The Historical Jesus and the Literary Imagination
1860–1920
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[I]f all the Bibles and Testaments were destroyed tomorrow, they could almost be reconstructed from the literature that has grown up around the life of Christ.

Samuel Ayres, *Jesus Christ Our Lord*

From the late 1830s to the end of the nineteenth century, scholarly preoccupation with the historicity of the Gospels generated a form of biblical literature generically classified as ‘Lives of Jesus’.¹ In *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906), the first comprehensive survey of over a century of critical enquiry into the life and teachings of Christ, Albert Schweitzer states that ‘Not all the Lives of Jesus could be cited. It would take a whole book simply to list them’, a claim not to be dismissed as mere hyperbole.² More recent studies in the field estimate that 60,000 or so such works were published in Europe and the USA in the mid-to-late nineteenth century.³ Reaching the peak of its popularity in the early 1870s, the genre was undeniably jaded by the century’s end, the varieties of different angles on the Gospel narratives being all but exhausted. The American author Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, anxious to signal the novelty of her own late contribution to the Lives tradition, *The Story of Jesus Christ* (1897), provides a succinct account of the forerunners she is attempting to leave behind:

This book is not theology or criticism, nor is it biography. It is neither history, controversy, nor a sermon [...] It is not a study of Jewish life or Oriental customs. It is not a handbook of Palestinian travel, nor a map of Galilean and Judean geography. It is not a creed; it speaks for no sect, it pleads for no doctrine.⁴

Though this catalogue of negations refers most directly to American Lives, it equally well categorizes British ones. Some of these took the
form of published sermons; some presented the conservative counter-argument to the Higher Criticism; others situated their picture of Jesus in his ‘authentic’ geographical, cultural and religious contexts; and most aligned themselves firmly with a doctrinal position, most usually orthodox. For the most part undistinguished in style and unremarkable in content, these British Lives were characterized by pious, often sententious, prefaces, highly sentimental depictions of the Gospel narratives, and a doughty determination to beat off Continental infidelity.

This chapter traces the evolution of this somewhat peculiar literary sub-genre from its radical inauguration abroad to its mainly reactionary and conservative closing stages in Britain. Focusing on the relatively few Lives of Jesus that served as blueprints for the superabundance of imitations, it explores their very considerable impact on contemporary discourse about Christianity, and the impetus they provided for the fictional representations of Christ that emerged from the late 1860s onwards.

Continental infidelities: the influence of D. F. Strauss and Ernest Renan

Many of the Lives of Jesus written in the second half of the nineteenth century were instigated by Strauss’s Leben Jesu, a ground-breaking study of the Gospel narratives. Mounting as it did a sustained attack on the veracity of the New Testament, the work quickly gained notoriety, resulting in its author being removed from his post as tutor at the University of Tübingen just a matter of weeks after its publication. It took seven years or so for Leben Jesu to reach the British reader. Its first translator explained in the Address that prefaced the four-volume English edition of 1842 that ‘The illiberal tone of the public mind [had] prevented its publication being attempted by any respectable English publisher, from a fear of persecution.’ By 1846, the year of publication of George Eliot’s much better known translation of the fourth edition, the softening of the blasphemy laws such that only works that were deemed to ‘scoff’ at the Scriptures were liable to prosecution ensured that Strauss’s Life could be more vigorously and openly publicized. Described by Strauss himself as ‘accurata et perspicua’ in the Latin preface to the three-volume work, Eliot’s translation provided a highly accomplished version of the book and, while
it is unlikely that this densely argued and erudite work would have been read from cover to cover by the layman, there is no doubt that its central contentions were widely circulated and energetically debated.

As the century wore on, the public’s growing familiarity with Strauss’s *Life of Jesus* is evidenced in the way that both author and title appear more and more frequently in the domain of prose fiction. By the 1880s it had, in the words of the eponymous hero of Eliza Lynn Linton’s *The Autobiography of Christopher Kirkland* (1885), ‘long been known to the English reading public, thanks to the fine translation by Marian Evans’ and, indeed, it could be found resting on the bookshelves of fictional characters in novels such as W. H. Mallock’s *A Romance of the Nineteenth Century* (1881) and Edna Lyall’s *Donovan* (1882), a sure signifier of religious scepticism either confirmed or approaching. And in Mrs Humphry Ward’s *Robert Elsmere*, the extensive library of Squire Wendover, biblical scholar and confirmed sceptic, boasts ‘most of the early editions of the “Leben Jesu”, with some corrections from Strauss’s own hand’.8 In other novels, such as George Gissing’s *Workers in the Dawn* (1880), Strauss’s work is actually taken off the shelf to play a crucial role in the life of one of its central characters. In this bleak depiction of urban working-class poverty, a chance encounter with an English translation of the *Life of Jesus* brings about a radical transformation in the heroine, Helen, expressed in language closely akin to that of religious revelation:

Helen […] sat at her reading-desk, bending over the pages of him whose eyes saw with surpassing clearness through the mists of time and prejudice, whose spirit comes forth, like a ray of sunshine in winter, to greet those toiling painfully upwards to the temple of Truth.9

Once emancipated from the Christian beliefs of her years as a clergyman’s daughter, Helen wastes no time in organizing a study visit to the University of Tübingen, home of the Higher Criticism, where a close reading of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* completes her education in sceptical thinking.

Novelists tended to portray their imagined readers of Strauss embracing the work as liberating and revelatory, drawing scant attention to its density of detail, or the considerable time and effort required to read it in its entirety. Separated into three chronological
Strauss’s penetrating analysis of the Gospels is anything but a quick, easy read. Moving methodically through the New Testament sources, the author endeavours to distinguish between the recording of what might have been actual events and what might have been constructed solely by the religious imagination. He rejects the supernaturalist approach to the Scriptures as contrary to contemporary understanding and knowledge of the world, at the same time holding up the often convoluted and far-fetched theories of the rationalists to intellectual ridicule. Influenced by the idealist philosophy of Hegel, he breaks down the stalemate that had persisted between these two opposing schools of thought, and expounds his own interpretive strategy based on the belief that the Gospels grew out of a mythopoetic process. What rationalists such as Reimarus had condemned as lies and forgeries, Strauss regarded as the consequence of a mode of thought peculiar to a bygone age when perceptions of ‘truth’ differed radically from those of the nineteenth century. In order to grasp the essential differences between the minds of the disciples and those of modern men, Strauss insisted, the religious historian must resist anachronistic thinking and ‘transplant himself in imagination upon the theatre of action, and strive to the utmost to contemplate the events by the light of the age in which they occurred’.

Strauss’s heterodox reading of the Scriptures left an immeasurably deep scar on the hearts of the faithful. Almost three decades after the publication of Eliot’s translation of the Life of Jesus, a writer for the highly orthodox Christian Observer, though reviewing one of Strauss’s least controversial titles, The Life and Times of Ulrich von Hutten, still feels moved to denounce the earlier work in the most intemperate of terms as ‘blasphemous hallucinations, mischievous, revolting’. That the Life should cast so long a shadow over conservative Christians is perhaps unremarkable, given that it had adumbrated the agenda for future decades of theological tussles; the miraculous elements of the New Testament narratives, the identity and intentions of their authors and the historical value of the Fourth Gospel were all areas laid open for argument. Moreover, Strauss’s insistence that ‘the line of distinction between history and fiction […] was not drawn so clearly as with us’ was a perplexing notion for the many orthodox readers who regarded fact and fiction as binary opposites, and who associated the term ‘fiction’ with fakery and lies. Strauss notes how, as far as traditional Christians are concerned, the
Bible is strictly true, while ‘the histories related by the heathens of their deities, and by the Mussulman of his prophet, are so many fictions’. Fiction for the traditional Christian, then, is associated with error, false belief and the unconverted. Strauss’s reading of the Scriptures blurred such a rigid demarcation of truth and lies; for him, the very development of the Christian faith was embedded in a complex evolutionary process whereby the real and the fictive were interwoven. Strauss explains the process thus:

In general the whole Messianic era was expected to be full of signs and wonders […] These merely figurative expressions, soon came to be understood literally […] and thus the idea of the Messiah was continually filled up with new details, even before the appearance of Jesus. Thus many of the legends respecting him had not to be newly invented; they already existed in the popular hope of the Messiah, having been mostly derived with various modifications from the Old Testament, and had merely to be transferred to Jesus, and accommodated to his character and doctrines.

Viewed from Strauss’s diachronic perspective, Christ’s contemporaries are seen to have had linguistic difficulties with the pronouncements of their elders, just as nineteenth-century Christians sometimes struggled to understand the religious imagination and idiom of the disciples. In addition to this unintentional fiction, created by the superimposing of the past on the present, Strauss identified an entirely aesthetic fiction that developed once myths were established and became ‘the subject of free poetry or any other literary composition’. Akin to literary fiction, this poetic embellishment of the dominant religious ideas was contrived to strengthen belief, though still, according to Strauss, ‘without evil design’, being in accordance with the will of a community.

The implications of Strauss’s work for the theology of its time and their potential impact on faith were forcefully expressed by a critic writing in the *Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review*:

It is the pride of Strauss, that he *un-creates*. At his spell, the warmth of every faith, the accumulated glow of old ages, that alone renders the Present habitable, suddenly becomes latent: the facts, the scenes, the truths that re-absorb it, run down in liquefaction, pass off in vapour, and restore the world to a nebular condition.
Here, the arresting notion of ‘un-creation’ and the images of deliquescence convey a hauntingly desolate picture of a post-Straussian world, in which civilization reverts to original chaos. Reviews such as this one made it clear that Strauss’s work had struck too fierce a blow against traditional Christianity for it to remain solely within the community of scholars, and one of its consequences was, somewhat paradoxically, a revitalization of the traditional Church. Looking back from a distance of forty years, F. W. Farrar defines the *Life of Jesus* as the ‘*reductio ad horribile* of current scepticism’ and recalls, approvingly, the rallying of the faithful against its insidious influence, so that ‘pulpits rang once more with vital truth and manly eloquence’.

Uplifted and strengthened by the newfound energy of the clergy, individuals could continue to nourish their faith with any one of a plethora of orthodox Lives of Jesus published to counter and reject the apostasy of Strauss. If Continental criticism had reduced Jesus to an idea, a figment – albeit a highly significant one – of the religious imagination, the biographical works that succeeded it attempted to reinstate a sense of historical reality. The authors of these Lives transformed the relatively slender Gospel stories into hefty volumes, supplementing New Testament stories with extra-biblical material and psychological conjecture, and rewriting them in a prose style frequently verging on the pleonastic. If Strauss’s trenchant analysis threatened irrevocably to undermine the verity of the Gospels, Lives of Jesus offered a means of rehabilitating or even replacing them.

In the preface to *A New Life of Jesus*, published in 1864, Strauss avers that ‘We must address the people since theologians refuse to listen.’ While ostensibly directed at the professional theologian, it is also a covert undermining of the achievement of Ernest Renan’s *Vie de Jésus*, published just a year earlier. Having gone through ten editions of 5,000 copies each in its first year and having been translated into eleven European languages by the end of 1864, Renan’s study of Christ could be said to have already accomplished the task of conveying current thinking on the Gospels to the non-specialist. Though Strauss claims to have ‘joyfully hailed the work of Renan on its appearance’, he goes on to damn it with faint praise: ‘I accept it respectfully, and though by no means tempted by its example to alter my own plan, I may say that all I wish is to have written a book as suitable for Germany as Renan’s is for France.’ It is evident here that for Strauss, as for the majority of theologians of his time, studies in the historical Jesus were inseparable from the national characteristics of both authors and readers.
deterministic mode of thinking was also to be found in the periodical press. The *Edinburgh Review* regarded the *Life* as proof of the unbridgeable gap between the French and English temperaments: ‘The French mind, in particular, is so easily dazzled by brilliancy, and so readily captivated by dramatic finish and vivid portraiture [...] Englishmen have not so much faith in the laws of dramatic unity, or in the irrefragibility of logic.’\(^{23}\) And forty years on, reflecting on a century or so of Christological research, Schweitzer was forthright in his assertion of the superiority of the German temperament in matters theological and the relative weakness of the French, which he considered to be writ large in Renan’s *Life.*\(^{24}\) It was an argument with which Renan himself had already engaged in an essay entitled ‘The Critical Historians of Jesus’, published in *Studies of Religious History* (1857). In this he asserts somewhat bullishly:

We can affirm that if France, better endowed than Germany with the sentiment of practical life, and less subject to substitute in history the action of ideas for the play of passion and individual character, had undertaken to write the life of Christ in a scientific manner, she would have employed a more strict method, and that, in avoiding to transfer the problem, as Strauss has done, into the domain of abstract speculation, she would have approached nearer to the truth.\(^{25}\)

This was, of course, no empty boast: Renan would put his theory into practice a few years later in his *Vie de Jésus*, a work whose perceived failings were often put down to the innate characteristics of its Gallic author.

