

## Cefalo on Priest (2015)

Priest, Robert D. *The Gospel According to Renan: Reading, Writing, and Religion in Nineteenth-Century France*. Oxford UP, 2015, pp. 304, 7 b&w illustrations, ISBN 978-0-19-872875-7

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Robert D. Priest's *The Gospel of Renan: Reading, Writing, and Religion in Nineteenth-Century France* tells the story of Ernest Renan's *Vie de Jésus*, the controversial first volume of the *Histoire des origines du christianisme*, from its genesis to its reception and beyond. Part history, part "divination," Renan's *Vie de Jésus* aimed to expose new truths in the story of Christianity's founder. Seeking to separate the myth from the man, Renan depicts a very human, somewhat romantic messiah framed in an idyllic pastoral setting. His descriptions of the holy land in ancient times are colored by personal impressions formed during his own travels in Galilee.

The publication of *Vie de Jésus* in 1863 transformed the author-professor into a celebrity of Second Empire society. Vilified by the far right and practically deified on the left, Ernest Renan was a larger than life figure whose most famous work is often left out of nineteenth-century French studies. *The Gospel According to Renan* recaptures the importance of Renan's work, life, and legacy in nineteenth-century scholarship. Priest notes that his book differs from previous studies of *Vie de Jésus* in that it is a "holistic examination" of its persistent role in French conversations on the Bible, secularism, and the place of religion in society well into the Belle Époque. Reactions to Renan's often fantastical approach to Christian history touched on more than just religious issues. The book sparked debate on gender roles, politics, racism, and acceptable approaches to the science of history. Priest's research helps decode *Vie de Jésus* by highlighting terms, phrases, and intertextual references familiar to the nineteenth-century public. Priest furthermore explains the roots of Renan's work, linking his text to important influences such as Heinrich Ewald and Johann Strauss and comparing and contrasting his historical approaches to other giants of the time like Edgar Quinet and Jules Michelet.

One of the great pleasures of Priest's approach is that he introduces us to a Renan we have not yet met in previous studies of the historian. This portrait is perhaps even more intimate than Renan's own autobiography in that it offers a well-documented window onto the intersection of Renan's personal and professional personae. Priest digs deep into *Vie de Jésus*, unafraid of broaching the complicated and sometimes unpleasant details therein, such as Renan's backward views on race and culture. His choice of a chronological and thematic organization of the chapters also guides the reader through his examination of letters and journals written by Renan and his contemporaries. Best of all, while the book is an engaging and even enjoyable read, Priest is careful to ground his assertions in fact, avoiding the biographical fantasy for which Renan's own historical writings were often criticized.

A study of the proliferation of pamphlets, reviews, and articles in response to *Vie de Jésus*, proves just how relevant Renan was in his time. From George Sand and Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve to religious philosophers and clergy of various denominations, the chapter on "The Debate" follows a paper trail that details the extent to which Renan became a rallying point for all those interested in establishing the place of religion in the Second Empire. The highlight of this section is an analysis of satirical pamphlets by Louis Veuillot and Henri Lasserre. Priest excerpts some eye-opening passages from the pamphlets that serve as memorable illustrations of the most colorful opposing views of the time. He compliments the critical debate with reader responses in chapter five, "The Audience," which uncovers the details of an often overlooked but important historical point in literary scholarship—the reactions of everyday readers. Priest's approach reveals more than just statistics. We have the pleasure of peeking into letters sent to Renan by a variety of fans and critics. Through their correspondence, a more intimate picture of nineteenth-century French culture comes together in the absence of the typically overbearing voices of professional critics and clergymen. The focus on responses from women such as the mysterious "Inconnue" and Cornélie Delort offers a chance to understand points of view generally absent from public forums.

The book closes with a look at the impact of *Vie de Jésus* in the decades that followed its publication and, moreover, the transformation of Ernest Renan into a secular icon. Priest recounts the unveiling of a Renan statue in the Breton town of Tréguier as an example of Renan's problematic Republican "canonization." This final chapter follows Renan's shadow on French social politics past his death in 1892 into the Dreyfus Affair and the dawning of a secular Third Republic. In the end, the reader is left to question Renan's conflicting popular identities both as a race theorist and an "apostle of tolerance."

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