and even of these the value is very small."