Ernest Renan's Jesus: an appraisal

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ABSTRACT

The present day image of Renan's Jesus among some scholars seems to be very much mediated by Albert Schweitzer in his Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung, with the result that Renan's Jesus is often regarded today as merely romantic or sentimental, and often even ignored in historical Jesus studies. In this paper Renan's Jesus is evaluated anew. Special emphasis is laid on the internal development which Renan distinguishes in Jesus, the importance of historical geography in his work and his work as sound historiography which often precedes present day historical Jesus studies.

1 BIOGRAPHICAL REMARKS

Born in Tréguier, Brittany in 1823 and having passed away in Paris 1892, the 69 years of Ernest Renan's life saw him as a much published scholar of wide interest. His publications include a seven volume work on the history of early Christianity (of which his Life of Jesus1 constitutes the first volume) as well as a five volume work on the history of Israel—a pre-Gablerian scholar in the true sense of the word!2 Moreover he also published fiction and philosophy.

He attended various Catholic seminaries but abandoned his initial aspiration to the priesthood, as well as the Catholic faith, in 1845 at the age of 22, thereafter rejecting the claims of orthodox religion for the rest of his life. According to Schweitzer (1984:207, followed by another German, Strecker 1961:1063) Renan became sceptical after his study of German critical theology (as if a Frenchman would not be able to handle it!).3 However, it should be clearly distinguished whether Renan became sceptical after his study of German critical theology (as if a Frenchman would not be able to handle it!).4

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1 Original title: La vie de Jésus, published by Michel Lévy Frères in Paris, 1863. For better communication of this paper in a largely English speaking environment, quotations in this paper are made from the 1935 English translation, originally published by Watts & Co and republished by Prometheus Books in 1991.

2 What is referred to here is Gabler's attempt in 1787 to distinguish the interpretation of the Old and New Testament apart from dogmatics and the other theological subjects, which led to Old and New Testament as separate disciplines. Although Renan wrote about a century later he was in a sense 'pre-Gablerian' (cf Brueggemann 1997:13). Today Gabler's distinction is questioned more and more (see eg Scheffler 1994:154).

3 I fully realise that Schweitzer, who came from Alsace (which only became part of Germany at the time of his birth and was returned to France after 1918) could not be regarded as 'German' in the traditional sense of the word. Schweitzer was fluent and also published in French, and was especially grieved by the French-German conflict of the first World War.
tical in the sense of becoming an atheist or whether his scepticism primarily concerned orthodoxy. The reason for his stance (and not becoming a Protestant) can be deduced from a remark in his book on Jesus (1991:171). According to him the reformer is

essentially "biblical", taking the unchangeable text for his basis in criticising the current theology... Jesus applied the axe to the root of the tree much more energetically... he dwelt little on exegesis—it was the conscience to which he appealed. With one stroke he cut through text and commentaries. He showed indeed to the Pharisees that they seriously perverted Mosaism by their traditions, but he by no means pretended himself to return to Mosaism.

Renan's Life of Jesus was published in 1863 and sold more than 60 000 copies in one year (8 reprints in three months). It attracted so much attention that in a certain sense it obscured his other (according Schweitzer, more) important work. It elicited a vast body of anti-Renan literature⁴ which at that stage was mostly concerned with his consequent-historical view on Jesus's human nature, miracles and resurrection. Renan's greatest sin seems to be his popularisation of historical criticism and finding great interest among the public—a phenomenon not unfamiliar in South Africa.⁵ For this he had to pay by being dismissed from his Professorship of Semitic languages at the Collège de France which he had just obtained in 1862. He was reinstated in 1871 and became administrator of the Collège and member of the French Academy.⁶

Renan's so-called scepticism should be kept in mind when his book on Jesus is read and when criticism which brands the book as merely sentimental and romantic⁷ is evaluated.

2 SCHWEITZERIAN (MIS)UNDERSTANDING

Renan's Life of Jesus has its closest counterpart in that of David Friedrich Strauss⁸ and was published after the latter. As such it was part of the first quest of investigation because of his background. However, he was of German theological tradition. His major theological works were published in German and with the exception of Renan, his Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung deals mainly with German speaking theologians. In his treatment of Renan, Schweitzer clearly contrasts Renan's work with what to his mind is sound 'kritische Theologie' (see below).

⁴ Schweitzer (1984:635–639) lists 85 titles (mostly French) which appeared within a few years after the publication of Renan's book.
⁵ The work of Johannes du Plessis in the thirties and Ferdinand Deist in the seventies comes to mind. Both were accused by the Dutch Reformed Church.
⁷ As, for instance, Du Toit (1980), followed by Du Plessis (1985). It is noteworthy that although Schweitzer regarded Renan's work as sentimental, he never used the word 'romantisch', only 'romanhaft' (cf Schweitzer 1984:207–218).
⁸ Strauss's Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet was published in two volumes in 1835 and 1836.
into the historical Jesus which was so reputedly summarised and evaluated by the great Albert Schweitzer ([1906] 1984). It must be noted that the work of Schweitzer is in a certain sense a pity, because his conclusions are so readily accepted as valid by New Testament scholars, even today. It is as if historical Jesus scholars are subconsciously or secretly glad that Schweitzer did his work, because it rids them of the responsibility to read Renan (and the others) for themselves. Schweitzer, luckily, finished Renan off as a mere romantic (a word Schweitzer never used), merely one of those who found in Jesus his own image. Now our 'objective' research into the life of Jesus can continue.9

