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David Friedrich Strauss

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The German theologian David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1874) first published his highly controversial *The Life of Jesus* in three volumes between 1835 and 1836. This translation by George Eliot is based on the fourth German edition (1840). Strauss applied strict historical method to the gospel narratives and caused scandal across the Protestant world by concluding that all miraculous elements were mythical and ahistorical. Strauss introduces Volume 1 with a survey of ‘de-mythology’ in Western thought. He applies modern historical and scientific criticism to the annunciation and birth narratives; the Davidic descent and genealogies of Jesus; Jesus’ visit to the temple; Jesus’ baptism and temptation and his relationship with John the Baptist. The volume ends with a chapter on chronology and locality in the life of Jesus. This is a key text of nineteenth-century theology that pioneered the application of historical and scientific methods to the study of religious texts.

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The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined

VOLUME 1

DAVID FRIEDRICH STRAUSS



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THE

LIFE OF JESUS,

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BY

DR. DAVID FRIEDRICH STRAUSS.

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IN THREE VOLUMES.

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CERTIOR factus ex Britannia, librum meum, quem de vita Jesu XI abhinc annis composui, virorum ejusmodi studiis faventium cura in linguam Britannicam translatum, brevi illic in publicum proditurum esse, lætitia anxietate temperata commoveor.

Nam ut gratulari sibi æquum est auctorem, cujus operi contigit, patriæ terræ ac linguæ fines transgredi, ita sollicitudo eundem subeat necesse est, ne, qui domi placuit liber, foris displiceat, aut cujus inter populares vel adversariorum numero creverat auctoritas, apud exteros neglectus in obscuro maneat. Solum enim cœlumque vix minore libri quam plantæ periculo mutant. Et facilius quidem transtuleris opera in illis rebus versantia, de quibus inter diversas gentes communis quidam aut certe parum discrepans sensus obtinet: ut, quæ poetæ aut disciplinarum quas exactas dicunt periti proferunt, inter politiores hujus seculi nationes fere solent esse communia. Neque tamen vel hoc in librorum genere plane æquum Germano cum Britannis aut Gallis certamen. Peregrina enim cum facilius nostra quam illorum et lingua et indoles recipiat, longe frequentius poetæ quoque illorum in nostram quam nostri in illorum linguas transferuntur. At Germanicum opus in theologiæ et philosophiæ quasi confinio versans, si trajicere in Britanniam parat,

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ne illa quidem inter utramque gentem sensus et studiorum communione adjuvatur. Tam diversa enim utrimque via istæ disciplinæ processerunt, ut in theologia impii, in philosophia superstitionis Britannis Germani iidem videamur. Cum iis, qui in Britannia ausi sunt, historias, Judæorum et Christianorum religione sacras, examini ut ajunt critico subicere, nihil agendum esset, nisi ut Lockii sui atque Humii principia philosophica, sicut ad reliquas omnes historias, ita ad illas etiam, quas legibus istis hucusque superstitioni subtraxerat, adhiberent: in Germania ad hoc monstri res degeneraverat, ut superstitioni a theologorum potissima parte derelictæ philosophia succurreret, critico ergo non simplex sanæ philosophiæ contra theologorum superstitionem, sed duplex et contra philosophorum ex sanioribus principiis deductas ineptas conclusiones, et contra theologorum propter philosophica ista auxilia ornamentaque inflatam atque induratum superstitionem, certamen ineundum esset. Ex hoc rei statu proprie Germanico natum opus meum, nominibus insuper atque opinionibus theologorum ac philosophorum nostratum refertum, nec scholarum etiam vocabula, quibus nostræ tantum aures assuevere, satis evitans, a Britanorum usu ingenioque non posse non abhorre, tam probe scio, ut de translato in eorum linguam, licet interpretatio, quantum quidem ejus inspicere potuerim, et accurata et perspicua sit et librum, quantum in ipsa est, popularibus commendet, num gaudendum mihi magnopere sit, mehercule nesciam.