In tones redolent of Wilde’s Francophobic Lady Bracknell, a torrent of publications saw the author of *La Vie* roundly denounced for transgressing the *bonnes mœurs* of the Victorian public, as only a Frenchman could; his agnosticism was ‘dandified’, his depiction of Jesus perfumed, effeminate and far too sensuous. The debate over national temperament, however, went beyond such crude chauvinism; at its heart lay some important issues of methodology, style and intention. Where Strauss’s forensic scrutiny of the primary texts was a fitting method for dismantling the once-stable relationship between truth and history, Renan’s more impressionistic and imaginative approach was better suited to what was in all respects a gentler, even nostalgic, denial of divinity. In his Introduction to the *Life of Jesus,*
Renan accuses Strauss of concentrating too fully on the theological, thereby rendering the figure of Jesus a mere abstraction. Conscious that ‘Many will regret [...] the biographical form’ of his study, he takes on the role of biographer regardless, insisting that his subject will only be brought to life with ‘some share of divination and conjecture’ and by ‘combining the texts in such a manner that they shall constitute a logical, probable narrative, harmonious throughout’. Renan’s willingness to treat the canonical Gospels as biographical works (an attitude that has found favour with some twenty-first-century biblical scholars), and to reconstruct his own biography from them, did not meet with Strauss’s approval. In the first chapter of *The New Life of Jesus*, Strauss states unequivocally that the Christ of the Church is ‘no subject for biographical narrative’, arguing that the Jesus of dogma and the Jesus of history are irreconcilable, the inevitable result of the biographical method being the demise of theology. Yet whatever Strauss’s misgivings about Renan’s choice of form might have been, he could not have denied the enormous success that resulted from it. What the work lacked in theological scrupulosity it more than made up for in readability, and its adaptation of the Gospel narratives for a novel-reading public was its *tour de force*. Placed alongside it, Strauss’s original *Life of Jesus* must have appeared prohibitively learned and tenebrous to the common reader, conforming to Matthew Arnold’s description of the Germanic style as ‘blunt-edged, unhandy and infelicitous’.

The response to Renan’s *Life of Jesus* was immediate and prolific. Traditional believers were predictably outraged by its denial of miracles and Christ’s divinity (one particularly irate female reader repeatedly sending the author an anonymous note to remind him that ‘There is a Hell’), and the Catholic Church was swift to place it on the *Index Librorum Prohibito* alongside several of the author’s earlier works. While it was welcomed and admired by some of the more liberal-minded readers, freethinkers viewed it as a sentimental dilution of Strauss, and theologians derided it for its lack of scholarly restraint. Leaving aside the religious and moral convictions of its critics, however, there was general agreement that Renan’s depiction of Jesus was highly imaginative and executed in a style rather more literary than academic. If some judged Renan’s exuberant prose wholly inappropriate for its subject, others regarded it as its greatest quality, establishing the author’s reputation as a brilliant stylist. In an address of thanks to Renan, following his delivery of the Hibbert Lectures in
1880, Dr James Martineau praised the lectures for their ‘marvellous charm of literary form, in the command of which the French are the first among European nations, and [...] M. Renan among the French’. Even one of Renan’s fiercest detractors, the Catholic theologian Marie Joseph Lagrange, had to concede that ‘Renan’s art stripped exegesis of the heavy garments with which the climate of Germany had smothered it [...] His success was immense, and the sensation still continues.’ Indeed, the attraction of Renan’s art continued well into the twentieth century. Writing in the 1970s, Edward Said reaffirmed the uniqueness of Renan’s *Life of Jesus*:

The text of his book is sober enough, but what it does to the textual forms of the Gospels, their matter and their existence, is highly adventurous, particularly if we take account of the extraordinarily imaginative connection made by Renan between a subject like Jesus, textual records of his life and teaching, and retrospective critical analysis.

While Renan may have declared his preference for the biographical form in his treatment of the Gospels, what Said deems the ‘highly adventurous’ nature of his work stems largely from its reaching beyond the usual perimeters of biography. As Ben Pimlott remarks in the last of his published essays: ‘Most of the world’s greatest religions have a biographical element: at the core of Christian teaching are four resonant biographies.’ Renan no doubt realized that the biographical mode was not in itself enough to produce an absoringly fresh version of Christ’s life, and manipulated the conventions of contemporary genres such as travel writing, the historical novel and realist fiction to guarantee his work’s originality. Countless critics of the *Life* have commented on its kinship with the novel, and there is no doubt that Renan understood how easily what Hans Frei defines as the ‘realistic or history-like quality of biblical narratives’ could be adapted to appeal to readers more accustomed to prose fiction than history or theology. Yet, while Renan’s depiction of setting and character, his manipulation of narrative pace and his literary style invite his *Life* to be read as a work of fiction, its historical foundations – contentious though they were – confound such a straightforward reading. The substantial critical apparatus of the first editions, such as footnotes and appendices, serves to remind readers that they are engaging with a non-fiction text documenting the life of a historical figure.
There are points in the narrative, however, where Renan’s adroit fusion of history and fiction threatens to erase the borderline between the two discourses. This is particularly pronounced in his portrayal of the ‘missing years’ of Christ’s life, a textual lacuna that offered great scope for imaginative speculation and one that had already been exploited in numerous apocryphal writings. Take, for example, Renan’s description of Jesus’s education: ‘He learnt to read and to write, doubtless, according to the Eastern method, which consisted in putting in the hands of the child a book, which he repeated in cadence with his little comrades, until he knew it by heart.’40 Here biographical conjecture, indicated by the parenthetical ‘doubtless’, is easily cast aside as the sentimental image of the young Jesus chanting merrily with his ‘little comrades’ takes shape in the reader’s mind. Read fleetingly, the second ‘he’ of the sentence seems to refer to the same substantive as the first ‘he’, Jesus himself; read more carefully, however, it is clear that it is the typical Eastern child whose cheerful diligence is being evoked. While the grammar of the description acquits Renan of sheer invention, the overall impact owes more to the author’s historical imagination than to verifiable ‘facts’. And while Renan is assiduous throughout the work in maintaining the technical indicators of the biographical mode, frequently prefacing his comments with phrases such as ‘it seems that’, ‘it must have been’ and ‘it is probable that’, the authorial voice is remarkably protean. Further on in the narrative, for example, he makes an intimate appeal to the reader to consider how ‘The last hours of a cherished friend are those we best remember’, in order to appreciate the lasting impact of the Last Supper on the disciples.41 At other times, such as when describing the moments directly following Christ’s death on the cross, he shifts his address from the reader to the subject:

Rest now in thy glory, noble initiator. Thy work is completed; thy divinity is established […] A thousand times more living, a thousand times more loved since thy death than during the days of thy pilgrimage here below, thou wilt become to such a degree the corner-stone of humanity, that to tear thy name from this world would be to shake it to its foundations.42

In this emotive apostrophe, Renan offers a redefinition of the concept of Christ’s divinity to all who reject the supernatural: Jesus’s greatness inheres not in a resurrection but in the enduring impact of his days on
earth. Furthermore, the prayer-like rhythms of the prose, aided by the archaic ‘thy’ and ‘thou’, seem to emulate the fervent devotion of the faithful, effecting what Mary Robinson aptly termed ‘pious unbelief’. Coming at the end of the chapter that depicts Christ’s suffering on the cross, it forms the kind of dramatic climax regularly employed by nineteenth-century serial novelists. However, in the opening paragraph of the succeeding chapter, Renan reasserts the voice of the historian, informing the reader matter-of-factly of the Jewish laws concerning crucified corpses, and citing Origen’s interpretation of Christ’s premature expiry on the cross. Through this diversity of styles Renan’s *Life* takes on the heteroglossic quality of prose fiction, the fluctuations of narrative tone resembling the interplay of the diverse social voices provided by the characters in a novel. Employing a range of typifying lexis, the author manages to suggest multiple presences: the scientist, the historian, the worshipper, the *cicerone*. In so doing, he enriches the narrative texture of the writing, greatly enhancing its appeal for the reader.

The voice that seemed to touch contemporary readers of the *Life* most forcefully was that of the traveller. In contrast with the early nineteenth-century Protestant writers who undertook scientific study of the Levant solely to verify scriptural authenticity and prophecy, Renan employs his first-hand knowledge of Palestine to endue his work with an air of antiquarian charm. The 1860s saw a surge of interest in the archaeology and antiquities of the Near East. In 1865 the Palestine Exploration Fund (PEF) was founded in Britain under the patronage of Queen Victoria, with the intention of funding excavations of the Bible lands and of Jerusalem in particular. Surveying a decade or so of its projects, the *London Quarterly Review* pronounced that:

> The ‘Land’ and the ‘Book’ are indissolubly associated. The one cannot be fully understood without the other. The land must be seen through the eyes of the book, and the book through the eyes of the land. M. Renan, in a memorable passage, describes the surprise with which he discovered the harmony existing between the gospel narrative and the places to which it refers. He declares that the scenes of our Lord’s life are *un cinquième évangile*.  

Citing Renan as instrumental in forging a link between landscape and sacred texts confirms the very considerable impact the *Life* had on the
British public, not least because of its use of the phrase ‘un cinquième évangile’ [a fifth Gospel], which was common parlance by the late nineteenth century. Being more or less in line with Christian orthodoxy, the aims of the PEF differed fundamentally from those of Renan.46 Having carried out an extensive itinerary of travel in Palestine in the early 1860s, Renan had plenty of topographical knowledge to contribute to his rewriting of the Gospels, and he used this, for the most part, for aesthetic purposes. The Life dispels former nineteenth-century images of Palestine as decaying, desolate and accursed by God by picturing the Bible lands as they might have been in the time of Christ.47 Taking the reader back to a former age, Renan attempts to show Jesus in his original setting (true to his promise that he would take up some of the historical ground ignored by Strauss), at the same time creating an atmosphere verging on pastoralism:

The rivulet of Ain-Tabiga makes a little estuary, full of pretty shells. Clouds of aquatic birds hover over the lake. The horizon is dazzling with light. The waters, of an empyrean blue, deeply imbedded amid burning rocks, seem, when viewed from the height of the mountains of Safed, to lie at the bottom of a cup of gold. 48

Here, syntactical variation, rich imagery and elaborate adjectives paint a reassuring setting in which to envisage the historical Jesus, the appeal of aesthetics replacing that of faith in an age of ever-increasing religious scepticism. And no less atmospheric is his lyrical description of Galilee which, with its shifts from the past simple to the present historic tense, takes the reader on a journey back in time, offering a form of literary escapism to keep the harsher elements of unbelief at bay:

Galilee [...] was a very green, shady, smiling district, the true home of the Song of Songs, and the songs of the well-beloved. During the two months of March and April the country forms a carpet of flowers of an incomparable variety of colours. The animals are small, and extremely gentle: – delicate and lively turtle-doves, blue-birds so light that they rest on a blade of grass without bending it, crested larks which venture almost under the feet of the traveller, little river tortoises with mild and lively eyes, storks with grave and modest mien, which, laying aside all timidity, allow man to come quite near them, and seem almost to invite his approach.49
It was largely this kind of representation of the natural world of Palestine that earned Renan his reputation as a writer more inclined to romanticism than serious theology. One of his most vehement critics, the French Reformed pastor Edmond de Pressensé, took particular exception to Renan’s insistence on a spiritual correspondence between Christ and his environment.50 Pressensé complained that Renan’s ‘exquisite passages […] polished like the finest diamond’ ascribed ‘an exorbitant influence to nature in the development of the soul of Jesus’.51 Indeed, for the orthodox reader, Renan’s urging that the ‘birds of heaven, the sea, the mountains, and the games of children, furnished in turn the subject of his instructions’52 placed Christ too close to the earth and too far away from his heavenly father, rendering him, in the words of John Middleton Murry, little more than a ‘village illuminé’.53 Similarly, his suggestion that Christ’s soul was enriched and elevated more by the temperate climate of Galilee than by the Almighty placed his subject’s sensibilities closer to those of the Romantic poet than the holy man, a characterization that some considered highly irreverent. Nonetheless, Renan’s vision of the Palestinian Jesus seemed to stamp itself upon the minds of even his most critical readers. Author of numerous works on Christianity, Frances Power Cobbe, though highly critical of Renan’s aestheticism, writes of the impossibility of recovering the person of Christ in a style itself distinctly Renanian:

Rather do we only look sorrowfully over the waves of time to behold reflected therein some such faint and wavering image as his face may have cast on the Lake of Galilee as he leaned at eventide from the ship of his disciples, over the waters stirred and rippling before the breeze.54

Renan, like several of the biographers of Jesus who followed him, brought his subject squarely in line with the spirit of the age. If, as the author states in the preface to the Édition Populaire, ‘On peut aimer Jeanne d’Arc sans admettre la réalité de ses visions’ [One can admire Joan of Arc without accepting the reality of her visions], so his romantic figure of Christ could be admired and loved by those for whom science had long replaced miracle.55 A Jesus who could be regarded as a product of nature, rather than as a mysterious emanation from the heavens, was welcomed by readers unable to accept the Gospel miracles but reluctant to give up what they saw as the ideal
example of human greatness. Renan’s portrayal of Christ as the finest human being of all time, a pattern for all to follow, is echoed by agnostics such as John Stuart Mill, who defines him as ‘a standard of excellence and a model for imitation’, one who could provide a spiritual guide for the unbeliever. Renan’s Jesus is a man of ‘extraordinary sweetness’ and ‘infinite charm’, kind to women and children and adored by them in return. In some respects this image of Christ proved extremely attractive for nineteenth-century readers, especially those partial to sentimental and idealized images of women and children. Moreover, Renan’s speculation about whether Jesus reflected on the ‘young maidens who, perhaps, would have consented to love him’ during his agony in the Garden of Gethsemane hinted at his potential to become both husband and father, and aligned him more easily with the mid-century normative view of masculinity. Likewise, Renan’s description of Christ as ‘no longer a Jew’ was very much in line with the mid-century view of the Saviour as the instigator of a revolutionary new faith, one who had broken entirely with the Judaic religion.

Renan takes care, though, that his leading character is not unfeasibly good: Jesus is susceptible to adulation, taking pleasure from being hailed as ‘son of David’. He is also given to bouts of bad humour and melancholy, leading him ‘to commit inexplicable and apparently absurd acts’, a changeability that prefigured Albert Schweitzer’s vision of Christ as a fervid apocalyptic, and that was frequently criticized by Renan’s opponents as inimical to the Christian ideal of an immutable figure of divinity. Renan emphasizes that, like all human beings, Jesus is prone to change, doubt and anxiety, and offers the reader tantalizing glimpses into his putative inner life. He evokes Christ’s thoughts in the Garden of Gethsemane through a series of speculations: ‘Did he curse the hard destiny which had denied him the joys conceded to all others? Did he regret his too lofty nature, and, victim of his greatness, did he mourn that he had not remained a simple artisan of Nazareth?’ Notice here how Renan is careful to maintain the dividing line between fiction and biography, employing authorial questions rather than free indirect discourse. By the following century, however, biographers would start to follow the narrative technique of some contemporary fiction writers to build on Renan’s stylistic method, dropping the conjectural syntax and conveying Christ’s thoughts as if coming directly from his own mind.
One aspect of Christ’s personality that Renan conveys as both constant and indisputable is his way with words. As critics highlighted the author’s stylistic felicities, so the author draws attention to the same qualities in his subject. Renan’s Jesus has the soul of a poet: he has a sensitive appreciation of the verses of the Old Testament; he enjoys the linguistic energies of wordplay; he inspires an entirely original form of parable, ‘charming apologues’ articulated in ‘beautiful language’. Just as British writers tended to compare the words of Christ to those of Shakespeare, so Renan likens them to those of Molière. Endowing Christ with literary flair is another means by which the heretical contents of the Life are softened: Jesus may not be divine, but his eloquence and poetic sensibilities furnish him with a spiritual quality entirely in keeping with the founder of a world religion. It was, perhaps, the coincidence of the literary talents of both author and subject that led some readers of the Life to consider it a work closer to autobiography than biography. At the start of the twentieth century, Schweitzer was to make a similar observation in relation to the entire genre of Lives of Jesus: that ‘each individual created Jesus in accordance with his own character’. Yet this identification of the writer with his subject fails to recognize the enormous scope and influence of Renan’s work. Far from capturing the essence of only one man in Jesus, he succeeds in capturing the mood of the 1860s in all its contradictoriness. In The Gospels, Renan claims that ‘the life of Jesus will always obtain a great success when the writer has the necessary degree of ability, of boldness, and of naïveté to translate the Gospel into the style of his time’, and there is no doubt that he more than succeeded in fulfilling his own criteria. His Life is, to use Thomas De Quincey’s definition, an example of the ‘literature of power’, in contradistinction to the ‘literature of knowledge’. Those readers looking for the latest in theological scholarship would have found little of note in Renan’s rewriting of the Gospels; however, those seeking a vision of Jesus that would move, inspire and comfort them in an increasingly materialist century would have found an ideal guide.

Towards a definitive English Life of Jesus:
J. R. Seeley and F. W. Farrar

By the mid-1860s, the New Testament studies of Strauss and Renan had left British theology looking outmoded and unfit for the modern
age. Fearing the consequences of simply ignoring the Higher Criticism, a number of traditional British Christians called for a more strenuous resistance to its influence, with biographical studies of the historical Jesus being regarded as the best means to this end. In 1864, no doubt prompted by the publication of the English translation of Renan’s Life, one pseudonymous author wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury, urging that ‘the first-fruits of our native School of Biblical criticism, an English history of the life of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ should forthwith be prepared by some thoroughly competent English writer’. Such a Life, the author suggests, would serve as a corrective to the ‘absurd fancies’ of the likes of Renan and Strauss and would ‘without professing to be authoritative [...] so commend itself to the reason and feelings of all believers in revelation, as to serve as a standard not only to the members of the Established Church of England, but also to pious and thoughtful Christians of every denomination both in this country and abroad’. Less than a year later, what was to become regarded by some as the definitive English Life of Jesus entered the public arena, though it was far from being the refutation of heresy this particular writer had in mind.

*Ecce Homo: A Survey of the Life and Work of Christ* was published in 1865. By the end of 1866, the identity of its author had been revealed as John Robert Seeley, then Professor of Latin at University College London. Numerous reviewers compared Seeley’s work with Renan’s Life, asseverating that a British Renan had entered the controversy over the life of Jesus. Yet of the plethora of liberal Lives of Jesus produced in the final forty years of the nineteenth century, Seeley’s is in some ways one of the least like Renan’s. Certainly it shares some surface similarities. As in Renan’s Life, Christ’s humanity is emphasized throughout, beginning with its bold title, *Ecce Homo* or ‘Behold the man!’, the words of Pontius Pilate, recorded in John’s Gospel (19:5); and in the main body of the work, Seeley expounds his conviction that ‘within the whole creation of God nothing more elevated or more attractive has yet been found than he’, a human perfection that enables Jesus to inspire ‘an enthusiasm of humanity’. Like Renan, Seeley shows an acute awareness of contemporary issues, relating the story of Christ to Victorian debates over issues such as philanthropy, scientific advance and the abolition of slavery. And where Renan compares Jesus to Molière, Seeley chooses to compare him to Britain’s equivalent: Shakespeare. Yet Seeley’s work differs starkly from Renan’s in both its selection of textual material and in its
stylistic methods. If Renan wrote with the creative flair of the novelist, then Seeley wrote with the control and clarity of the accomplished lecturer.\textsuperscript{76} \textit{Ecce Homo} is structured around a series of sustained discussions of various aspects of Christ’s ministry, the second half of the study being separated into a number of meditations on abstract concepts such as morality, mercy and forgiveness. Where Renan creates cliff-hanger endings for his chapters, Seeley supplies chapter summaries, focusing the reader’s mind on the salient points of what he describes as his ‘investigation’ into the life of Christ.\textsuperscript{77} Eschewing the traditional methods of the biographer, Seeley selects Gospel incidents to illustrate his ideas rather than presenting them in a linear narrative. New Testament figures such as Mary Magdalene, Judas and Joseph of Arimathea, for all their potential for imaginative development, find no place in Seeley’s restrained study. In contrast to Renan’s exuberant prose style, Seeley writes in an oddly oblique and often distant manner, defined by one reviewer as ‘Power without show of power; a quiet, simply-evolved, unrhetorical form of sentence and paragraph.’\textsuperscript{78} Voiced in the third person throughout, \textit{Ecce Homo} has none of the directness of Renan’s \textit{Life}; the reader is neither invited to speculate on Christ’s state of mind, nor to visualize the Palestinian landscape. Seen through Seeley’s vision, Renan’s poet-Christ becomes the somewhat less Romantic tutor-figure. The \textit{Edinburgh Review} was typical of its time in accounting for these essential differences between Renan and Seeley in terms of national characteristics: where the Frenchman had approached his subject ‘on the side of the Imagination’, his English counterpart had produced a work which is ‘undramatic’ and ‘characteristic of […] the country whence it sprang’.\textsuperscript{79} What were deemed English qualities in Seeley’s work – austerity, temperance and quiet strength – largely coincided with the Victorian normative view of manliness. Gladstone admired the ‘broad and masculine grasp’ of \textit{Ecce Homo}, with numerous other reviewers regarding it as a welcome corrective to Renan’s feminizing of the Christian narrative.\textsuperscript{80}

Hailed by the \textit{Fortnightly Review} as the ‘most important religious book that has appeared in England for a quarter of a century’,\textsuperscript{81} and described by Schweitzer as the ‘classical liberal English life of Jesus’, \textit{Ecce Homo} was undoubtedly a work of great significance.\textsuperscript{82} However, its impact can be attributed more to its omissions and ambivalences than to any more concrete qualities; as the author of the first comprehensive study of Seeley’s life and work succinctly puts it ‘one misses […] a decisive yes or no’.\textsuperscript{83} After giving the prefatory disclaimer that
‘No theological questions whatever are here discussed’, the argument that ensues refuses to come down on the side of either religion or science, the author at one point declaring that ‘Both are true and both are essential to human happiness.’

Seeley assiduously avoids the New Testament debates of his day. He steers clear of discussing whether the Gospel miracles were true or imagined, opting instead to deal ‘Provisionally […] [with] them as real’ (a position that the Westminster Review judged worthy only of ‘the official rhetoric of the less educated bishops’), and, most conspicuously of all, he omits any mention of the Passion, the most vehemently disputed area of the source texts. This theological fence-sitting renders the work unusually open to interpretation, and critical responses did not always align neatly with denominational standpoints. While, for example, the Evangelical J. K. Glazebrook’s condemnation of the work as one of the ‘infidel publications of the day’ was entirely predictable, the praise heaped on the work by Gladstone, a High Churchman, was not. As John Henry Newman so aptly put it in his review of the fifth edition of Ecce Homo, the onus is put upon the reader to decide whether Seeley is ‘an orthodox believer on his road to liberalism, or a liberal on his road to orthodoxy’. Indeed, Ecce Homo generated a formidable number of reviews and monographs by its very indeterminacy. Lacking the scholarly rigour of Strauss and the populist appeal of Renan, and refusing to declare his views on issues as crucial as Christ’s divinity, Seeley cannot be easily placed along the continuum of Lives of Jesus. There is no doubt, however, that the stir caused by the work’s publication played a crucial role in further animating the quest for the historical Jesus. The title of Seeley’s book, which had caused great offence to readers on account of what was then considered to be its pagan origins (Pilate was, after all, a Roman), reverberated in the titles of some of the responses it provoked. Works such as Joseph Parker’s Ecce Deus, the ‘ultra-Unitarian’ Ecce Veritas and D. Melville Stewart’s Ecce Vir ensured that the original title was kept in the public consciousness well into the twentieth century.