With such an attitude even Schweitzer is misunderstood or only half understood. His profound insight that all sketches of Jesus's life would reflect the world-view of the historian involved, is but one corroboration of the general rule which philosophers of history have communicated to historians all along, namely that the 'wie es eigentlich gewesen ist' of Ranke is something worth striving for, but never attainable. This is true of history writing as such: it is only a relative enterprise, an interpretation. If the consequence of Schweitzer's insight implied the abandonment of historical Jesus research, it would also have implied the abandonment of Schweitzer's own

9 The main aim of this paper is not to prove that Schweitzer unduly influenced subsequent scholarship, but to argue that Renan's work represents essentially a sound contribution to historical Jesus studies and that he is often unduly overlooked in present day Jesus studies. The reason for this may very well be Schweitzer's depiction of Renan's work as an unsound and 'sentimental' contribution. Merely the terms 'first quest' or 'second quest' give the impression that scholars working in those periods are 'categorised' and then subsequently overlooked. This is, for example, the impression one gets from Du Toit's (1980:258) discussion of Renan as part of the first stage of the critical quest for Jesus, where Schweitzer is referred to and Renan's Jesus is disposed of as 'romantic'. Du Toit's remark that Renan's Jesus is a 'sage, idilliese droombeeld van wie daar oneindige bekoring uitgaan, en wat in Galilea werk waar elke stroompie kabbel en die berge mooier as elders is', is to my mind totally one sided and does not even hold water for the full range of Renan's presentation of Jesus' Galilean activity. It denies the internal development in Jesus as I show below. Also, Pelikan (1985) regards Renan's Jesus (together with that of Schleiermacher's) as part of the 'romantic reaction to the Enlightenment' (1985:201). He also calls it aesthetic, and Renan's Jesus 'the Poet of the Spirit' (1985:199). However, prima facie, one does not know whether Pelikan's view is mediated by that of Schweitzer. Interesting is Crossan's (1991:225, 265, 354) three extensive quotations of Renan. Because these quotations are made at the beginning to various chapters in his book, it is not always clear whether he approves of Renan or not. Interestingly enough the first quotation which emphasises Jesus' 'poetic' ministry in Galilee is directly followed by a contrasting quotation from Schweitzer's book describing Jesus as 'an authoritative ruler', the 'One unknown' that 'commands' (cf Crossan 1991:225). However, Crossan's second quotation (1991:265) seems to be used to support his view of Jesus' kingdom as a 'kingdom of nobodies' (1991:266) and seems to reveal (together with his third quotation) that Crossan had read Renan in his own right. As for other Jesus scholars, Renan is often ignored (e.g Bornkamm [1956] 1975; Keck 1971; Vermes 1973; Wilson 1984; Sanders 1985; Davies 1995; Van Aarde 1998). Whether this state of affairs can be attributed to Schweitzer's verdict on Renan is an open question.
research and of all subsequent research into Jesus, indeed the abandonment of all historical research.

Much can be learnt from historical reconstructions of the past, but they are selective and relative, never absolute and final, and always open to question. The same holds true for Schweitzer's image of Renan's work.

Schweitzer's evaluation of Renan's Jesus strikes one as outspoken, sarcastic, ad hominem, contradictory and often without sufficient substantiation. According to him the book marks 'ein Ereignis in der Weltliteratur', because (he continues sarcastically, 1984:208) 'die Welt war ergriffen und glaubte Jesum zu schauen, weil sie mit Renan blauen Himmel, wogendes Saatenmeer, ferne Berge und leuchtende Lilien um den See Genezareth sah und mit ihm im rauschenden Schilf die ewige Melodie der Bergpredigt vernahm.' (Words of Schweitzer, not Renan.)

What Renan regarded as a legitimate historical geographical enterprise, in the words of the founders of the (French) Ecole Biblique, 'to study history where it occurred', Schweitzer wrote off as 'gekünstelten Naturempfinden' full 'von der grauenhaftesten Art von Geschmacklosigkeiten, “christliche Kunst” im schlechtesten Sinne des Wortes, Wachsfigurenkunst' (1984:208). Nevertheless he regarded it as ‘ein Wunderwerk’, which wounds and attracts, which will never be surpassed because it was born ‘als Kind der Begeisterung’ (1984:209).


The play has 'ein Vorspiel': Jesus' encounter with John the Baptist. Jesus visited the Baptist in the desert and became part of his following, but this actually suppressed his creativity. Ironically the Baptist's death was an advantage, because with his return to Galilee Jesus came into his own. From the Baptist he learned to influence the masses.

The first act comprises Jesus' initial Galilean ministry, pastoral, in harmony with nature, and full of love, beauty, festivity and adoration by women. This was the time of the sermon on the mount between the lilies of the field. He charmed people and had a happy and great following.

The second act of Renan's play (according to Schweitzer) also takes place in Galilee, but after Jesus had attended the Passover in Jerusalem. His Jerusalem experience is a disillusionment. There people are not enchanted by him. He is confronted by the injustices of the religious establishment and becomes an apocalyptic revolutionary. From now on he exists in the tension between his Galilean ethical idealism and his expectation of God's direct intervention into the world. He loses his innocence and joy. In order to gain credibility he has to conform to public demand and become a miracle worker. He foresees and yearns for his death, and 'institutes' the twelve apostles and the community meal which proleptically gives meaning to his death.

The third act narrates Jesus' passion in Jerusalem, his betrayal by Judas, his agony in Gethsemane (which possibly included a longing back to the old Galilean days) and
his ultimate death on the cross. At his grave a woman has a vision that he lives.