Accedit, quod a primo libri mei ortu duo lustra, et a recentissima etiam editione unum jam lustrum intercessit. Ut tum, quum opus inchoabam, via incedebam, quam pauci ingressi, totam emensus nemo erat, ita per primum illud lustrum nullæ fere nisi adversariorum voces audiebantur, principia mea negantium et historiam in Evangeliiis vel meram, vel levissima

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tantum erroris rumorisve adpersione tinctam contineri affirmantium, cum quibus non modo non disputandum, sed a quibus ne discendum quidem quidquam erat, quod ad rem et ad librum vere emendandum pertineret. Proximo demum lustro viri vestigia mea non refugientes neque evitantes, sed persequentes, ubi ego substiteram longius progressi, rem revera juverunt atque promoverunt. Narrationes in Evangeliiis traditas, quas rerum vere gestarum esse persuadere mihi non potueram, mythorum in modum, qui inter antiquas gentes inveniuntur, aut in ore populi a minutis initiis coaluisse et eundo crevisse, aut a singulis, sed qui vere ita evenisse superstitione in animum induxerant, fictas esse existimaveram. Quod ut sufficit explicandis plerisque eorum, quæ dubitationem moventia tribus prioribus Evangeliiis continentur: ita quarti Evangelii auctorem ad tuendas et illustrandas sententias suas haud raro meras fabulas scientem confinxisse, a Baurio, theologo Tubingensi doctissimo, nuper ita demonstratum est, ut critici me iudicii rigori religiosius quam verius temperasse intelligam. Dumque prima a Christo secula accuratius perscrutantur, partes partiumque certamina, quibus nova ecclesia commovebatur, in apicum proferunt, narrationum haud paucarum, quas fabulas esse ego bene quidem perspexeram, sed unde ortæ essent demonstrare non valueram, veram in illis primæ ecclesiæ motibus originem detegere theologis Tubingensibus contigit.

Imperfectum igitur opus meum, ut solent rerum initia, non ob hoc tamen, quod sententiæ deest, timerem, ne a Britannis sperneretur, nisi formæ etiam illud quod supra dixi peregrinum atque inusitatum accederet. Qui si suum Hennellium non audiverunt, de iisdem rebus cum Britannis Britannice agentem, quomodo audient, si quis Germanus surget, cujus liber cum sua lingua non potuerit cogitandi quoque disputandique morem

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prorsus Germanicum exuere? Sed absit omen verbis meis,
atque ut pridem in Germania, ita mox in Britannia jaceat liber
hic εἰς πτώσιν καὶ ἀνάστασιν πολλῶν καὶ εἰς σημεῖον ἀντιλεγόμενον
ὅπως ἂν ἀποκαλυφθῶσιν ἐκ πολλῶν καρδῶν διαλογισμοί.

STRAUSS.

Scribendam Heilbronnæ,
Med. mens. April. a. 1846.

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P R E F A C E

TO THE FIRST GERMAN EDITION.

It appeared to the author of the work, the first half of which is herewith submitted to the public, that it was time to substitute a new mode of considering the life of Jesus, in the place of the antiquated systems of supranaturalism and naturalism. This application of the term antiquated will in the present day be more readily admitted in relation to the latter system than to the former. For while the interest excited by the explanations of the miracles and the conjectural facts of the rationalists has long ago cooled, the commentaries now most read are those which aim to adapt the supranatural interpretation of the sacred history to modern taste. Nevertheless, in point of fact, the orthodox view of this history became superannuated earlier than the rationalistic, since it was only because the former had ceased to satisfy an advanced state of culture, that the latter was developed, while the recent attempts to recover, by the aid of a mystical philosophy, the supranatural point of view held by our forefathers, betray themselves, by the exaggerating spirit in which they are conceived, to be final, desperate efforts to render the past present, the inconceivable conceivable.

The new point of view, which must take the place of the above, is the mythical. This theory is not brought to bear on the evangelical history for the first time in the present work: it has long been applied to particular parts of that history, and is here only extended to its entire tenor. It is not by any means meant that the whole history of Jesus is to be represented as mythical, but only that every part of it is to be subjected to a critical examination, to ascertain whether it have not some ad-

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mixture of the mythical. The exegesis of the ancient church set out from the double presupposition: first, that the gospels contained a history, and secondly, that this history was a supernatural one. Rationalism rejected the latter of these presuppositions, but only to cling the more tenaciously to the former, maintaining that these books present unadulterated, though only natural, history. Science cannot rest satisfied with this half-measure: the other presupposition also must be relinquished, and the inquiry must first be made whether in fact, and to what extent, the ground on which we stand in the gospels is historical. This is the natural course of things, and thus far the appearance of a work like the present is not only justifiable, but even necessary.

It is certainly not therefore evident that the author is precisely the individual whose vocation it is to appear in this position. He has a very vivid consciousness that many others would have been able to execute such a work with incomparably superior erudition. Yet on the other hand he believes himself to be at least possessed of one qualification which especially fitted him to undertake this task. The majority of the most learned and acute theologians of the present day fail in the main requirement for such a work, a requirement without which no amount of learning will suffice to achieve anything in the domain of criticism, namely, the internal liberation of the feelings and intellect from certain religious and dogmatical presuppositions; and this the author early attained by means of philosophical studies. If theologians regard this absence of presupposition from his work, as unchristian: he regards the believing presuppositions of theirs as unscientific. Widely as in this respect the tone of the present work may be contrasted with the edifying devoutness and enthusiastic mysticism of recent books on similar subjects; still it will nowhere depart from the seriousness of science, or sink into frivolity; and it seems a just demand in return, that the judgments which are passed upon it should also confine themselves to the domain of science, and keep aloof from bigotry and fanaticism.