Though Seeley’s study no doubt influenced what was written about Jesus and his life, it had less effect on how they were presented, and Renan’s Life remained the dominant stylistic model. While some of the more traditional elements of English society tried hard to ignore Renan’s Life of Jesus in the vain hope that it might disappear back across the Channel, its imprint on British lives of Christ proved indelible.
the way in which his style was more likely to be emulated by the orthodox writer than by the heterodox; indeed, rationalist writers such as Thomas Scott produced Lives of Jesus that self-consciously resisted the Frenchman’s lyricism. Scott’s *The English Life of Jesus*, as its title proclaims, is clearly aimed at supplying the nation’s demand for its own study of the historical Jesus. Stylistically, it has all the austerity of Strauss and none of the warmth and antiquarian charm of Renan, features that may account for its limited readership and its never posing a serious challenge to Seeley’s *Ecce Homo* as the definitive English Life. While it attracted compliments from some of the more liberal-minded clergymen, one of whom admired it for appealing to ‘the English sense of truthfulness’, its style and method was, as one freethinker put it, too ‘business-like’ to hold much appeal for the general reader. Where Renan appealed to the emotional empathy of his readers, Scott appealed to their sense of logic. In Scott’s Life, the Passion narratives, heavily adorned and emotionally height-ened by Renan and his imitators, are dismissed as typological reworkings of the Psalms; and where the French biographer fused the four-fold Gospel into a compelling drama, the English one insisted rather sourly that any ‘attempt to harmonize the several contradictory narratives can produce only a ridiculous medley, which may be best compared to attempts to mingle oil and vinegar’. For Scott, the New Testament already contained more than enough fiction – the Fourth Gospel being an egregious example – without writers on the life of Christ adding additional layers to it. There is, indeed, a supercilious-ness of tone, verging on the puritanical, in Scott’s writing that many readers must have found off-putting. His scepticism is expressed with palpable disdain, if not disgust: the early rationalist theory that Jesus might have been revived following his crucifixion is deemed to be ‘not merely absurd but revolting’ and the poetic qualities that even the most hardened unbeliever appreciated in the Gospel of John are dismissed as sophistic and elitist. The overall impression the reader gains of the author of *The English Life of Jesus* is that of someone intent on reaffirming the unorthodox kernel of Renan’s fundamen-tally Straussian argument, while resolutely refusing to imitate its stylistic flourishes.

There were, however, some biographers of Christ who were more than willing to match Renan’s literary exuberance, especially when it was to beat him at his own game. One such was William Hanna, a Free Church of Scotland minister whose six-volume study of Christ was
the most expansive British Life of Jesus published. Originating in a series of sermons, Hanna’s work was entirely devotional in intention, his structural approach being to ‘harmonize the accounts given by the different Evangelists […] to construct a continuous narrative’. In carrying out such an organization he shows a shrewd appreciation of the Gospels’ potential for imaginative retelling. In terms more suited to the theatre than the pulpit, he refers in the preface to ‘the motives and feelings of the different actors and spectators’ of the New Testament and their place in the story of ‘the great Central Character’. His handling of the narrative lives up, in parts, to this promise of drama, particularly in the fifth volume, which is devoted to the Passion. With seemingly unconscious irony, Hanna dedicates much of the seventh chapter of this volume to warning the reader of the dangers of dramatic prose writing in his own highly dramatic prose. Taking Christ’s instruction to the daughters of Jerusalem, ‘do not weep for me’ (Luke 23:28), as his text, Hanna interprets the phrase as warning against excessive emotionalism, in itself a form of ‘selfish gratification’. He moves on from this to express the traditional Protestant disapproval of ‘indulging to excess the reading of exciting fiction – tales in which the hero of the story passes through terrible trials, endurances, agonies of mind and heart’, going on to describe how ‘our heart may pulsate all through with pity as we read’ and how ‘we may wet with tears the page that spreads out some heartrending scene’. Here, Hanna’s rousing language only serves to confirm the lure of such a mode of storytelling, and the reader cannot fail to notice the close parallels between his chosen fictional example and the harrowing crucifixion narrative that follows.

Though lacking the flair of Renan, Hanna’s retelling of the Passion still manages to evoke the very sensations he advises his readers to resist. He spares no literary device when describing the darkness that, according to the synoptic Gospels, covers the earth as Jesus hangs on the cross:

Did it come slowly on, deepening and deepening till it reached its point of thickest gloom? or was it, as we incline to believe, as instantaneous in its entrance as its exit: at the sixth hour, covering all in a moment with its dark mantle; at the ninth hour, in a moment lifting that mantle off? Was it total or partial: a darkness deep as that of moonless, starless midnight, wrapping the cross so thickly round, that not the man who stood the nearest to it could see aught of the
sufferer? Or was it the darkness of a hazy twilight obscuring but not wholly concealing, which left the upraised form of the Redeemer dimly visible through the gloom?  

There is certainly plenty here to get the Victorian reader’s heart racing as Hanna leads him into the gloom of Golgotha. The posing of direct questions, lent emphasis by grammatical parallelism, activates the imagination, while the personification of the darkness with its ‘entrance’ and ‘exit’ lends it a certain self-conscious drama. Yet no sooner is the reader invited to consider just how much of Christ’s suffering body an onlooker could make out through the gloom than he is made to feel his own vulgarity and baseness in even desiring to witness such a sight:

Men gazed rudely on the sight, but the sun refused to look on it, hiding his face for a season. Men would leave the Crucified, exposed in shame and nakedness, to die; but an unseen hand was stretched forth to draw the drapery of darkness around the sufferer, and hide him from vulgar gaze.

Here, Hanna cuts short the reader’s imagination with the inept and simple-minded linking of the brutal realities of Roman crucifixion with an entirely supernatural event. Notwithstanding his ability to command the elemental forces of the universe, Hanna’s God is Victorian to the core: as much concerned to protect his Son’s sexual propriety as he is with expressing displeasure at his slaughter. In moving the spotlight away from the ‘upraised form of the Redeemer’ to the generic ‘sufferer’, Hanna employs Renan’s grammatical trick of letting the general stand for the specific, a shift that serves to maintain a reverent distance between reader and sacred subject. That is not to say, however, that Hanna is willing to sacrifice the dramatic potential of Christ’s final moments:

A sudden change comes over his spirit. He ceases to think of, to speak with man. His eye closes upon the crowd that stands around. He is alone with the Father. A dark cloud wraps his spirit. He fears as he enters it.

Here, then, the scene is brought back into close focus as the author works hard at stimulating the emotions of the reader through the use
of the historic present tense and the accumulation of short, abrupt sentences, stripped of polysyllables. Almost a hundred pages on from this description, and still reluctant to leave the Passion narrative behind, Hanna once again encourages the reader to dwell on the crucifixion scene: ‘The burial is over now, and we might depart; but let us linger a little longer, and bestow a parting look on the persons and the place, – the buriers and the burying-ground.’ Here, the author’s direct address to the reader infuses the writing with a tone of confidentiality – not unlike that exploited by Renan – while his continued use of the present historic tense and his invitation to ‘linger’ at the death scene seems to once again lure the reader into an unseemly mawkishness.

By the end of the 1860s, works such as Hanna’s were in plentiful supply. Indeed, one reviewer, writing in 1872, observed that ‘Lives of Jesus multiply with a rapidity that makes hopeless all freshness, and very much worth. They simply repeat one another like sermons.’ This sounding of the death knell for the Lives of Jesus genre was, however, somewhat precipitate. Sensing that there was still a strong market for a Life of Jesus with popular appeal, the publishing company Cassell, Petter and Galpin approached Frederic William Farrar with a view to his producing for their readers ‘a sketch of the Life of Christ on earth as should enable them to realise it more clearly, and to enter more thoroughly into the details and sequence of the Gospel narratives’. The commission offered a generous payment for the completed work and expenses for an excursion to the Holy Land, the latter detail suggesting that the publishers were keen to replicate the immense success enjoyed by Renan’s Life, with its sustained focus on Christ’s homeland. Choosing Farrar was an astute move. Though by no means a prominent theologian, Farrar’s posts as Chaplain to the Queen and headmaster of Marlborough College ensured that his name was familiar to the reading public; moreover, as the author of edifying novels about public school life, he had the credentials to appeal to a more traditional readership. Farrar was doubtless aware of the challenge involved in writing a saleable Life of Jesus at a time when the genre seemed to be reaching its apex and responded to it with great ingenuity. Eager to appeal to the whole spectrum of readers, he made clear in his preface that he was writing both for ‘the simple and the unlearned’ and the ‘professed theologian’, and while he insists that his Life is ‘unconditionally the work of a believer’, he is also keen to stress that it will not prove ‘wholly valueless to any honest doubter
who reads it in a candid and uncontemptuous spirit’. To carry out his ambitious intentions, Farrar employs diverse methods of interpreting and presenting the Scriptures, calling upon the everyday logic of the rationalist, the linguistic skills of the translator and the literary flair of earlier writers to portray his essentially orthodox vision. At the same time, to demonstrate his knowledge of the Higher Criticism and Jewish Scripture and religious practice, he provides copious footnotes and a list of authorities so long that it prompted one reviewer to point out that, if Farrar had indeed read them all, then ‘the duties of the masters of our public schools must be less onerous than has commonly been supposed’.

*The Life of Christ* enjoyed instant success. The author’s son noted in his 1905 biography of his father that:

Twelve editions, at the rate of one a month, were exhausted in the first year of its publication. Since its first appearance the work has gone through thirty editions in England alone, has been ‘pirated’ in America, and has been translated into almost every European language, including two independent translations into Russian, and even into Japanese.

Its popularity was no doubt aided by generally laudatory reviews that admired its deft combination of scholarship and piety; approval was even expressed by the Roman Catholic journal, the *Month*, which declared that ‘there is more learning about it than about the pretentious flippancy of Rénan [sic]’. It was a comparison that would have afforded Farrar a great deal of satisfaction: Renan was very much Farrar’s *bête noire* and would remain so throughout his writing career. In the preface to *The Life of Christ* he warns the reader not to expect ‘brilliant combinations of mythic cloud tinged by the sunset imagination of some decadent belief’, an obvious jibe at Renan’s *Life of Jesus*. Twenty years later, he was still intent on castigating Renan for past crimes, whether denouncing the ‘extreme […] irreverence’ of Godefroy Durand’s illustrations to the popular edition of 1870, or insisting that the author’s work had ‘failed to shake a general conviction’.

