In a letter of 27 July 1744 to Cardinal Angelo Maria Querini, archbishop of Brescia and head of the Vatican Library, the Hamburg professor of Oriental Languages Hermann Samuel Reimarus wrote: ‘... I am so averse to the controversies of the theologians and the disputes among the denominations that I have never engaged in an argument about any fundamental principle of faith, neither in private conversation, nor in writing.’ If the Cardinal’s—and indeed Reimarus’s colleagues and employers—had known the truth, they would have been shocked to the core, for Reimarus was engaged in the most radical critique of revelation and Christian doctrine the world had ever known. Though he would never publish his *Apology and Defence for the Reasonable Worshipers of God*, even the five fragments printed by Lessing between 1774 and 1777 would arouse a storm of controversy, thereby generating one of the defining theological-philosophical debates of the mature German Enlightenment.

Reimarus’s authorship was revealed only when his son donated the manuscript to the Hamburg Public Library in 1814. Not until 1972 would a complete edition be published, followed by reissues of some of Reimarus’s most important published works and an edition of the auction catalogue of his library. Since then, several studies have illuminated aspects of the life and work of this key, yet mysterious, figure. Most scholars have focused on the philosophical aspects of his thinking. Reimarus has been portrayed as an Enlightenment deist and as an exponent of Wolffian rationalism. Almut and Paul Spalding have explored important facets of Reimarus’s personal and family life. Martin Mulsow has situated him among the clandestine networks of the German Enlightenment. In 2011 Dietrich Klein published the first comprehensive survey of Reimarus’s theology.

Ulrich Groetsch’s engrossing new book goes back to Reimarus’s life’s work to show how his radical critique of revelation and Christianity came, not from philosophical reflection, but rather from his scholarship. Reimarus was, at root, a philologist; it was his proficiency in this calling that equipped him with the skills that he deployed to devastating effect in his *Apology*. The son of a teacher at the Hamburg *Johanneum*, the local Latin school founded by Johannes Bugenhagen in 1528, he came under the influence of Johann Albert Fabricius, professor at the *Gymnasium illustre*, where he also encountered the Hebraist Johann Christoph Wolf. Study at Jena under the theologian Johann Franz Buddeus, among others, was followed by lecturing at Wittenberg. An extended journey to The Netherlands and England in 1720–1721 led to his appointment as...
rector at the Latin school at Wismar. Finally, in 1727 he was appointed as professor of Hebrew and Oriental Languages at the Hamburg Gymnasium, where he remained until his death in 1768.

Groetsch’s account of Reimarus’s background and early training provides a marvellous account of the vitality of Humanist scholarship among the Hamburg polyhistors around 1700. Reimarus himself continued those traditions in his own teaching, as Groetsch shows on the basis of the teaching plans and lecture notes that Reimarus used at the Gymnasium. With the presence of Fabricius and Wolf, authors respectively of the Bibliotheca Graeca (14 vols, 1705–1728) and the Bibliotheca Hebraea (4 vols, 1715–1733), Hamburg was clearly exceptionally provided and Groetsch’s two chapters devoted to the Hamburg scholarly scene make fascinating reading. They also hint at the process whereby Reimarus gradually became a radical critic of established Christianity. Whereas he started out teaching an entirely Christological interpretation of ancient Levitic ritual, he increasingly developed a philological and historical focus which transcended the constraints of a hermeneutica sacra to engage in a free hermeneutica profana which treated the Bible like any other text.

A major inspiration in that transition seems to have been Reimarus’s meeting with Jean Le Clerc in Amsterdam on his way to London in 1720. Like Louis Cappel and Hugo Grotius, Le Clerc had become stigmatized as a profaner of Scripture. Having started his publishing career in 1685 by rebutting Richard Simon’s Histoire critique du Vieux Testament, Le Clerc had himself fallen foul of the orthodox theologians and was widely suspected of being a follower of Spinoza.

In point of fact, however, Le Clerc was probably more a follower of Locke, for in 1697 he applied to the life of Christ Locke’s proposition in the Essay Concerning Human Understanding that we can know our thoughts concerning an object of knowledge, but not the object directly. This reduced the study of Christian texts to little more than the history of their composition, a series of human attempts to know the unknowable. As Reimarus noted in a diary fragment after his meeting with Le Clerc: ‘he claimed that he evaluates the Bible just as if he read Aristophanes’. If Reimarus was initially troubled by Le Clerc’s introduction of profane material, he soon overcame his inhibitions. Indeed, before long he was using knowledge from the applied and experimental sciences to make sense of sacred texts; from there it was but a small step to using such material against the Bible to show that it made no sense at all.

Groetsch’s final chapters show how Reimarus developed both his scholarly reputation and his private scholarly passion to the highest degree. His edition of Cassius Dio’s Roman History, published in two volumes 1750–1752, was universally praised. It was this work, which generated Reimarus’s correspondence