

RENAN, Joseph Ernest (28 February, 1823 — 2 October, 1892)

Ernest Renan was a French rationalist philosopher, orientalist, and historian of religion. He was professor of Semitics at the Collège de France. Renan is best known for his influential *Vie de Jésus* (1863), a biography of Jesus written in the tradition of David Strauß's *Das Leben Jesu* (1835-1836). Against his Roman Catholic upbringing, Renan disputed the compatibility of history and theology, questioned the divine inspiration of the Bible, precluded the possibility of miracles, and rejected Jesus's divinity (and Jewishness). Although *Vie de Jésus* was immediately criticized for its many unsupported claims and led to a temporary suspension of Renan's post at the Collège, its popularity made it a watershed in French intellectual history.

Renan's use of comparative philology to reinforce modern racial stereotypes was also influential. In several publications, including his widely read *Histoire du peuple d'Israël* (1887-1893), Renan developed a view of the Semitic languages as a singular, static, and underdeveloped linguistic family. The Indo-European ("Aryan") languages, by contrast, were presented as manifold and fluid. For Renan, these alleged linguistic distinctions reflected contemporary racial, cultural, and religious differences; the rigidity of the Semitic languages corresponded to the strict monotheism that had stunted Jewish progress, whereas the multiplicity and richness of the Indo-European languages aligned with the complex "Aryan" culture that eventually developed into the robust intellectual world of Europe.

Bibliography:

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