Yet however contemptuous Farrar might have been of Renan’s ‘sunset imagination’, his own book offers the reader a prose style every bit as vivid and effusive, an irony underscored by a significant number of reviewers. While a small minority of evangelicals took
Farrar to task for using inappropriately colloquial language to narrate the most sacred of lives, the vast majority of criticism was aimed at its flamboyance. The Athenaeum was one of the severest critics, judging the rhetoric of The Life of Christ ‘excessive and artificial, often far-fetched and fanciful’, and pitying a reader who, ‘dazzled with the gaudy glitter, sighs for repose’.\textsuperscript{117} Farrar’s son recorded how ‘the terms “florid” and “exuberant” have been recorded \textit{ad nauseam}’ in response to The Life of Christ, and this deriding of the aesthetics of the work seemed to stick in the critical consciousness.\textsuperscript{118} Two decades on, in a review of Wilson Barrett’s melodramatic Early Christian novel The Sign of the Cross, the critic comments that he had ‘long feared that someone might arise who would oust the Dean from his proud pre-eminence in classical romance’.\textsuperscript{119} Such criticism inevitably recalled that directed towards Renan, and Farrar would doubtless have been stung by the coincidence. In a letter to Macmillan’s Magazine, written a year after the publication of his Life, Farrar defends himself against those reviewers who had accused him of depicting the crucifixion in a gratuitously gruesome manner, insisting that he had no intention ‘to add, or to invent, one touch or colour of pain or dreadfulness’.\textsuperscript{120}

Indeed, throughout The Life of Christ Farrar vents his disapproval of all types of sensational writing associated with the Scriptures, accusing the authors of the Apocryphal Gospels of rendering Christ’s boyhood ‘portentous, terror-striking, unnatural, repulsive’ in their over-imaginative writings.\textsuperscript{121}

Notwithstanding Farrar’s avowed distaste for stylistic over-indulgence, the popularity of The Life of Christ was due largely to its author’s manipulation of imaginative detail and dramatic language. If anyone deserved the epithet ‘the English Renan’ it was Farrar, and not only for his literary style. While the orthodox Englishman differed radically from the Frenchman in his essential view of Jesus, he followed him in portraying a man who is sweet-natured, a uniquely gifted storyteller and a lover of nature. Making extensive use of Renan’s habit of imaginative conjecture, Farrar’s portrait of Christ is filled with the kind of everyday human detail he so admired in the paintings of Holman Hunt, to fill up what he describes in a later work as ‘the interspaces of the eloquent silence of the Evangelists’.\textsuperscript{122} Drawing on legends passed down through Church tradition, Farrar informs the reader of Jesus’s physical appearance and his eating and sleeping habits; his hair ‘the colour of wine, is parted in the middle of the forehead, and flows down over the neck’ and his skin is ‘of a more
Hellenic type than the weather-bronzed and olive-tinted faces of [...] His Apostles'; his diet is plain but healthy, consisting of ‘bread of the coarsest quality, fish caught in the lake [...] and sometimes a piece of honeycomb’; and he has ‘that blessing of ready sleep’.123 But however much Farrar’s characterization of Jesus might resemble Renan’s in certain respects, he was mindful that his Christ could not be accused of the effeminacy so frequently identified in the French portrait.124 In a manner anticipating the muscular Christianity of his friend Thomas Hughes, Farrar interprets Jesus’s refusing of an opiate to ease his physical suffering on the cross as a sign of his masculinity, an act of ‘sublimest heroism’;125 and where the Fourth Gospel simply reports that ‘Jesus wept’ (John 11:35) at the death of Lazarus, Farrar qualifies the phrase by adding that his tears were ‘silent’, the transferred epithet emphasizing the emotional restraint expected of the Victorian male.126

As with his methods of characterization, Farrar’s editing and selection of his source material suggest the instinct of the popular novelist. Though departing from some of his more evangelical predecessors in admitting in the preface to The Life of Christ that a convincing harmony of the Gospels is both impossible and undesirable, he nevertheless follows Renan in selecting and shaping them so as to ensure maximum dramatic impact. Matthew’s account of Pontius Pilate is chosen for the intriguing detail of his wife’s dream; John’s narration of the anointing of Christ’s feet with costly ointment is chosen over those of the Synoptists as it features Mary, sister of Lazarus, already a distinctive character in the story, rather than the anonymous women of the other three versions. In other instances, Farrar conflates all four texts: for example, bringing together all the women said to be at the foot of Christ’s cross in his re-imagining of the crucifixion scene.127 In some respects, Farrar regarded his reshaping of the New Testament narratives as a means of making up for the artistic shortcomings of their original authors, mere recorders – as he saw them – of revelation. He explains to the reader that the rude simplicity of the Gospel accounts is in itself proof of their integrity and that men who ‘were constantly taking His [Christ’s] figurative expressions literally, and His literal expressions metaphorically’ could hardly have been expected to produce sophisticated biographies of their Saviour.128 Indeed, in a letter to Macmillan’s Magazine he attests that Lives such as his are needed to add life and energy to the spare Gospel accounts of Christ’s life ‘often narrated without clear notes of time and place’.129

While Farrar repeatedly insists that New Testament stories ‘tran-
scend[s] all power of human imagination’, he has no qualms about embellishing their typically stark outlines. Take, for example, his recounting of the incident of the woman taken in adultery, for the Victorians one of the most revered texts of the Gospels. Told in a spare eight verses most commonly printed in the text of John’s Gospel, the story was admired not only for the qualities of love and forgiveness that it illustrates, but also for its aesthetic grace. Oscar Wilde, who gives his own succinct but nonetheless affecting version of the story in De Profundis, was among many of his generation who admired the restrained beauty of Christ’s verbal challenge to the authorities. In Farrar’s own highly emotive reworking of the story, he goes all out to dramatize the scene. Where the King James version records how the woman is ‘brought’ before Jesus [John 8:3], Farrar describes how she is ‘dragged’ before him; where the original text leaves the reader to judge the behaviour of the scribes and the Pharisees, Farrar supplies him with a lexis of moral antithesis, leaving him no space to formulate his own mode of censure. The author juxtaposes the ‘cold, hard cynicism’ and ‘graceless, pitiless, barbarous brutality’ of the Jewish law with the ‘stainless Innocence’ of Christ. And while not omitting the woman’s ‘flagrant guilt’, we are called upon to appreciate the ‘moral torture’ and ‘superfluous horror’ to which the woman is subjected by the religious authorities. The energy and immediacy of the scene and its ‘malignant mob’ is conveyed through a long series of increasingly fervid questions, moving between reported and free indirect thought:

Would He then acquit this woman, and so make Himself liable to an accusation of heresy, by placing Himself in open disaccord with the sacred and fiery Law? or, on the other hand, would He belie His own compassion, and be ruthless, and condemn? And if He did, would He not at once shock the multitude, who were touched by His tenderness, and offend the civil magistrates by making Himself liable to a charge of sedition? How could He possibly get out of the difficulty? Either alternative – heresy or treason, accusation before the Sanhedrin or delation to the Procurator […] would serve equally well their unscrupulous intentions. And one of these, they thought, must follow. What a happy chance this weak, guilty woman had given them!

When the reader’s attention is directed to Christ himself, the prose loses its hectic pace and frantic questions give way to composed certainties:
A sense of all their baseness, their hardness, their malice, their cynical parade of every feeling which pity would temper and delicacy repress, rushed over the mind of Jesus. He blushed for His nation, for His race; He blushed, not for the degradation of the miserable accused, but for the deeper guilt of her unblushing accusers.\footnote{135}

In taking care to attribute Jesus’s blushing to his shame at his race and nation, and not to any kind of unease at the sexual nature of the sin, Farrar seems to be replying to J. R. Seeley’s interpretation of the story in \textit{Ecce Homo}, where the woman’s being detected ‘\textit{in the very act}’ [author’s italics] is seen to have discountenanced the celibate Jesus so that ‘In his burning embarrassment and confusion he stooped down so as to hide his face, and began writing with his finger on the ground.’\footnote{136} It was a retelling that had provoked angry reactions in the periodical press, \textit{The Quarterly Review}, for example, denouncing the author for ‘the coarseness and latitude of the interpretation’ of the incident.\footnote{137} Farrar’s treatment of the story, then, still carries the shadow of previous treatments by other biographers, an intertextuality that underlines the significance of reader response for the development of the Lives of Jesus genre.

Farrar’s predilection for highly emotive writing is nowhere more evident than in his retelling of the Passion narratives. In this description of the scourged Christ, Farrar’s highly wrought prose serves to heighten the drama of the ordeal:

\begin{quote}
Around the brows of Jesus, in wanton mimicry of the Emperor’s laurel, they twisted a green wreath of thorny leaves; in His tied and trembling hands they placed a reed for sceptre; from His torn and bleeding shoulders they stripped the white robe with which Herod had mocked Him – which must now have been all soaked with blood – and flung on Him an old scarlet paludament – some cast-off war cloak, with its purple laticlave, from the Praetorian wardrobe. This, with feigned solemnity, they buckled over His right shoulder, with its glittering fibula […].\footnote{138}
\end{quote}

Here, the anaphoric structure of the lengthy sentence detailing the indignities being inflicted on the victim, along with the two parentheses, serves to emphasize Christ’s dignified stillness before the mocking gaze of the spectators; and in the contrastingly short sentence
that follows, the adjective ‘glittering’ is shocking in its incongruous modification of an open wound. A few pages on, the depiction of the actual crucifixion is as grisly and explicit as any to be found in medieval miracle plays:139

His arms were stretched along the cross-beams; and at the very centre of the open palms, first of the right, then of the left hand, the point of a huge iron nail was placed, which, by the blow of a mallet, was driven home into the wood, crushing with excruciating pain, all the fine nerves and muscles of the hands through which they were driven. Then the legs were drawn down at full length: and through either foot separately, or possibly through both together as they were placed one over the other, another huge nail tore its way through the quivering and bleeding flesh.140

Perhaps anticipating the criticism this particular passage would receive in the journals of the day, Farrar adds a footnote justifying the violence of the description: ‘I write thus because the familiarity of oft-repeated words prevents us from realising what crucifixion really was, and because it seems well that we should realise this.’141 Though the Fourth Gospel is alone in explicitly signalling that Jesus was nailed to the cross, Farrar is content to give it precedence over the other three accounts for the sake of this arresting image of the torture and penetration of the sacred body.142 And Farrar’s fascination with the ‘quivering flesh’ of Christ continues to reveal itself in his description of the effects of crucifixion. Though ostensibly he itemizes the physical torments of the crucified in general, the reader is encouraged to imagine them as peculiar to the suffering Christ. The author paints in words an image reminiscent of that depicted in the early sixteenth-century painting by Matthias Grünewald of a torn and bleeding Man of Sorrows:

The unnatural position made every movement painful; the lacerated veins and crushed tendons throbbed with incessant anguish; the wounds, inflamed by exposure, gradually gangrened; the arteries – especially of the head and stomach – became swollen and oppressed with surcharged blood.143

Farrar’s writing here sensationalizes pain, the dense nature of the sentence serving to enmesh the reader as it recounts every torturous
physical detail. Farrar toned down some of the more gruesome descriptions of the crucifixion in the revised edition of 1893, dispensing with some of the more gratuitously graphic images. In making such cuts, Farrar would appear to be practising what he went on to preach in his 1894 work, *The Life of Christ as Represented in Art*, in which he questions whether it ‘be lawful to paint this subject at all’. However, the reader already familiar with Farrar’s description of the crucifixion cannot help but feel there is a certain irony in the author’s admiration of Fra Angelico’s restrained visual depiction of the crucified Christ:

> Next we notice the reverence and the good taste which shrank from the attempt at anatomic nudities, as much from the ignorant and ghastly profusion of blood. His object was not to exhibit the Crucifixion as a scene of torture on which men were to gaze with gloating and morbid curiosity […]

If some of Farrar’s more purple passages aimed at stirring emotional responses to the story of Christ’s life, his liberal sprinkling of lines from the work of British poets, past and present, throughout his work seems intent on rousing a strong sense of national identity. Quotations, some indirect, some direct, are placed within the text, often to reinforce a moral truth or to provide an apt parallel to a thought or deed of Jesus; others form the epigraphs that subscribe each chapter heading. Poets from previous centuries, such as Milton and Pope, share equal space with contemporary poets such as Browning, Clough and Tennyson. But it is Shakespeare who takes pride of place. Speeches from the major tragedies, and even a few of the comedies, find their way into almost every strand of the narrative. In some instances, the sources of these citations are stated; in others, only the playwright’s words appear and it is left to the well-educated and literary reader to identify them. This omnipresence of a playwright who had been regarded for over a century as emblematic of Englishness lends Farrar’s *Life of Christ* a strong national identity, clearly distinguishing it from its Renanian predecessor.

