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CAMBRIDGE TEXTS IN THE  
HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY



LESSING  
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GOTTHOLD EPHRAIM LESSING

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*Philosophical and  
Theological Writings*

TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY

H. B. NISBET

*Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge*



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## 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
- 1752–5 Freelance writing in Berlin; friendship with Mendelssohn and Nicolai
- 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*

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- 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*

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- 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.

There is no full and up-to-date biographical study of Lessing in English. H. B. Garland, *Lessing: The Founder of Modern German Literature* (Cambridge, 1937; revised edition, London and New York, 1962, reprinted Folcroft, PA, 1973), and F. Andrew Brown, *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing* (New York, 1971), contain useful basic information. The best general introduction currently available in English, with essays on most aspects of Lessing's life and works, is *A Companion to the Works of Lessing*, edited by Barbara Fischer and Thomas C. Fox (Rochester, NY and Woodbridge, 2005); a more detailed equivalent in German is Monika Fick's *Lessing-Handbuch. Leben – Werk – Wirkung* (Stuttgart and Weimar, 2000).

The best analysis in English of Lessing's philosophical and religious thought, with particular emphasis on the influence of Leibniz, is Henry E. Allison, *Lessing and the Enlightenment: His Philosophy of Religion and its Relation to Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Ann Arbor, 1966). Leonard P. Wessell, *Lessing's Theology: A Reinterpretation* (The Hague and Paris, 1977), offers an alternative reading of the theological writings; but Georges Pons, *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing et le Christianisme* (Paris, 1964), remains

*Further reading*

by far the most comprehensive study of Lessing's religious thought as a whole. Klaus Epstein, *The Genesis of German Conservatism* (Princeton, 1966) contains a judicious account of Lessing's conflict with Goeze. Lessing's relationship with Moses Mendelssohn is well documented in Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (University of Alabama Press, 1973).

The reception of Spinoza in Germany is extensively covered in David Bell, *Spinoza in Germany from 1670 to the Age of Goethe* (London, 1984), and his influence on the radical thought of the early Enlightenment is explored at length by Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* (Oxford, 2001). The pantheism controversy initiated by Jacobi's publication of his conversations with Lessing is fully documented in *The Spinoza Conversations between Lessing and Jacobi: Text with Excerpts from the Ensuing Controversy*, introduced by Gérard Vallée and translated by Gérard Vallée, J. B. Lawson, and C. G. Chapple (Lanham, NY and London, 1988), with a long and useful introduction. English translations of further works by Jacobi, again with a useful introduction, are available in Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel 'Allmill'*, edited and translated by George di Giovanni (Montreal and Kingston, 1994). A short account of the Spinoza controversy can also be found in Frederick C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, MA and London, 1987).

Theories of metempsychosis, palingenesis, reincarnation, and the transmigration of souls in later eighteenth-century Germany are discussed in detail in Lieselotte E. Kurth-Voigt, *Continued Existence, Reincarnation, and the Power of Sympathy in Classical Weimar* (Rochester, NY and Woodbridge, 1999). The Masonic background to Lessing's dialogues *Ernst and Falk* can be followed up in J. M. Roberts, *The Mythology of the Secret Societies* (London, 1972) and Margaret C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans* (London, 1981). I have not dealt in this volume with Lessing's ethical thought, since most of his relevant writings deal neither with philosophy nor religion but with the theory of tragedy; it is, however, examined in detail in H. B. Nisbet, 'Lessing's Ethics', *Lessing Yearbook*, 25 (1993), 1–40.

## 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*

in *Briefen an Herrn Moses Mendelssohn* [*On the Doctrine of Spinoza, in Letters to Mr Moses Mendelssohn*] (Breslau, 1785) in *Die Hauptschriften zum Pantheismusstreit zwischen Jacobi und Mendelssohn*, edited by Heinrich Scholz (Berlin, 1916), pp. 74–103.

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

*Note on texts and translations*

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 Reimar'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.