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PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION.

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The author is aware that the essence of the Christian faith is perfectly independent of his criticism. The supernatural birth of Christ, his miracles, his resurrection and ascension, remain eternal truths, whatever doubts may be cast on their reality as historical facts. The certainty of this can alone give calmness and dignity to our criticism, and distinguish it from the naturalistic criticism of the last century, the design of which was, with the historical fact, to subvert also the religious truth, and which thus necessarily became frivolous. A dissertation at the close of the work will show that the dogmatic significance of the life of Jesus remains inviolate: in the mean time let the calmness and insensibility with which, in the course of it, criticism undertakes apparently dangerous operations, be explained solely by the security of the author's conviction that no injury is threatened to the Christian faith. Investigations of this kind may, however, inflict a wound on the faith of individuals. Should this be the case with theologians, they have in their science the means of healing such wounds, from which, if they would not remain behind the development of their age, they cannot possibly be exempt. For the laity the subject is certainly not adequately prepared; and for this reason the present work is so framed, that at least the unlearned among them will quickly and often perceive that the book is not destined for them. If from curiosity or excessive zeal against heresy they persist in their perusal, they will then have, as Schleiermacher says on a similar occasion, to bear the punishment in their conscience, since their feelings directly urge on them the conviction that they understand not that of which they are ambitious to speak.

A new opinion, which aims to fill the place of an older one, ought fully to adjust its position with respect to the latter. Hence the way to the mythical view is here taken in each particular point through the supranaturalistic and rationalistic opinions and their respective refutations; but, as becomes a valid refutation, with an acknowledgment of what is true in the opinions combated, and an adoption of this truth into the new

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theory. This method also brings with it the extrinsic advantage, that the work may now serve as a repertory of the principal opinions and treatises concerning all parts of the evangelical history. The author has not, however, aimed to give a complete bibliographical view of this department of theological literature, but, where it was possible, has adhered to the chief works in each separate class of opinions. For the rationalistic system the works of Paulus remain classical, and are therefore pre-eminently referred to; for the orthodox opinions, the commentary of Olshausen is especially important, as the most recent and approved attempt to render the supranatural interpretation philosophical and modern; while as a preliminary to a critical investigation of the life of Jesus, the commentaries of Fritzsche are excellently adapted, since they exhibit, together with uncommon philological learning, that freedom from prejudice and scientific indifference to results and consequences, which form the first condition of progress in this region of inquiry.

The second volume, which will open with a detailed examination of the miracles of Jesus, and which will conclude the whole work, is already prepared and will be in the press immediately on the completion of the first.

THE AUTHOR.

Tübingen, 24th May, 1835.

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PREFACE

TO THE FOURTH GERMAN EDITION.

As this new edition of my critical examination of the life of Jesus appears simultaneously with the first volume of my *Dogmatik*, it will not be expected to contain any essential alterations. Indeed, even in the absence of other labours, I should scarcely have been inclined to undertake such on the present occasion. The critical researches prompted by the appearance of my work have, after the stormy reaction of the first few years, at length entered on that quiet course, which promises the most valuable assistance towards the confirmation and more precise determination of the negative results at which I have arrived. But these fruits still require some years for their maturing; and it must therefore be deferred to a future opportunity to enrich this work by the use of them. I could not persuade myself to do so, at least in the present instance, by prosecuting a polemic against opposite opinions. Already in the last edition there was more of a polemical character than accorded with the unity and calmness proper to such a work; hence I was in this respect admonished rather to abridge than to amplify. But that edition also contained too much of compliance. The intermingling voices of opponents, critics, and fellow-labourers, to which I held it a duty attentively to listen, had confused the idea of the work in my mind; in the diligent comparison of divergent opinions I had lost sight of the subject itself. Hence on coming with a more collected mind to this last revision, I found alterations at which I could not but wonder, and by which I had evidently done myself injustice. In all these

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PREFACE TO THE FOURTH EDITION.

passages the earlier readings are now restored, and thus my labour in this new edition has chiefly consisted in whetting, as it were, my good sword, to free it from the notches made in it rather by my own grinding, than by the blows of my enemies.

THE AUTHOR.

Stuttgard, 17th October, 1840.

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