CAMBRIDGE TEXTS IN THE
HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

LESSING
Philosophical and Theological Writings
The main objective of Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy is to expand the range, variety and quality of texts in the history of philosophy which are available in English. The series includes texts by familiar names (such as Descartes and Kant) and also by less well-known authors. Wherever possible, texts are published in complete and unabridged form, and translations are specially commissioned for the series. Each volume contains a critical introduction together with a guide to further reading and any necessary glossaries and textual apparatus. The volumes are designed for student use at undergraduate and postgraduate level and will be of interest not only to students of philosophy but also to a wider audience of readers in the history of science, the history of theology and the history of ideas.

For a list of titles published in the series, please see end of book.
GOTTHOLD EPHRAIM LESSING

Philosophical and Theological Writings

TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY
H. B. NISBET
Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge

Cambridge University Press
Contents

Acknowledgements page vii
Chronology viii
Further reading xi
Note on texts and translations xiii

Introduction 1

Philosophical and theological writings 23

1 The Christianity of reason (c. 1753) 25
2 On the reality of things outside God (1763) 30
3 Spinoza only put Leibniz on the track of [his theory of] pre-established harmony (1763) 32
4 On the origin of revealed religion (1763 or 1764) 35
5 Leibniz on eternal punishment (1773) 37
6 [Editorial commentary on the ‘Fragments’ of Reimarus, 1777] 61
7 On the proof of the spirit and of power (1777) 83
8 The Testament of St John (1777) 89
9 A rejoinder (1778) 95
10 A parable (1778) 110
11 Axioms (1778) 120
### Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>New hypothesis on the evangelists as merely human historians (1778)</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Necessary answer to a very unnecessary question of Herr Hauptpastor Goeze of Hamburg (1778)</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>The religion of Christ (1780)</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>That more than five senses are possible for human beings (c. 1780)</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Ernst and Falk: dialogues for Freemasons (1778–80)</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>The education of the human race (1777–80)</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>[Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, Recollections of conversations with Lessing in July and August 1780 (1785)]</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Index** 257
Acknowledgements

For permission to quote Michael Hamburger’s translation of Goethe’s poem ‘Prometheus’, I am grateful to John Calder (London) and Suhrkamp/Insel Publishers Boston Inc. I should also like to thank Karl S. Guthke for valuable help in resolving some problems of translation in ‘The Challenge’ (pp. 116–19), and Karl S. Guthke and Nicholas Boyle for many stimulating conversations on Lessing and the Enlightenment.
Chronology

1729  Gotthold Ephraim Lessing born 22 January in Kamenz, Saxony, son of a Lutheran pastor
1741–6  Secondary education at St Afra, Meissen
1746–8  Eclectic studies at Leipzig University (classics, philology, archaeology, theology, medicine); abandons studies after increasing involvement with theatre
1747–50  Early comedies; prolific output of miscellaneous poetry
1748  Begins work as journalist and critic in Berlin
1750–1  Meets Voltaire, and translates his *Shorter Historical Writings* into German (published 1752)
1751–2  Resumes studies in Wittenberg; MA thesis on Juan Huarte and Nicolai
1752–5  Freelance writing in Berlin; friendship with Mendelssohn
1754  Publishes comedy *The Jews*, in favour of Jewish civil rights
1755  Tragedy *Miss Sara Sampson* gains national acclaim
1755–8  Literary activity in Leipzig and journey to Holland; Seven Years War (1756–63) and invasion of Saxony by Frederick the Great involve Lessing in conflict of allegiance between Saxony and Prussia
1758–60  Growing celebrity as critic in Berlin: *Letters on Literature; Fables*; translations of Diderot’s dramas and dramatic theory; life of Sophocles
1760–5  Secretary to Prussian military commandant of Breslau in Silesia
1766  *Laocoön, or on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*
Chronology

1767  *Minna von Barnhelm*, comedy promoting Saxon and Prussian reconciliation, seals Lessing’s reputation as Germany’s leading dramatist

1767–9  Official critic and dramatic theorist at new ‘National Theatre’ in Hamburg, which soon collapses through mismanagement and lack of public support

