CHAPTER FOUR
THE CLAIMS OF HISTORY:
STRAUSS’S “MYTHO-MANIA” AND AFTER

Strauss’s *Leben Jesu* rocked the foundation of Unitarian faith. Strauss, in denying that the divine idea of God-man unity could be identified with a particular historical individual or event, parted company with contemporary tradition not only in exegesis but also in philosophy. On the exegetical front, Strauss left his New England audiences with a Christianity desupernaturalized and stripped of miracles. On the philosophical front, Strauss arrived at a Christianity depersonalized and anonymous, reducing Jesus to nothing more than a gifted genius whom legend had gradually deified. In this account, the Christian faith could be explained without reference to the Jesus of history. Strauss in this way firmly stayed on the side of the negative critique. He did not arrive at a historical core of the life of Jesus, nor did he in fact set out to inquire after one.

Against an apologetic mode of appropriation that sought to embrace the findings of the new historical criticism without sacrificing the framework of evidentialism, Strauss’s “speculative” approach “had a bad name.” With thinkers like Norton, Octavius Brooks Frothingham’s history of Unitarianism judged, Strauss was a “man of straw” who relinquished all claims to the genuineness and historical factuality of the Gospel tradition.¹ Strauss, Frothingham observed, completely knocked away the historical basis of Jesus’ life. It now seemed methodologically impossible to write a life of Jesus. Frothingham also noted that Strauss even called for a suspension of all efforts to seek the Jesus of history.

New England divines were not prepared to accept the apparent impossibility of reaching the historical Jesus described in the Gospels. “There are two ways of writing the life of Jesus,” the *North American Review* observed in 1864. “The one is simply to ascertain and arrange the facts of his external history; the other is, then to go on and so interpret and explain those facts as to make it seen and felt what

---

manner of man he was in spirit and purpose.” A “life” of this latter kind seemed to the Review “still … eminently needed.” It was necessary to have “first, … a conviction founded on internal and external evidence that Jesus is the name of a real man, and not of a fictitious one; … then, … to appreciate his true relation at once to God and to man. And then, too,” it was believed, “the life of Jesus [would] be brought into such a light that it [could] be seen to be the Gospel of to-day.”

This step of transmuting the teaching of the historical Jesus into “the Gospel of to-day” was undertaken in Ernest Renan’s literary adaptation of the life of Jesus. Unlike Strauss, Renan was convinced that a good deal of historical data on the life of Jesus could be recovered. Renan’s historical romance of Palestine was thus sharply set apart from the critical tradition of Leben-Jesu-researchers like Strauss. Renan’s portrayal of the historical Jesus invested the narrative of Jesus’ life with an immediacy and dramatic force that readers were accustomed to associate with secular romances. Renan’s literary portrait did not produce a “theoretical” Christ, but rather “the historical Christ, who bore the name of Jesus.” Under this premise Renan’s Vie de Jésus (1863) presented a figure not of dogma and doctrine but of psychology, a “gentle,” “delightful,” “charming” preacher of a lakeside idyll who propagated amid the picturesque Galilean countryside a “religion de l’humanité.” “As often happens in very elevated natures,” Renan observed of his “great man,” “tenderness of the heart was transformed in him into an infinite sweetness, a vague poetry, and a universal charm.” This “poetic” approach to history posited “a form, a solidity” in scriptural history which affirmed, instead of an “abstract being” who might be said never to have existed, an “admirable human figure,” “a man living and moving.” Renan thus attested that the synoptics contained a history of the ministry of Jesus which permitted the reconstruction of authentic data and not merely of the attributes of “symbol” and “myth.” For Unitar-

---

3 Ernest Renan, Studies of Religious History and Criticism, authorized translation from the original French by Octavius Brooks Frothingham (New York: Carleton, 1864), 183.
4 Ernest Renan, Histoire des origines du christianisme (History of the origins of Christianity), vol. 1 (Berlin: J. Springer, 1863), 159. The Vie de Jésus was the first volume of a projected series on the “origines du christianisme.”