To conclude his production of Renan's imagined 'play', Schweitzer partly quotes Renan's dramatic and moving address to Jesus: 'Rest now in thy glory, noble initiator...Complete conqueror of death, take possession of thy kingdom, whither, by the royal road thou hast traced, ages of adorers will follow thee' (Renan 1991:212). Schweitzer continues: 'Klingelzeichen. Der Vorhang beginnt zu fallen; die Klappstühle gehen in die Höhe. Kaum hört man noch den Epilog: Jesus will not be surpassed. His words will constantly renew its youth, the tale of his life will cause ceaseless tears, his sufferings will soften the best hearts; all ages will proclaim that among the sons of men there is none born who is greater than Jesus' (Renan 1991:227). Empathetic, sympathetic or even emotional words coming from a sceptic, one could say.

In the remainder of his review, in which he mainly discusses Renan's critics, persecutors and supporters, Schweitzer (1984:214–216) also laments 'das Grundübde des Werkes, die innere sittliche Haltlosigkeit der Weltanschauung des Verfassers', 'die grosse Unwahrhaftigkeit' that runs through the book from beginning to the end. His motivation for this harsh judgement amazes us: Renan tried to paint Christ without believing his wonder and authenticity. Moreover, Renan tried to write a scientific work for the public! On me, for one, Renan's enterprise had just the opposite impression. What for Schweitzer is a crime, may just as well be experienced as a virtue. Being a sceptic, Renan's empathetic depiction radiates a touching credibility. As far as the 'scientific' argument is concerned, one could only ask whether it is not a greater crime and an uncalled for paternity to keep scientific insight from the public. In the same vain, Schweitzer also regards it as a pity that Renan, through his popularisation of critical theology, discredited the 'Strassburger Theologie' and everything 'was Kritik und religiöse Aufklärung hiess'. One can only wonder what really contributes to religious enlightenment: open public debate, although hectic, or clandestine so-called critical theology of which the public should be unaware?


Suffice it to say that throughout his discussion Schweitzer's criticism strikes one as rather ad hominem, and not pertaining to the historical matters which Renan raised in the book itself. An evaluation of Renan's work from an orthodox viewpoint which challenges his views on Christ's divinity, and miracles is indeed one-sided, but

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10 Schweitzer's 'German bias' can be detected here.
11 Much of the anti-Renan literature in the previous century was (understandably) written from an orthodox viewpoint.
understandable and therefore forgivable. However an evaluation which fixates on the book’s so-called romanticism and sentimentialy is unfair and therefore deplorable. An evaluation of Renan’s work, addressing the historical issues, is therefore needed, the more so because similar issues have been raised again in recent historical Jesus research.

3 TWENTY PLUS GLIMPSES OF JESUS

3.1 Renan and historiography

Renan’s book surely reveals a poetic, artistic and often dramatic style of writing. However, one cannot conclude from this that the work as a whole is a play or drama and therefore not history writing. Quite the opposite. Twenty eight chapters are devoted to the narration of Jesus’ life and these chapters, to my mind, should rather be regarded as 28 relatively short glimpses of Jesus’ life. Renan, like anybody else is fully aware that the sources for writing a life of Jesus are confined mainly to the synoptic Gospels, and as far as he is concerned also to the Gospel of John (as an eyewitness account) from which one can obtain some minor biographical information. Because of the limitation of the sources, a running chronological biography is difficult and a full-fledged life of Jesus escapes us to a large extent. By realising this and only providing glimpses, Renan actually escapes Schweitzer view on the impossibility of capturing the earthly life of Jesus in a verifiable historical construction.

It should however be counted to Renan’s credit that he endeavours, as far as is possible to him, to reconstruct some chronology. Renan would therefore open a window on Jesus’ youth, his first sayings, his encounter with the Baptist, and his ministry in Capernaum after he returned from the Baptist, further preaching at the lake of Genesareth, his response to the delegation to the Baptist, his first visit to Jerusalem, his encounter with pagans and Samaritans, his institution of the twelve and the community meal, increasing progression of enthusiasm and exaltation, his last journey to Jerusalem, his last week, his arrest and trial and the tomb experience of the women. These distinctions, however, do not represent a diary but are a basic outline which leaves plenty of gaps of which Renan is the first to admit that we know nothing about. The progression in these events is not a day to day chronology, relating everything that happened to Jesus.

The view that one holds on what history writing is would of course to a large extent determine how one would judge Renan’s (re)construction. If one regards history as the mere representation of facts, of the gesichertes Minimum of which one can be absolutely sure, Renan can indeed be heavily criticised and accused of much speculation. But history writing is never like that, even if more sources are available. It always involves selection, (re)construction and interpretation. If one were merely to state a few sure facts, the larger picture on a person like Jesus’ life is in any case lost and one would have no history of him. History writing is indeed also the relative attempt at
constructing a holistic picture which involves much imagination and speculation. The holistic picture in the end should be judged and should be compared in open debate with other attempts at holistic construction. The imagination and speculation should also not be haphazard and arbitrary but should be kept in check with what is possible in the context of the time.12

To my mind Renan succeeded to a great extent in accomplishing this. Although his progression of events can be regarded as rather conservative (he has a chapter on Jesus' youth, various visits to Jerusalem are proposed, Jesus himself institutes the twelve and a community meal which later becomes the Eucharist), Renan's scheme allows him to discern an internal development in Jesus' preaching, attitude and views. This renders Jesus as a human being much more credible from a historical and psychological point of view.13 Contradictory sayings of Jesus are also accounted for.

3.2 Jesus's internal development

It is interesting that Schweitzer criticises Renan for not giving enough attention to what he regards as Renan's strong point, namely the distinction of an internal development in Jesus. Schweitzer therefore ironically criticises Renan for what he should have praised him. One should also keep in mind that Schweitzer on this point joins the enemies of Renan, who also took offence on this point, but for different reasons, namely that such a distinction affects Jesus' divinity.