1768–9  *Antiquarian Letters* and associated conflict with C. A. Klotz

1770  Meeting with J. G. Herder; appointed Librarian to the Duke of Brunswick-Lüneburg at Wolfenbüttel

1771  Engagement to Eva König, widow of a Hamburg merchant; joins Freemasons

1772  Tragedy *Emilia Galotti*, implicitly critical of courtly absolutism; studies of Leibniz

1773  *Leibniz on Eternal Punishment*

1774  Publishes first (relatively innocuous) ‘Fragment’ of Reimarus’s critique of the Bible and Christianity

1775  Journey to Leipzig, Berlin, Dresden, Vienna; audience with Emperor Joseph II and performances of Lessing’s plays in honour of his visit; joins Prince Leopold of Brunswick on a tour of Italy; audience with Pope Pius VI

1776  Audience in Dresden with Elector Frederick Augustus III of Saxony; marries Eva König and returns to Wolfenbüttel

1777  Declines post of Director of Mannheim theatre; publishes five more ‘Fragments’ of Reimarus’s work, together with first half of *The Education of the Human Race*; on 25 December, Eva gives birth to a son, who dies soon afterwards

1778  Eva dies on 10 January; Lessing finds distraction in theological polemics against Goeze and others (*A Rejoinder, Axioms, Anti-Goeze*, etc.); publishes first three dialogues of *Ernst and Falk*; prohibition (July) of further writings on religion without advance approval of Brunswick censorship

1779  Furthers his theological campaign by indirect means through the drama *Nathan the Wise*
Chronology

1780  Publishes complete text of *The Education of the Human Race*; A. F. von Knigge obtains a copy of the last two dialogues of *Ernst and Falk* and publishes them without Lessing’s permission; conversations on Spinoza with Jacobi; Lessing’s health deteriorates rapidly
1781  Dies on 15 February
Further reading

The most comprehensive edition of Lessing’s works is Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Sämtliche Schriften*, edited by Karl Lachmann and Franz Muncker, 23 vols. (Stuttgart, 1886–1924). The new edition of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Werke und Briefe*, edited by Wilfried Barner and others, 12 vols. (Frankfurt-on-Main, 1985–2003), is particularly useful for its detailed commentaries and notes, which I have found most helpful in compiling this volume; it also contains the most complete collection of Lessing’s surviving correspondence.


Further reading


Note on texts and translations

The texts in this volume include works which Lessing himself published (nos. 5–11, 13, 16, and 17), fragmentary works published after his death (nos. 1–4, 12, 14, and 15), and the recollections of Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi of conversations with Lessing in 1780 (no. 18). Their sequence is chronological – by date of completed publication in the case of works published by Lessing or Jacobi, and by approximate date of composition in the case of posthumous works. Thematically, the texts fall into four distinct groups: early fragments on the philosophy of religion, informed by studies of Leibniz, Wolff, and Spinoza (nos. 1–4), an essay on Leibniz based on intensive engagement with that philosopher in the early 1770s (no. 5), works associated with Lessing’s publication, in 1777, of ‘Fragments’ from Hermann Samuel Reimarus’s radical critique of the Bible and with the ensuing theological controversy (nos. 6–14), and a group of late works and conversations on speculative philosophy, the last of which (the conversations on Spinoza) generated a further controversy after Lessing’s death (nos. 15–18).

All of the texts by Lessing are translated from what is still the most comprehensive edition of his writings, the Sämtliche Schriften, edited by Karl Lachmann and Franz Muncker (referred to as LM), 23 vols. (Stuttgart, 1886–1924). Locations of the German originals, by volume and page numbers in LM, are as follows: 1 (xiv, 175–8); 2 (xiv, 292–3); 3 (xiv, 294–6); 4 (xiv, 312–13); 5 (xi, 461–87); 6 (xii, 303–4 and 428–50); 7 (xiii, 1–8); 8 (xiii, 9–17); 9 (xiii, 19–35); 10 (xiii, 91–103); 11 (xiii, 105–37); 12 (xvi, 370–91); 13 (xiii, 329–6); 14 (xvi, 518–19); 15 (xvi, 522–5); 16 (xiii, 339–68 and 389–411); 17 (xiii, 413–36). Jacobi’s recollections (no. 18) are translated from the critical edition of his Über die Lehre des Spinoza,
Note on texts and translations