As the best-selling English Life of Jesus, Farrar’s work provided the model for the majority of orthodox studies of Christ up to the close of the century (as well as proving popular as wedding and christening gifts). Farrar had proved beyond any doubt that the public appetite for Lives of Jesus was far from sated, and numerous writers continued to
exploit the genre. However, only those authors capable of emulating Farrar’s artful fusion of orthodoxy and popular appeal attracted any significant readership. Two such were Cunningham Geikie and Alfred Edersheim, both of whom wrote lengthy studies of Jesus that attracted a wide readership. The first of these to be published, Geikie’s *The Life and Words of Christ* (1877), replicates Farrar’s *Life in its evocation of Palestinian landscape, politics, religious ritual and family life, and in its listing of theological authorities. It also follows Farrar in regarding Jesus as part of a literary elite. Geikie insists that ‘We all know how lowly a reverence is paid to Him in passage after passage by Shakespere [sic], the greatest intellect known’, and extends the list of Christ’s admirers to include Europeans such as Goethe and Rousseau. And though not quite as extravagant in its style as Farrar’s *Life*, it succeeds in rewriting the Gospel stories in a manner guaranteed to appeal more to the reader of historical romance than to the scholar. Geikie’s retelling of the Passion narratives in particular owes much to his forefather: the body of his scourged Christ is also a ‘quivering’ mass of broken flesh and the reader is not spared the graphic detailing of the impact of iron nails being driven through ‘sensitive nerves and sinews’, and the ‘intolerable thirst, and ever-increasing pain’ that ensued.

Published six years after Geikie’s *Life, Alfred Edersheim’s* *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* promised to depart somewhat from Farrar’s model in its foregrounding of Judaic cultural, social and religious customs. In the preface to the work he states that ‘since Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew, spoke to, and moved among Jews [...] it was absolutely necessary to view that Life and Teaching in all its surrounding of place, society, popular life, and intellectual or religious development’. Of Jewish parentage (Edersheim embraced Christianity in 1846), Edersheim’s religious upbringing doubtless provided him with insight and knowledge unavailable to cradle-Christians, and his contextualizing of the life of Jesus gained him high praise from William Sanday, one of the most prominent theologians of the day. Sanday, who undertook the completion of the abridged edition of the work, cut short by Edersheim’s death, prefaces the volume with the observation that no one other than the author has shown ‘such a profound and masterly knowledge of the whole Jewish background presented in the Gospels’. Yet despite this change of emphasis and the author’s denial in the preface to the first edition of ‘any pretence [...] to write a “Life of Christ” in the strict sense’, it conforms in
most senses to the pattern of its forerunners, not least in its evocative prose and liberal use of conjecture, demonstrated in its retelling of the anointing of Christ:

As she stood behind Him at His Feet, reverently bending, a shower of tears, like sudden, quick summer-rain, that refreshes air and earth, ‘bedewed’ His Feet. As if surprised, or else afraid to awaken His attention, or defile Him by her tears, she quickly wiped them away with the long tresses of her hair that had fallen down and touched Him [...]. And, now that her faith has grown bold in His Presence, she is continuing to kiss those Feet which had brought to her the ‘good tidings of peace’, and to anoint them out of the alabaston round her neck.\footnote{153}

So, while Edersheim dismissed Renan’s \textit{Life of Jesus} as ‘frivolous and fantastic’, he, like Farrar before him, owed its author a considerable debt of gratitude for providing a highly successful stylistic model.\footnote{154}

Considering the sheer volume of Lives of Jesus, it is unsurprising that a large number of them are undistinguished and formulaic. Indeed, Oscar Wilde’s declaration that the quality of a book, like that of wine, can be judged by a brief ‘tasting’ proves particularly apt when surveying the corpus of Victorian Lives.\footnote{155} It is rarely necessary to venture much beyond a Life’s preface in order to establish the author’s religious stance, the other Lives he intends to flatter, deride or counter, and the image of Christ he intends to project. By the end of the nineteenth century, interest in the historical Jesus, and the innumerable Lives that sprang from it, were in a steady decline. Farrar’s \textit{The Life of Lives, Further Studies in the Life of Christ}, published in 1900, did not sell well, despite its author’s well-established reputation, and it must have been clear to any writers still intent on presenting the life of Christ that they would need to seek out innovative ways to do so.\footnote{156} Alfred E. Garvie, for example, remarks somewhat wearily in the preface to his \textit{Studies in the Inner Life of Jesus} (1907) that ‘enough is being written about the scenery, the upholstery and drapery of the life of Jesus’, and chooses instead – as his title announces – to concentrate on the psychology of his subject.\footnote{157} Likewise, in \textit{The Galilean} (1892), the Unitarian author Walter Lloyd aims ‘rather to draw a portrait than to write a history, and, by clearing away the accumulations of centuries, to see what manner of man Jesus of Nazareth was’.\footnote{158} This shift in emphasis had already been identified by the Scottish Free
Church pastor James Stalker, in an article entitled ‘Our present knowledge of the life of Christ’, published in the *Contemporary Review* at the turn of the century. Stalker, himself the author of a brief and uncontroversial Life of Jesus, remarked on how ‘study is moving on from the story of Jesus to His mind’. But if approaches to Jesus were changing, interest in him as a person persisted well into the new century. Works such as T. R. Glover’s *The Jesus of History*, published in 1917, would continue the tradition of liberal Lives of Jesus, with its clear, readable prose and its appended ‘Suggestions for Study Circle Discussions’. Outlined in this appendix are questions such as ‘Was Jesus fond of life and Nature?’, ‘Had Jesus a sense of humour?’, and ‘What do you imagine Jesus looked like?’, answers to which could have been found by looking back to the works of Farrar *et al.*

The first two decades of the twentieth century would see a significant shift in New Testament theology, as form critics such as Rudolf Bultmann moved the emphasis away from the Jesus of history. Yet if theologians turned their attentions away from historical and biographical studies of the Gospels, there were still plenty of non-specialists willing to help the Life of Jesus genre limp into the twentieth century. The by now well-established idea of the Bible as a literary text freed authors with little or no theological training to treat the subject of Christ. John Middleton Murry, for example, pronounces his skills as a literary critic to be the ‘equivalent of the more specialised training of the professor of divinity’, before attempting to plug the one gap he perceives in the long history of Gospel biography: Jesus as man of genius. Abandoning all scholarly paraphernalia, Murry attempts to dissuade the reader from accepting modernist visions of Jesus as an obscure figure, steeped in an eschatological mode of thought inaccessible to twentieth-century minds. In this, as in several other respects, Murry’s work steps back from perceived advances in theological approaches to the Gospels to produce a somewhat universalized figure, removed from his immediate context. Replacing scholarly detail and insight with the artistic licence of the literary writer, Murry abandons the conjectural grammar of the biographer, telling us as if for a certainty that Jesus played in the streets with his friends, watched the dough rise in the family home and learnt the hardships of poverty. And while disassociating himself from the rationalizing tendencies of former Lives, Murry speculates that Jesus’s unusually quick death on the cross could be accounted for by his weak constitution, a conse-
quence of poor nourishment as a child. Though striving to write something fresh and original, Murry did little more than produce a work that read like a nostalgic backward glance at over a century’s worth of Lives of Jesus: a sure sign that semi-fictional treatments of the Life of Christ had long since had their day.

In *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, Schweitzer comes to the conclusion that ‘There is nothing more negative than the result of the critical study of the Life of Jesus’ and that ‘the historical Jesus will be to our time a stranger and an enigma’.\(^\text{162}\) It is a somewhat bleak, if ultimately judicious, appraisal of the several decades spent attempting to draw the figure of Christ closer to the popular mind. Rather than providing a more realistic portrayal of Jesus, attempts to fill in what James Stalker termed the ‘folds and wrinkles’ left by the Evangelists’ testimonies had developed into a form of biblical fiction, with only the authors’ intentions and critical paraphernalia anchoring the work within the realm of non-fiction.\(^\text{163}\) In this respect, Lives of Jesus, whatever their theological shortcomings, loosened ethical restraints on the imaginative treatment of the Gospel narratives, preparing the ground for entirely fictional representations of Christ.

**Secularists, spiritualists and pseudo-evangelists: some ‘alternative’ Lives of Jesus**

As the popularity of the liberal Lives of Jesus began to wane, so there developed a variety of ‘alternative’ versions of the New Testament narratives. These can be loosely divided into two main categories: those that were atheist in conviction and highly irreverent in intention, style and presentation, and those that made spurious claims to be recently discovered documents of Christian antiquity. The coincidence in the early 1880s of the decline of Lives of Jesus and the emergence of rather more subversive narratives of Christ springs from a complex combination of factors. First among these was a slow but steady redefinition of the profane, a redefinition that allowed Jesus to become an acceptable figure for debate, imaginative recreation and historical enquiry.

Standing staunchly at the extreme end of the debates surrounding the historical Jesus were Secularists such as G. W. Foote, whose scabrous reworkings of the Bible circulated throughout the 1880s. A Nietzschean *avant la lettre*, Foote characterized Christ as ‘a tame,
effeminate, shrinking figure’, in opposition to the majority of agnosti-
cics who still held up the person of Jesus as a pattern of perfection for
all men to follow.\textsuperscript{164} He subjected both Old and New Testament texts
to a variety of generic transformations: Bible stories appeared in the
form of cartoons, salacious poems and jokes, and perhaps most
memorably, in the grotesque outlines of comic woodcuts.\textsuperscript{165} Exuber-
antly vulgar, Foote’s recreation of the Scriptures stripped away all
gravity and portentousness. Even the apocalyptic visions of the book
of Revelation are reduced to the dream-vision of a terminally ill
Jehovah, taking his son to task for only recruiting ‘weak, slavish,
flabby souls’, while Satan manages to attract the ‘best workers and
thinkers’.\textsuperscript{166} One particularly audacious venture of Foote’s was his
investigation into the ‘missing years’ of Jesus’s youth through an epis-
tolary format. In \textit{Letters to Jesus Christ}, Foote employs relentless
comic bathos to mock the very concept of divinity. In these pithily
colloquial letters, Jesus is asked to reflect on his early years and answer
questions such as ‘Did God howl when he was pricked by a nasty
pin?’, ‘Did God kick and squeal in his bath?’ and ‘Did God play at
marbles and make mud-pies?’\textsuperscript{167}

What has often gone unacknowledged in studies of Foote’s
burlesques of the Old and New Testaments is his debt to his Conti-
nental counterpart, the French writer, freethinker and conspiracy
theorist Gabriel-Antoine Jogand-Pagés who, under the pen-name Léo
Taxil, founded an anti-clerical publishing house.\textsuperscript{168} His \textit{Vie de Jésus},
first published in 1882, is a crude parody of French Lives of Christ,
featuring lewd woodcuts accompanied by a bawdy prose narrative.\textsuperscript{169}
In its preface, Taxil reduces a century of theological wrangling about
the true nature of Jesus to three terse propositions: he was God incar-
nate; he was a Jewish agitator; or he was a complete invention of his
disciples, intent on creating a new religion. Declaring himself unequiv-
occally a supporter of the third position, he sets out to demonstrate that
‘l’histoire de Jésus-Christ […] n’est qu’un tissu de fables immorales et
stupides’ [the story of Jesus Christ is nothing but a weaving together
of stupid, immoral fables].\textsuperscript{170} Such impious productions gained some
notoriety in Britain and were alluded to with some frequency in prose
fictions of the 1880s. In his novel \textit{Thyrza} (1887), George Gissing
draws attention to such crude traducing of the Scriptures through one
character’s account of a ten-year-old girl being sent a biblical
burlesque by her atheist working-class father, compelling the reader
to consider the effects of such writings on the young and impression-
Published a year later, Mrs Humphry Ward’s novel *Robert Elsmere* makes reference to working men reading *The Comic Life of Christ*, which ‘contained a caricature of the Crucifixion, the scroll emanating from Mary Magdalene’s mouth, in particular, containing obscenities which cannot be quoted here’. Any reader intent on discovering what such ‘obscenities’ might have been would have needed to look no further than the writings of Taxil; his illustrated Life of Jesus, for example, pictures the mother of Christ being amorously fondled by the Angel Gabriel, depicting her, a few pages on, heavily pregnant, declaring to her husband ‘C’est le pigeon, Joseph!’ [Oh, but it was the pigeon, Joseph!] (a joke repeated numerous times in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*).