It seems therefore appropriate to dwell somewhat on Renan's views in this regard. The inner development which Renan distinguished in Jesus' life is very much informed by what happened to him, and also by the country's geography.14 There is a vast difference between Galilee, the desert and Jerusalem. According to Renan, the geography of the country itself co-determines the attitudes of people, their view of nature influences their views on God as well as their receptivity (cf also Scheffler 1996:294–307). Therefore Renan regards the fact that he wrote the major draft of his

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12 It may be worthwhile in this regard to make a distinction between 'history' and 'the past'. The past is what really happened in all its totality and as such is gone and never retrievable (whether there are sources available or not), whereas 'history' refers to a human attempt to obtain some glimpse or insight into the past. Schweitzer's remarks on Jesus' irretrievability reflect a lack of this distinction and may suggest (and indeed suggested) that a historical quest is not possible. To my mind the present-day researchers involved in the so-called 'third quest' are more aware of this distinction, although this is not always explicitly stated by them. In other words: the third quest was made possible by a changed view of what history (writing) entails.

13 With his emphasis on Jesus' internal development and psyche Renan is actually also the precursor of modern psychological studies on Jesus. Cf in this regard Wolff (1975a and 1975b), Davies 1995, Scheffler 1995 and Van Aarde (1998, especially chapter 5).

14 It is interesting how much emphasis is laid nowadays on the 'archaeology of Galilee' in Jesus studies, an insight already part and parcel of Renan's work. Cf amongst others Bøsen 1985; Freyne 1988; Crossan 1991; Horsley 1995a, 1995b.
book in Palestine as an advantage. Galilee indeed has a different geography to Jerusalem and the Dead Sea. This should not merely be regarded as romanticism, for we all know that people who live in the countryside (for instance on farms) hold different views on life to those who are confined to the small spaces in a city. This indeed explains to a large extent the different views of the Galilean Jesus, John the Baptist and the Pharisees and the rest of the religious establishment that was seated in Jerusalem. It stands to reason that because the Sanhedrin, temple and leaders of the major religious parties were not situated in Galilee, that Jesus was not confronted by their views and way of doing things, therefore these constituted no part of his own religious views. It also stands to reason that when he was later confronted by them, they had a profound influence on his own views and ultimately on his own fate.

3.3 Jesus' youth and education

As with any human being, Jesus' development starts with his youth and education. Renan does not rely on the Gospel sources (which to a large extent are a projection of Jesus' perceived divinity into his childhood) to inform him about this. Renan rather put Jesus into the Middle Eastern context of how any child would grow up in Nazareth in the first century. This approach links up to contemporary Jesus research, like for instance Crossan's (1991).

According to Renan, the town of Nazareth, in the time of Jesus, did not perhaps much differ from what it is today (that is of course Renan's day, 140 years ago). 'We see the streets where he played when a child, in the stony paths or little crossways which separate the dwellings. The house of Joseph doubtless much resembled those poor shops, lighted by the door, serving at once for shop, kitchen, and bedroom, having for furniture a mat, some cushions on the ground, one or two clay pots, and a painted chest' (37).

Nazareth was situated between the fine outlines of Carmel...the double summit which towers above Megiddo...the mountains of the country of Shechem...the hills of Gilboa...the valley of the Jordan...the high plains of Perea from the eastern side...on the north the mountains of Safed.' 'Such', says Renan, 'was the horizon of Jesus. This enchanted circle, cradle of the kingdom of God, was for years his world. Even in later life he departed but little beyond the familiar limits of his childhood' (39).

From a modern point of view, Jesus received a limited education. He quoted the Bible in Aramaic and probably did not know the original Hebrew. He probably attended the synagogue school, where the schoolmaster was the hazzan or reader. 'Jesus frequented little the higher schools of the scribes or sopherim (Nazareth had perhaps none of them), and he had none of those titles which confer, in the eyes of the vulgar, the privileges of knowledge. It would, nevertheless, be a great error to imagine that Jesus was what we call ignorant...[for] moral culture, and especially the general spirit of the age, was transmitted by the perpetual intercourse of man with man' (41).
Quite in line with present day emphasis on orality, one could say!\textsuperscript{15}

According to Renan Jesus knew nothing beyond Judaism. ‘His mind preserved that free innocence which an extended and varied culture always weakens... Hillel was the true master of Jesus...the Old Testament made much impression on him...Jesus participated in the taste for allegorical interpretations... Although born at a time when the principle of positive science was already proclaimed, he lived entirely in the supernatural... (42-45) ...He never attached much importance to the political events of his time, and probably knew little about them’ (52).

This background played its part in Jesus' first ministry in Galilee. Although Galilee was ‘an immense furnace where the most diverse elements were seething’ (55) ‘it is not recorded that Jesus was even once interfered with by the civil power in his wandering career. Such freedom, and above all, the happiness which Galilee enjoyed in being much less confined in the bonds of Pharisaic pedantry, gave to this district a real superiority over Jerusalem.’

3.4 Galilee and the fatherhood of God

Jesus' initial views in Galilee centred on the fatherhood of God. As Renan puts it: ‘God, conceived simply as Father, was all the theology of Jesus. And this was not with him a theoretical principle, a doctrine more or less proved, which he sought to inculcate in others.’ This fatherhood was universal, for the God of Jesus is not the partial despot who has chosen Israel for his people and specially protects them. The God of Jesus was the God of humanity. ‘Jesus was not a patriot, like the Maccabees; or a theocrat like Judas the Gaulonite. Boldly raising himself above the prejudices of his nation, he established the universal fatherhood of God’. The logical consequence of this theology was the idea of a 'pure worship, a religion without priests and external observances, resting entirely on the feelings of the heart' (65). This is quite in line with present day attempts at reconstructing Jesus' abba-theology, one could say,\textsuperscript{16} with the exception that Renan contextualises it within the context of Jesus' earliest ministry in Galilee. In other words, it was the beginning but not the end of all of Jesus' thought. As his life developed, his thought also developed.