All but two of the texts are complete in themselves. The two exceptions are Jacobi’s recollections, which form a self-contained section in the larger work referred to above, and no. 9 (A Rejoinder), which includes only Lessing’s general, introductory section on Scriptural exegesis and omits the second, more detailed section in which he refutes the attempts of his adversary, Johann Heinrich Ress, to harmonise or explain away the ten contradictions identified by Reimarus in the gospel narratives of Christ’s resurrection.

The complete text of Reimarus’s ‘Fragments’, as published by Lessing, can be found in LM xii, 304–428 and xiii, 221–327; the final, integral version of Reimarus’s work was not published until nearly two centuries later, as Apologie oder Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes, edited by Gerhard Alexander (Frankfurt-on-Main, 1972). Relevant writings by Lessing’s adversaries can be found in the new edition of Lessing’s works, namely Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Werke und Briefe, edited by Wilfried Barner and others (referred to as B), 12 vols. (Frankfurt-on-Main, 1985–2003). Their location, by volume and page numbers in B, are as follows: viii, 355–435 (Johann Daniel Schumann); viii, 475–503 (Johann Heinrich Ress); ix, 11–37, 117–45, 163–84, 357–94, 447–69 (Johann Melchior Goeze); where appropriate, references to these works will be supplied in the footnotes to Lessing’s texts.

Although most of Lessing’s works on philosophical and theological topics are included in this volume, three important texts are for good reason omitted. The first is Laocoön, his famous treatise on aesthetics, which has already appeared in Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics, edited by J. M. Bernstein (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 25–129, in the same series as the present volume; its subject-matter is in any case quite distinct from that of the texts included here. The second is the drama Nathan the Wise of 1779, whose reflections on religion (especially the famous parable of the three rings in Act III) enlarge, in poetic form, on Lessing’s scepticism concerning historical proofs of religious truth and on his belief in the primacy of the ethical, both of which are conspicuous in several texts in the present collection; this lengthy drama would plainly be out of place in a series devoted to works of a theoretical and discursive character. The
third major omission is his Anti-Goeze, a series of eleven polemical pamphlets published between April and July 1778 (just after the Axioms and immediately before the Necessary Answer) and directed at Lessing’s principal adversary in the controversy over Reimarus’s ‘Fragments’; although this work is, in literary terms, a masterpiece of polemical writing, its main purpose is to ridicule Goeze rather than to add substantively to the theological points expounded more clearly and dispassionately in the Axioms and other related works included here.

English translations of some of the works by Lessing in this volume have appeared in the past, but none of them are now in print. The most complete collection, Lessing’s Theological Writings, edited and translated by Henry Chadwick (London, 1956), contains just over a quarter of the material included here (nos. 1, 2, 4, 7, 8, 12, 13, 14, and 17); while I have found some of Chadwick’s renderings helpful, I have also been able to correct a number of errors and omissions in his text. Several translations of The Education of the Human Race appeared between 1806 and 1908, but all are inferior to Chadwick’s version. Part of A Parable and most of the Axioms, together with the Anti-Goeze, were published under the title Cambridge Free Thoughts and Letters on Bibliolatry, translated from the German of G. E. Lessing by H. Bernard (London, 1862), and a translation of the Masonic Dialogues by A. Cohen was published in London in 1927. All of these translations are antiquated or in other respects unsatisfactory. Two modern translations of Jacobi’s conversations with Lessing are available, by Gérard Vallée and collaborators and by George di Giovanni respectively (see Further Reading above for details). I consulted these after translating the piece myself, but saw no need to alter my own version. To the best of my knowledge, the remaining texts in this volume have not previously appeared in English.

Except where otherwise stated, translations from languages other than German are my own. Where any ambiguity is possible in my English renderings of German terms, the original German term is supplied in brackets after the translation. Square brackets are used throughout to enclose editorial interpolations. Editorial footnotes are keyed by numbers, author’s footnotes by letters of the alphabet.