While Secularists pushed the life of Jesus further and further into the realms of fiction, so others endeavoured to return it to historical fact, albeit radically reconfigured. Thanks to the developing field of archaeology, the mid-to-late nineteenth century saw the discovery of a number of early Christian documents, most significantly the *Codex Sinaiticus* in 1859 and, in the 1890s, the Oxyrhynchus Papyri, which provided new extra-canonical writings about the historical Jesus. Such discoveries were amply reported in the periodical press, provoking a good deal of speculation about the potential discovery of hitherto suppressed or discarded accounts of the life of Christ or, indeed, an entire fifth testament. Such a climate was ripe, then, for the circulation of a number of pseudo-gospels, claiming to provide details of those years of Jesus’s life unreported in the New Testament accounts. One example, Nicolas Notovitch’s *The Unknown Life of Christ*, translated into English from the French in 1895, provided an intriguing, if entirely spurious, account of Jesus’s life between the ages of fifteen and thirty. Another, *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ* by Levi H. Dowling, related the life of Jesus in 182 chapters, beginning with the birth and childhood of Mary Virgin and ending with the establishment of the ‘Christine Church’.

While such works offered little to interest the serious biblical scholar, they proved to have a substantial shelf life, their circulation encouraged no doubt by the contemporary fascination with spiritualism and the occult. Where the majority of liberal Lives of Jesus had kept flights of fictional fancy within the borders of the established canonical Gospels, works such as Dowling’s and Notovitch’s offered readers the opportunity to find out about Christ’s supposed travels in India, Tibet, Persia, Greece and Egypt, and his various encounters with Eastern religions. Further-
more, these writings made grand claims to authenticity. Notovitch’s account of Jesus’s life is purported to have been taken down from a hitherto undiscovered gospel, and Dowling’s is based on the ‘Akashic Records’ transmitted from the Supreme Intelligence thorough the author’s own mediumship.

The vast majority of Victorian Lives of Jesus had grappled self-consciously with the historical distance between the time of Christ and that of the contemporary reader; indeed, the desire to revivify the Scriptures for the modern age was often at the heart of these productions, and warmly expressed in their copious prefaces. As far as those works masquerading as ancient sources are concerned, however, we can only conclude that the intentions of the authors were altogether less genuine. Circulating widely in Europe and the United States, these fraudulent publications grew ever more outlandish as the twentieth century wore on. One American scholar, Edgar Goodspeed, dismayed at the increasing number of apocryphal testaments in circulation, took it upon himself to expose the fictitious nature of such texts. Published in 1931, *Strange New Gospels* endeavours to protect those readers ‘far removed from scholarly circles’ from taking false hope from ‘mischievous little books’. Describing the texts that form the focus of his discussion as ‘a strange netful, dredged up from obscure depths’, Goodspeed brings together a motley collection of writings about various aspects of Jesus’s life, outlining their frequently bizarre contents before submitting them to the rigours of academic scholarship. Dealing in the opening chapters with the relatively well-known alternative gospels of Notovitch and Dowling, Goodspeed goes on to discuss some even more outlandish examples of Christian fakery such as the ‘Letter of Jesus Christ’. Goodspeed notes that this document appeared in the *Chicago Evening Post* in May 1917, as well as being found ‘framed on the walls of people of more piety than intelligence’. While he goes on to explain that he has not been able to find out any details about the letter’s provenance, he estimates that it ‘seems to have originated in England, forty or more years ago’. In fact, the letter was circulating in published form a good deal earlier than this. Several copies are held by the British Library, one dating as far back as 1724, the introduction to which reads:

And found 18 miles from Iconium, 65 Years after our Blessed SAVIOUR’s Crucifixion: Transmitted from the Holy City by a Converted Jew: Faithfully translated from the Original Hebrew
Copy, now in the Possession of the Lady CUBA's Family at Mesopotamia. This Letter was written by JESUS CHRIST, and found under a great Stone both round and large, at the Foot of the Cross, 18 Miles from Iconium, near a Village called Mesopotamia. Upon the Stone was Written and Engraven, 'Blessed is he that shall turn me over'. All People that saw it Prayed to God earnestly, and desired that he would make known to them the Meaning of this Writing that they might not Attempt in vain to turn it over. In the mean time there came a little Child, about six or seven Years old, and turned it over without Help, to the Admiration of all People that stood by; and under this Stone was found a Letter, written by JESUS CHRIST, which was carried to the City of Iconium, and there published, by a Person belonging to the Lady Cuba, and on the Letter was written: The commandment of JESUS CHRIST, Signed by the Angel Gabriel, 98 Years after our Saviour's Birth.

What is represented here is a forgery seemingly borne out of the desire to endow Jesus with his own text, his own 'commandments', which would, once and for all, confirm his status as the son of God. The letter itself, however, falls some way short of living up to the imaginative potential of such a document. The Jesus who speaks out of this jere-miad is a hard and fast Puritan, who exhorts the reader to 'go to Church, and keep the Lord's Day Holy, without doing any manner of Work'; he warns them against the dangers of 'costly Apparel and vain Dresses', and commands fasting on five Fridays in every year 'in remembrance of the five bloody wounds [I] receiv'd for all mankind'. Bearing little resemblance to the meek and mild figure of the Gospels, this Jesus warns unbelievers to expect plagues that will 'consume both him, and his Children and his Cattle'; while those who invest in a copy of the letter to hang in their houses are promised that 'nothing shall hurt them; neither Pestilence, Lightening, nor Thunder [...]. And if a Woman be with Child and in Labour [...] she shall safely be delivered of her birth.' Signing off until the Day of Judgement, the letter-writer leaves the recipient with one final piece of advice: 'All Goodness and Prosperity shall be in the house where a Copy of this Letter shall be found.'

What this document amounts to is an early eighteenth-century example of pressure-selling, risible in its failure to even attempt to create an authentic voice or any other form of verisimilitude (other than repeating numerous times that it was, indeed, written by Jesus himself). The letter remained in print in Britain throughout
the nineteenth century, inaccurate copying leading to frequent variations on the so-called facts of the discovery. Though a text of such arrant speciousness would certainly not have passed the increasingly sceptical scrutiny of biblical scholarship, for the credulous and superstitious it offered a relatively trouble-free means of protecting against the ills and evils of everyday life.

Also featured in Goodspeed’s hall of fakes is Crucifixion, by an Eye Witness (1907). Claiming to be an account of the Passion narratives, written down seven years after the event, this letter is a somewhat prosaic reworking of the long-established theory that Christ did not actually die on the cross but was in truth resuscitated by his followers. As with all such ‘revelatory’ writings, the reader looking for a definitive statement on Christ’s death and resurrection will find only historical dubiety, anachronism and a complete lack of scholarly rigour. In this particular instance, the original document is untraceable, its provenance unknown and it is, somewhat improbably, said to have been composed in Latin. There are places where the editor makes an ineffectual attempt to convince the reader of its authenticity, drawing his attention to ‘a large vacant place in the document, caused by the destroying influence of time’.178 Equally unconvincing is the editor’s contention that the first printed copies of the letter, published in 1873, were all destroyed, save for one, which ‘found its way into the possession of a prominent Mason in the state of Massachusetts’.179 It was a conspiracy theory that would grow more and more outlandish over time, with the editor of a 1925 publication of the letter claiming that the document ‘created such a stir among the Christian circles that they seized every available copy and destroyed it’.180 The contents and style of the crucifixion account are no more convincing: the narrative of events seems to rely heavily on the Gospels (even referring directly to Mark and Luke at one point), though the letter is said to anticipate these canonical accounts by more than half a century. As Goodspeed wryly points out, this particular fabrication proves that ‘Ignorance is as difficult to pretend as knowledge.’181 And though the writer moves away from the Gospel narratives to pursue the idea that Jesus spent the six months between his crucifixion and his eventual death living in a brotherhood of Essenes, a community that had shaped his thinking and behaviour from childhood, he does so only to follow in the footsteps of early rationalists such as Bahrdt and Venturini, both of whom had argued that Jesus survived the cross and had lifelong connections with Essenism.
The rag-bag of documents considered by Goodspeed never found their way into the mainstream of religious discourse. Having only the most tenuous claim to authenticity, they proved no more than a minor irritant to serious biblical scholars, while their often heretical contents ensured that they would never replace the established Lives of Jesus, whose readers tended to cling to the stability and reassurance that they offered. On the other hand, those readers who sought fresh and challenging perspectives on the life of Christ could look to the New Testament novels that entered the literary marketplace in the late 1870s, which, in contrast to the pseudo-gospels, declared their fictitiousness plainly and honestly through their form. Nonetheless, the contribution of these ‘alternative’ records of the life of Jesus in the development of New Testament fiction was by no means insignificant. Some of them circulated for several decades, helping to keep alive theories and conjectures long since dismissed by the academic community. In this respect they set up a kind of counter-culture, which swam against the tide of both modern theological thought and traditional Christianity, and which would serve as a catalyst to some of the most significant imaginative reconfigurations of the Scriptures published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Notes

1 The year 1778 is generally regarded as the start of the quest for the historical Jesus; it was in this year that G. E. Lessing published an extract from a work by Hermann Samuel Reimarus, the theologian usually credited with being the first to investigate the historicity of Christ and the Gospels. While Lessing was prevented by the censor from publishing any further extracts, the first publication, ‘Von dem Zwecke Jesu und seiner Jünger.’ Noch ein Fragment des Wolfenbüttelschen Unge- nannten (Brunswick, 1778), remained a source of inspiration for later writers.

2 Albert Schweitzer, The Quest of the Historical Jesus, ed. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1st complete edn, 2000). Schweitzer’s book is the first major study of the critical research into the historical Jesus carried out in Europe in the nineteenth century. The first edition of the work was published in 1906 (Tübingen) and was translated into English by W. Montgomery (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1910). In the late 1990s John Bowden and Susan Cupitt, in preparing a complete edition of the work, found the translation to be unreliable, and they were obliged to revise it extensively. In the light of this, subsequent citations from The Quest will refer to the 2000 edition which includes Schweitzer’s extensive additions of 1913, hitherto untranslated.

3 In the Introduction to Jesus (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1967), Hugh Anderson states that ‘All the Gospel materials bearing on the life of Jesus were so
assiduously studied by liberal Protestant theologians that within the space of a few generations, some sixty thousand biographies, so it is estimated, had been produced’ (p. 16). Anderson gives no details regarding the provenance of the estimate, nor does he seem to include the very considerable number of Catholic Lives that were written in the later decades of the century. Both omissions render the figure of 60,000 somewhat dubious. The estimate is, nonetheless, reiterated by Warren S. Kissinger in The Lives of Jesus (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1985), p. xi.


5 For a full account of Strauss’s clash with the university authorities, see Chapter 8 of Horton Harris’s David Friedrich Strauss and his Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).


7 Eliza Lynn Linton, The Autobiography of Christopher Kirkland, 3 vols (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1885), III, p. 82.


12 Strauss, Life of Jesus, I, p. 84. The term ‘fiction’ is, of course, a semantically complex one and continues to be a site of considerable dispute, especially in the field of critical theory. It is reasonable to assume that one of the term’s meanings – imaginary prose narrative – was settled by the late nineteenth century, when works such as Henry James’s The Art of Fiction, published in 1884, employed it to signify a stable generic classification. Use of the term in its pejorative sense remained – and remains – common, especially among the more evangelical denominations.

13 Strauss, Life of Jesus, I, p. 54.

14 Strauss, Life of Jesus, I, pp. 81–82.

15 Strauss, Life of Jesus, I, p. 83.

16 Strauss, Life of Jesus, I, p. 84.


19 David Friedrich Strauss, A New Life of Jesus, Authorized Translation, 2 vols (London: Williams and Norgate, 1865), I, p. viii; translated from Das Leben Jesu für das deutsche Volk bearbeitet (Leipzig, 1864). In the preface, Strauss states: ‘I write especially for the use of laymen, and have taken particular pains that no single sentence shall be unintelligible to any educated or thoughtful person; whether professional theologians also choose to be among my readers is to me a matter of
indifference’ (I, p. vii).