\textsuperscript{15} Today it is often claimed that Jesus could not read or write. Although this is not Renan's view, he made the valid point that Jesus lived in an oral culture and that even if he was an analphabete, this by no means meant that he was uneducated.

\textsuperscript{16} Cf e.g. Jeremias 1966 and 1971:67-80,174–196. Cf also the recent study by Van Aarde (1998) where Jesus' emphasis on the fatherhood of God is explained in terms of his own illegitimacy or fatherlessness. Van Aarde also explains Jesus' empathy in later life for outcasts (especially street children) in terms of his own experience of father deprivation (1998:247–274). Although Renan saw Jesus' fatherhood theology as the basis or starting point of his own thought, Van Aarde seems to absolutise it. The inner development which Renan's Jesus experienced allowed for more influences on the life of Jesus.
3.5 Following and superseding the Baptist

The next stage in Jesus' development entails his encounter with John the Baptist. He probably heard about John and quitted Galilee with a few followers to join John's group. It seems, says Renan, 'that not withstanding his profound originality, Jesus, during some weeks at least, was the imitator of John. His way, as yet, was not clear before him.' Although baptism was not part of his basic idea, he yielded to it and worked together with John who was a kind of primus inter pares. John's career, which much earlier than Jesus challenged the authorities ended soon, however. When John was imprisoned, Jesus continued to preach in the desert for a while but then returned to Galilee. Renan attempts to explain this (77): 'He had no longer any reason to prolong his stay in a country which was partly strange to him. Perhaps he feared also being involved in the severities exercised towards John, and did not wish to expose himself at a time which, seeing the little celebrity he had, his death could in no way serve the progress of his ideas'.

Although initially harmful for his own development (because of his superior ideas) the experience with John was a condition for Jesus' own further development. He could now rid himself of baptism and all external rites and ceremonies which laid the basis for his ultimate influence on human history, because, says Renan (78), 'it has been by the power of a religion, free from all external forms, that Christianity has attracted elevated minds'. His views on the kingdom of God could also now develop on their own, and became a positive utterance of good news, a new order that would govern humanity. In this Jesus saw himself instrumental. It was a kingdom of the spirit, not based on power, and which actually challenged politics and the mere idea of earthly kingship. Renan remarks that 'our principle of positive science is offended by the dreams contained in the programme of Jesus...cosmical revolutions of the kind which Jesus expected are only produced by geological or astronomical causes, the connection of which with the spiritual things has never yet been demonstrated.' But then he adds remarkably that great originators should not be judged by the prejudices in which they have shared. Indeed a wise leniency for a sceptic, one could say!

3.6 Galilee again: God's kingdom for the lowly

In the period of his ministry after his encounter with the Baptist, Jesus' thought came to full fruition: 'The founders of the kingdom of God are the simple. Not the rich, not the learned, not the priests; but women, common people, the humble, and the young. The great characteristic of the Messiah is that “the poor have the gospel

17 Van Aarde (1998:114–118) makes the interesting point that Jesus went for baptism to get rid of his 'sin' of fatherlessness. Renan sees his association with the Baptist as something that happened naturally. Jesus was inatitilly attracted by John, but withdraw as part of his own unique development.
preached to them”. The idyllic and gentle nature of Jesus here resumed superiority. A
great social revolution, in which rank will be overturned, in which all authority in this
world will be humiliated, was his dream’ (84).

Beset by his ideal Jesus continued his work in Galilee. It seems as if he encountered
opposition only in his own home town, Nazareth, probably because of his humble
background and because his own family rejected him. This, at this stage of his career,
did not discourage him, because he saw therein only the proof of the adage that a
prophet is not honoured in his own country. He made Capernaum the center of his
activity. He preached in the synagogues (where free discussion was allowed) of
Capernaum and the surrounding towns. On his success Renan remarks (88): ‘These
good Galileans had never heard discourses so adapted to their cheerful imaginations.
They admired him, they encouraged him, they found that he spoke well, and that his
reasons were convincing. He answered the most difficult objections with confidence;
the charm of his speech and his person captivated the people, whose simple minds
had not yet been cramped by the pedantry of the doctors.’ Renan here recognises
what one can call a law of history, namely that great messages are only perceived as
great if the receptive ability of the addressees of such messages allows for it.

Although Jesus’ sphere of action was limited to the valley of Lake Tiberias, his
authority continued every day. It stands to reason that this positive reception
influenced his development. ‘The more people believed in him, the more he believed
in himself’ (88). Renan here reveals a psychological insight which is remarkable if one
takes the time he was writing into account.

As his following grew, Jesus started to select a narrower circle. Renan therefore
devotes a chapter of his book to Jesus’ disciples, Peter, James, John and the others.
Renan pays special attention to the women of his inner circle. Jesus manifested to
women ‘those reserved manners which render a very sweet union of ideas possible
between the two sexes’, and women ‘infused into the new sect an element of enthu­
siasm and of the marvellous.’ A prominent woman was Mary Magdalene whose
troubled nature (possession by demons is regarded as contemporary language) was
calmed by Jesus’ ‘pure and sweet beauty’ (93). She is of special importance, because
after his death ‘she was the principle means by which faith in the resurrection was
established’. Because of the logistic support of some of his more wealthy women fol­
lowers, Jesus could concentrate on his mission without having to practice his
trade.18 Although Jesus therefore had his inner circle, any ambition among them he
rebuked with his ‘habitual maxim that he who exalted himself should be humbled and
that the kingdom of heaven will be possessed by the lowly.’

Chapter 10 of his book, entitled ‘The preachings at the lake’, is probably the one
on which the evaluation of his work as being ‘romantic’ is mostly based. According to

18 One needs to be reminded that there was no feminist theology in Renan’s day and age
which could facilitate these insights on Jesus and women.
Renan, Jesus' preaching was 'gentle and pleasing, breathing nature and the perfume of the fields.' One may perceive this as sentimental, but one cannot deny that Jesus employed flowers, birds, the sea, mountains and the games of children in his aphorisms and parables. What is important is that Renan realised that the geography of a region (including the people living there) provided the metaphors for Jesus' thought and to a great extent even contributed to the origin of that thought (cf Scheffler 1996; 1997)

Renan continues in this chapter with a remarkable comparison, informed by profound insight, between present day European countries and that of first century Galilee, to explain much of Jesus' teaching on gathering treasures, money, food, clothes, drink and other cares of this world (100):

A total indifference to exterior life and the vain appanage of the 'comfortable,' which our drearier countries make necessary to us, was the consequence of the sweet and simple life lived in Galilee. Cold climates, by compelling man to a perpetual contest with external nature, cause too much value to be attached to researches after comfort and luxury. On the other hand, the countries which awaken few desires are the countries of idealism and of poesy. The accessories of life are there insignificant compared with the pleasure of living. The embellishment of the house is superfluous, for it is frequented as little as possible. The strong and regular food of less generous climates would be considered heavy and disagreeable. And as to the luxury of garments, what can rival that which God had given to the earth and the birds of heaven?

In a philosophical tone Renan concludes that Jesus 'saw with perfect clearness that man's inattention, his want of philosophy and morality, come mostly from the distractions which he permits himself, the cares which besiege him, and which civilisation multiplies beyond measure... In our busy civilisations the remembrance of the free life of Galilee has been like perfume from another world, like the "dew of Hermon" which has prevented drought and barrenness from entirely invading the field of God' (103).

What Renan's critics often overlook, was that according to him Jesus himself came to a further insight in his development, namely that the utopian ideal of Galilee was too idealistic and could not satisfy the whole of society. Jesus himself realised that the official world of his time would not accept his kingdom thus defined. He therefore redefined it by turning towards the simple. The kingdom of God is meant for children, social outcasts, heretics, publicans, harlots, Samaritans and pagans. Increasingly aware of the imperfection of reality, a certain disillusionment and socio-revolutionary element starts to enter his teaching. The poor, the maimed and the blind should be invited to the feasts of the kingdom. His actions also corresponded

Where the first and the third world meet, as in South Africa, there can be much appreciation for Renan's insight in this regard. At this stage too much reflection on this would in certain circles not be regarded as politically correct.
with his views, with the result that he was regarded as a glutton and wine-bibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. The reversal of social fortunes was now part and parcel of Jesus' ideal.

According to Renan, Jesus at this stage received the delegation from the imprisoned John the Baptist and heard about his death. Jesus by now had acquired messianic status\(^\text{20}\) and John inquired about it. In terms of his thought at this stage, Jesus characterises the coming of the kingdom with the healing of the sick and bringing/preaching of good news to the poor. Jesus, however, praised John as the greatest born among men, and John in turn yielded to Jesus’ superiority. The result was that after John’s death and in the course of the early Christian movement, the Baptist’s movement was absorbed by that of Jesus. John’s death therefore underscored, and in an ironic way strengthened, Jesus and his movement.

3.7 The first confrontation in Jerusalem

At the height of his success, the next stage in Jesus’ development turned out to be a major turning point. In order to play a greater role in the establishment of God’s kingdom, Jesus decided to leave Galilee and confront Judaism in its stronghold, Jerusalem. As we already know from Schweitzer’s rendering of Renan, this turned out to be a failure. Jerusalem’s pedantry, acrimony, disputes, hatreds and littleness of mind did not accord with Jesus. According to Renan the science of the Jewish doctor, of the sofer or scribe, was purely barbarous, unmitigatedly absurd, and denuded of all moral element. The Sadducees which controlled the temple were mere functionaries of Rome. The feeling was reversed for the Jerusalemites did not respect the ‘foolish Galileans’ at all. Even Jerusalem’s geography, ‘the parched appearance of nature in its neighbourhood’, which differed so much from Galilee, must have displeased Jesus. He was displeased with the shops that were established within the sacred enclosure of the temple mount. His religious sentiment was hurt. The scenes of butchery conflicted with the worship he conceived of his Father. He pronounced that the house of prayer was made into a den of thieves and ‘carried away by his anger, he scourged the vendors...and overturned their tables’ (121).

Naturally the religious establishment in Jerusalem was not impressed with Jesus. He found no public following in Jerusalem. Because of this experience his views

\(^{20}\) Very few Jesus scholars today would attribute a messianic status to Jesus during his lifetime. It should however be noted that Renan seems to interpret his ‘messianic status’ at this stage of his development primarily as an expression of the success of his ministry. According to Renan, Jesus saw himself as the Messiah at a later stage (see below). Renan’s views on Jesus’ messianity testify to his sometimes surprising conservatism, but on the other hand Renan expressly states that Jesus never thought of himself as God (as may be deduced from John’s Gospel) because such an idea would be ‘entirely foreign to the Jewish mind’ (132).
developed further. He realised that no union was possible between himself and the official Jewish religion. He now regarded the abolition of sacrifices, the suppression of the priesthood and the abrogation of the law as an absolute necessity. In his view Moses was superseded and the temple rendered useless. Jesus now held subversive views on nearly all Jewish practices. With charity as his only law, he cared little for fasting, he preferred forgiveness to sacrifice and openly violated the sabbath and purity laws. He increased his fellowship with pagans and Samaritans because he believed that true brotherhood is established among men by charity and not by creeds. Not the place of worship, but the worship of the father in spirit and in truth is important.

3.8 Revolutionary and apocalyptic development

Jesus returned to Galilee full of revolutionary zeal. The innocent aphorisms and moral precepts of his earlier career are now exchanged for a decided policy. He now saw himself as the Messiah (not God) who would reveal the kingdom of God in an apocalyptic manner. To corroborate his claim he now had to concede to the public demand of doing miracles. According to Renan Jesus did not prefer this, but in contemporary society of that time miracles were the mark of a supernatural mission. These miracles were mostly healings, and Renan explains them rationally: "The presence of the superior man, treating the diseased with gentleness, and giving him by some sensible signs the assurance of his recovery, is often a decisive remedy" (140). This 'psychological' explanation of Jesus' healings recognises a notion about the psychosomatic nature of humans which in modern medicine and psychology seems to be axiomatically accepted (cf Davies 1995).²¹

During this last phase of his activity in Galilee, Jesus developed no new ideas, but his old ideas grew and developed with an ever increasing boldness. The kingdom of God now had a threefold meaning to him. Firstly it was good news for the poor, secondly it implied an apocalyptic intervention and thirdly it was spiritual. The second meaning was now prominent. He expected the end of the world in his lifetime but after nineteen centuries (for Renan 181) we know it did not occur. His propagation of a spiritual kingdom, expressed in sayings such as 'the kingdom of God is amongst you', saved his cause, or else there would have been no Christianity today.

²¹ Bodemer (1990:11–12) from a medical perspective regards humans as 'bio-psycho-social' beings and mentions the psychological dimensions of physical diseases (discomfort, pain, uncertainty, anxiety, hearing bad news, retardation, depression, problems of addiction, stress etc). Elsewhere (Scheffler 1995) I also argued that the (psycho)therapeutic effect which Jesus had on his followers should not be viewed separately from his healings and that the latter probably gave rise to the miracle tradition.
3.9 Anticipating Christianity

According to Renan, Jesus was never entirely absorbed in his apocalyptic ideas, and during the very time that he was most preoccupied with them he laid the foundation for the future church. This marks a further development in his thought. He 'instituted' the twelve apostles who had to continue his work, although their own vision at that stage was entirely apocalyptic. The idea that he was complete nourishment to them, bread from heaven, made their community meal a sign of union for them, the germ of the later Eucharist. At this stage Jesus perhaps foresaw his impending death, and through the eating of bread and the drinking of vine endeavoured to give meaning to it to the benefit of his followers.²²

3.10 Enthusiastic development

The Jesus movement now grew more enthusiastic, expecting the coming end of the world. Within his own circle Jesus became more demanding. His followers should be prepared to leave everything (whether it be house, parents, wife or even children) for the sake of the kingdom. In Jesus there now developed a harsh and gloomy feeling of distaste for the world and of excessive self-abnegation. The cheerful moralist of the earlier days made room for a sombre giant. Jesus had forgotten the pleasure of living.

It stands to reason that the more enthusiastic Jesus became the more intolerable he became to those who did not agree to his ideas. He was no longer the mild teacher of the Sermon on the Mount. His main opponents were the Pharisees, and understandably so, because he endeavoured to abolish the law which was their sole purpose to uphold. His attack on their hypocrisy and traditional formalism is known to everyone familiar with the Gospels. Jesus did not want to reform Judaism by appealing to the biblical text, but to the human conscience. For him there was no return to any form of Mosaism. Renan states that 'a hate which death alone could satisfy was the consequence of these struggles.' As for Jesus, 'he saw clearly that his action, if confined to Galilee, was necessarily limited...he wished to try a last effort to gain the rebellious city; and seemed anxious to fulfil the proverb—that a prophet must not die outside Jerusalem' (173).

²² For the present day Jesus scholar Renan's thoughts on Jesus' role in the establishment of the 'future church' and the eucharist also seem to be rather conservative. It should however be kept in mind that Renan wrote exsnapshot and tried to trace the pre-easter 'seeds' of post-easter institutions. (His Jesus book was part of a larger work on the history of Christianity.) It should also be kept in mind that nineteenth-century historians saw history in its essence as the exposition of cause and effect.
3.11 The final confrontation in Jerusalem

In Jerusalem the Pharisees involved him in controversies about taxes, the resurrection, et cetera. Although he answered these, there was no love lost between them. He angered them more by stating that he would overthrow the temple and that the Jews would be substituted by the gentiles. The Pharisees regarded him as mad and arrested and tried to kill him. At this stage Renan’s description of Jesus is everything but romantic (183): Jesus was no longer himself...his conscience had lost something of its original purity...his mission overwhelmed him, and he yielded to the torrent....

The high priest Caiaphas in this context sought to put down religious enthusiasts, rightly foreseeing that by their exited preaching they would lead to the total ruin of the nation’ (187). Renan concludes: ‘Left free, Jesus would have exhausted himself in a desperate struggle with the impossible. The unintelligent hate of his enemies decided the success of his work, and sealed his divinity’ (188).

The opposition he encountered did not make Jesus flee from Jerusalem, because he believed that the kingdom of God would be realised soon. He expected and started to speak with his disciples about his approaching end. His behaviour actually provoked his death. He triumphantly entered the city and was hailed as the son of David by his followers. Despite the demand of the Pharisees, he refused to rebuke his disciples. He expected to be arrested and experienced a deep agony in the garden of Gethsemane. Renan speculates movingly about this agony: ‘Did he remember the clear fountains of Galilee where he was wont to refresh himself; the vine and the fig-tree under which he had reposed, and the young maidens who, perhaps, would have consented to love him? Did he curse the hard destiny which had denied him the joys he conceded to all others? Did he regret his lofty nature, and, victim of his greatness, did he mourn that he had not remained a simple artisan of Nazareth? We know not’ (192).

A further agony was his betrayal by Judas. To ascribe the latter’s action to mere avarice is according to Renan too simple. It should also be understood in terms of a rivalry between Judas and John and Jesus’ previous repudiation of Judas with regard to the poor.

During the last gathering with his disciples Jesus thought of precautions and spoke of swords. However, he did not pursue this idea for long because he realised that ‘timid provincials would not stand before the armed force of all the great powers of Jerusalem’ (197). Jesus was subsequently arrested and against the real will of

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23 Many would regard this type of speculation by Renan’s as bad historiography. If we keep in mind the distinction made above between ‘the past’ and ‘history’, this specific speculation to my mind (because of its humaneness) spells good historiography.
24 That Jesus initially thought of defending himself but later abandoned the idea emphasises Renan’s consistent view of the development in Jesus’ thought and his humanity. Often Jesus scholars today (although only describing Jesus as a human being) shy away from depicting him as somebody who changed his mind. (Maybe a subconscious residue of a former belief in his
Pilate, convicted and crucified. Pilate did this to appease the Jews, but according to Renan civil power proves it weakness when it concedes to religious persecution. No government has the right to say that it 'has a horror of blood when he causes it to be shed by his servants' (206). Ironically, Jesus was killed in terms of the law which he strived to abolish.

3.12 Jesus' effect

He was laid in the tomb of a well-doer, but on the Sunday morning Mary Magdalene found it empty. The cry that he had risen quickly spread among the disciples. To the question 'What had taken place?', Renan replies that 'for the historian, the life of Jesus finishes with his last sigh.' However, his impression on some devoted women was such that they experienced him as alive and consoling them. According to Renan the strong imagination of Mary Magdalene played an important part in this circumstance. He concludes dramatically: 'Divine power of love! Sacred moments in which the passion of one possessed gave to the world a resuscitated God!' (215).

In the last chapter of his book Renan summarises the essential character of the work of Jesus. He concludes: 'To have made himself beloved to the degree that after his death they ceased not to love him was the great work of Jesus... Jesus was not a founder of dogmas, or the maker of creeds; he infused into the world a new spirit... The faith, the enthusiasm, the constancy of the first Christian generation is not explicable, except by supposing, at the origin of the whole movement, a man of surpassing greatness... In him was condensed all that is good and elevated in our nature...' (219–227).

Renan concludes his book: 'Jesus will not be surpassed. His worship will constantly renew its youth, the tale of his life will cause ceaseless tears, his sufferings will soften the best hearts; all ages will proclaim that among the sons of men there is none born who is greater than Jesus' (227). Indeed moving words from a sceptic or one who (according to Schweitzer) lacks an ethical conscience!

4 CONCLUSION

I hope to have indicated that to judge Renan’s work as merely romantic or sentimental is totally one-sided. Such traits could certainly be traced in his work, but it should be remembered that in this regard we are dealing with subjective judgement. Much depends on the disposition of the person who makes the judgement. What may be sentimental to one, may be precious to another. To my mind Renan has done enough to prove himself a worthy historian, for the following reasons.

Firstly, he displayed a vast background knowledge of Palestine. He used his insight into the historical geography of the country to picture Jesus in a Middle Eastern con-
text. That he made a conscious decision to write the basic draft of his book while in Palestine facilitated this process, and militates against a mere ‘romantic’ interpretation of his work.

Secondly, Renan’s general knowledge and specifically that of world history at large enabled him to relate the life of Jesus _ex eventu_, from a perspective of eighteen centuries later, which only magnified his reconstruction. This Renan did by means of comparisons and without projecting anachronisms into the life of Jesus.

Thirdly, Renan’s emphasis on Jesus’ _internal development_ which correlates with his geographical movements, is perhaps (as Schweitzer himself remarked) his most valuable contribution. In an attempt to obtain a grip on the past, historians often resort to static descriptions. Although Renan made use of various glimpses of Jesus, these did not serve a static generalised picture, but rather one that is dynamic and in probable accordance with the historical development that individuals go through.

Fourthly, Renan’s attempt to create a _holistic picture_ of the life of Jesus can naturally be criticised on many points, but on the whole should be applauded. Many Jesus scholars tend to focus only on one aspect of Jesus’ ministry or life,²⁵ whereas Renan gave an integrated picture, borne out by Jesus’ inner disposition and development, his geographical and social surroundings and the Jewish tradition which formed him.

_Last but not least_, Renan related his story (=history) with profound _psychological insight and empathy_—aspects which many so-called histories lack. He made use of what can be called ‘historical psychology’ or the insight that there is a psychological dimension of history which does not emerge when one views history merely as ‘bare facts’. His _empathetic understanding_ and depiction of Jesus is not cancelled out by his criticism and scepticism, but (in an ironic way) underscored by it. He should therefore rather be regarded as a _religious sceptic_ or a _rational romantic_.

Let us grant him his French disposition!

**WORKS CONSULTED**


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