20 Ernest Renan, Vie de Jésus (Paris: Michel Lévy, 1863). The sales of Vie outstripped all expectations; one month after its publication in June 1863, Renan’s publisher wrote to him: ‘La Vie de Jésus continue à s’enlever comme du pain! Je compte mettre en vente la 5e édition avant la fin de cette semaine’ [The Life of Jesus continues to sell like hot cakes! I expect to put the fifth edition on sale before the end of the week]. See Lettres inédites de Ernest Renan à ses éditeurs Michel & Calmann Lévy, ed. Jean-Yves Mollier (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1986), p. 51, n. 4. The work went through 13 editions in the year following its publication, reaching its 61st edition by 1921. The ‘édition populaire’ sold even more successfully, going through 130 editions by 1921. The most significant revision was that undertaken for the 13th edition of 1864, wherein Renan explained his position on the Fourth Gospel, admitting that his original stance had been flawed. For bibliographical details of Renan’s Vie and other writings, see Bibliographie des œuvres de Ernest Renan, ed. Henri Girard and Henri Moncel (Paris: Presses Universitaire de France, 1923).

21 The first English translation was The Life of Jesus, trans. unknown (London: Trübner, 1864); hereinafter, all citations are taken from this edition. It is evident from Renan’s correspondence that the production of the first English translation was fraught with difficulties. The enormous attention afforded to the work on its publication meant that more and more newspapers and reviews began to print unauthorized and inaccurate translations of the original. For this reason alone, Renan was keen to get a sound English translation to press as soon as possible and, fearing his English was not good enough to judge the quality of the translation, he was especially anxious to employ a distinguished man of letters whom he could trust to capture the style of the original work, and who was au courant with biblical studies. His first three choices for the job were the English theologian Edward Higginson, the linguist and traveller Sir John Bowring, and the journalist George Augustus Sala, none of whom was able to undertake the work. After a good deal of negotiation, the first English translation was eventually carried out by Henry Harris, an acquaintance of Renan’s, who had published several works on religious topics. Renan was keen that this first, rather hasty, translation should not bear the name of the translator and that the door should remain open for future translations by more esteemed literary figures. For fuller details of the negotiations concerning the first English translation of Vie, see Lettres inédites de Ernest Renan, pp. 50–69.


24 In the opening paragraph of The Quest, Schweitzer states: ‘German theology will stand out as a great, a unique phenomenon in the mental and spiritual life of our time’ (p. 3). In a later chapter devoted to Renan, Schweitzer accuses the Frenchman of sacrificing scholarship for the sake of popular appeal (Ch. 13).


26 Renan, Life of Jesus, pp. 31, 32. In harmonizing the Gospels, Renan was practising an art that went back as far as the second century when the Syriac Diatessaron, compiled by Tatian, incorporated the four accounts of Christ’s life into one. For a discussion of Bible harmonies, see R. M. Grant, The Earliest Lives of Jesus
The nineteenth-century debates over the generic identity of the Gospels have continued into the present century and current thinking seems to favour Renan’s position. In his influential study of the genre of the Gospels, Richard A. Burridge states that ‘The study of the genre of the gospels appears to have gone round in a full circle over the last century or so of critical scholarship. The nineteenth-century assumption about the gospels as biographies is explicitly denied by the scholarly consensus of most of the twentieth century. In recent years, however, a biographical genre has begun to be assumed once more.’ See Richard A. Burridge, What Are the Gospels? (Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), p. 3.


One of Renan’s detractors, the artist William Holman Hunt, whose representation of Christ in his painting ‘The Light of the World’ was one of the best known of the Victorian age, regarded Renan’s Life of Jesus as revealing a ‘lack of imagination concerning the profundity and sublimity of the mind and purpose of Jesus’. See Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1905), II, p. 409.


As the popularity of Renan’s Life grew, so such critical apparatus tended to be removed from the text, either to enhance its appeal to the general reader or to fit within the limits set down by the publisher. For example, the translator of the Scott Edition of the work, William G. Hutchison, explains in his preface how the original appendix and notes had been omitted to conform to the limits of the series. See the Translator’s Preface in Renan’s Life of Jesus, trans. William G. Hutchison (London: Walter Scott, 1897).

Renan, Life of Jesus, p. 53.
41 Renan, *Life of Jesus*, p. 266.
46 Surveying the first nine years of the PEF’s work, its Honorary Secretary, Sir George Grove, wrote that the Fund’s purpose was to throw light on biblical history so that ‘faith is strengthened and reverence increased’. See the Committee of the Palestine Exploration Fund, *Our Work in Palestine* (London: Bentley & Son, 1873), p. 13.
47 Images such as that found in William Holman Hunt’s painting *The Scapegoat* (1854–45), which features the rocks of Usdum on the Red Sea, thought to be the site of God’s destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, are bleak representations of the wages of sin and are typical of the evangelical practice of fusing geographical realities with biblical typology. Protestant travel writers often interpreted their observations of the Holy Land in terms of crime and punishment; John Aiton, a Presbyterian minister, described Jerusalem as ‘drear and forsaken, blighted and cursed by the Almighty, for the enormous wickedness of which it had been the scene’. See John Aiton, *The Lands of the Messiah, Mahomet, and the Pope* (Edinburgh: A. Fullarton, 1852), p. 173.
49 Renan, *The Life of Jesus*, pp. 74–75.
50 Edmond de Pressensé was himself a contributor to the Lives of Jesus genre. In his orthodox *Jesus Christ: His Times, Life, and Work*, trans. Annie Harwood (London: Jackson, Walford & Hodder, 1866), de Pressensé eschews Renanian methods, making little reference to the Eastern landscapes he had himself researched.
54 Cobbe, *Broken Lights*, p. 120.
57 Renan, *Life of Jesus*, p. 84.
60 Renan, *Life of Jesus*, p. 249.
63 In Emil Ludwig’s *The Son of Man*, trans. Eden and Cedar Paul (London: Ernest
Benn, 1928), Christ’s thoughts in the Garden of Gethsemane are conveyed by way of free indirect speech: ‘Had it all been a mistake? The refuge of women’s tender affection, gentle hands to stroke his hair, soft lips to kiss his feet, loving-kindness to cherish him in his daily doings […] He would have spent his life in the quiet Galilean township, one man among many, and yet different from the rest, for he would have been privileged to hold converse with the Father, on the hillside behind the houses; he could have kept his own counsel about that matter!’ (p. 282).

64 Renan, *Life of Jesus*, pp. 137, 221.
68 De Quincey expounds this definition of literature in his essay on Alexander Pope. He explains that ‘There is, first, the literature of *knowledge*; and, secondly, the literature of *power*. The function of the first is – to *teach*; the function of the second is – to *move*: the first is a rudder; the second, an oar or a sail.’ See Thomas De Quincey, ‘Alexander Pope’, in *De Quincey as Critic*, ed. John E. Jordan (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 269.
69 In a retrospective study of the Life of Jesus genre, Maurice Goguel comments somewhat scathingly that the attractive style of Renan’s *Life* caused it to be read by ‘hosts of people who were neither initiated into nor even prepared for exegetical research’. See *The Life of Jesus*, trans. Olive Wyon (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1933), p. 50.
70 Christianus [Charles Tilstone Beke], *Jesus the King of the Jews* (London: Robert Hardwicke, 1864), p. 11.
71 Christianus, *Jesus the King*, pp. 10, 11–12.
72 The first edition of *Ecce Homo* was published anonymously by Macmillan, the author fearing the displeasure of his evangelical family at his treatment of a sacred subject.
73 Seeley was elected in 1869 to the post of regius professor of history at Cambridge on Gladstone’s recommendation.
74 The *British Quarterly Review* is typical in opening its discussion of *Ecce Homo* by asking if it ‘does not compete in fame with Renan’s “Vie de Jésus”’; see the *British Quarterly Review*, 43 (January 1866), pp. 229–32 (p. 229). The writer John Addington Symonds is also typical in his drawing of a comparison between the two works: ‘I read Seeley’s “Ecce Homo”. The enthusiasm of humanity in that essay took no hold upon me; just as […] Renan’s seductive portrait of “le doux Galiléen” [the gentle Galilean] was somewhat contemptuously laid aside.’ See *The Memoirs of John Addington Symonds*, ed. Phyllis Grosskurth (London: Hutchinson, 1984), p. 245.
humanity’ became one of the work’s most repeated phrases. Walter Pater, for example, quotes it in the final paragraph of *Studies In the History of the Renaissance* (London: Macmillan, 1873): ‘High passions give one this quickened sense of life, ecstasy and sorrow of love, political or religious enthusiasm, or “the enthusiasm of humanity”’ (p. 212).

76 One of Seeley’s students, the writer Joseph Jacobs, remarked ‘I attended one of his [Seeley’s] professorial courses [...] His lectures were clear, but cold.’ See Joseph Jacobs, *Literary Studies* (London: David Nutt, 1895), p. 193.

77 Seeley, *Ecce Homo*, p. 89.

78 Forsyth, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, p. 515.


81 Forsyth, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, p. 515.


83 Seeley, *Ecce Homo*, p. 44.

84 Westminster Review, 30 (July 1866), pp. 58–88 (p. 60).


86 Gladstone, ‘*Ecce Homo*’. Gladstone’s review was a staunch defence of Seeley’s work and proved extremely influential. The politician’s admiration for the book perhaps reflects his own ambivalence towards theological revisionism. Additionally, Seeley’s frequent references to the classical world and classical literature may well have appealed to Gladstone, who was engaged in his own study of the classics during the 1860s. See H. C. G. Matthew, *Gladstone 1809–1874* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. 152–55.


88 One reviewer of Seeley’s work remarked: ‘There are few, probably, of our readers who are not already well acquainted with the book. For not only has it passed through five or six editions, but it has been reviewed in every periodical, been canvassed in every social circle, and been carried by the angry waves of controversy into unnumbered nooks and corners.’ See the *Edinburgh Review*, 124 (October 1866), pp. 450–75 (p. 467). In *The Victorian “Lives” of Jesus*, Daniel Pals states that *Ecce Homo* ‘was reviewed extensively not only by the religious press but by nearly every one of the major literary magazines and in essays by several of religious Britain’s most distinguished spokesmen’ (p. 48).


90 One reviewer, severely underestimating the impact that Renan would have in Britain, wrote that ‘The shelves that once groaned under his various-sized octavos have now forgotten Rénan [sic]’. See *Blackwood’s Magazine*, 96 (October 1864),
pp. 417–31 (p. 418).
96 Scott promises early in his Life that ‘The witness of John (so called) will be shown to be nothing more than the unsupported assertions of some unknown writer living, perhaps late, in the second century, and desirous of blending the Alexandrine philosophy of the Logos with a modified Paulinism’ (The English Life of Jesus, pp. 16–17).
97 Scott, The English Life of Jesus, p. 336.
99 Hanna, Our Lord’s Life on Earth, I, p. vi.
100 Hanna, Our Lord’s Life on Earth, V, p. 157.
101 Hanna, Our Lord’s Life on Earth, V, p. 158.
103 Hanna, Our Lord’s Life on Earth, V, p. 226.
105 Hanna, Our Lord’s Life on Earth, V, p. 328.
108 When teaching at Harrow, Farrar wrote Eric, or, Little by Little (1858) which achieved great success. In the same period he published two other school stories: Julian Home; a tale of College Life (1859) and St Winifred’s, or, the world of school (1862).
111 Christian Observer, 74 (October 1874), pp. 726–46 (p. 731).
113 Month: A Catholic Review, 22 (September 1874), pp. 98–101 (p. 98). That the Month had anything complimentary to say about The Life of Christ is surprising, given that Farrar’s work contains frequent snipes at the Roman Catholic Church.
116 Farrar, History of Interpretation, p. 419.
118 The Life of Frederic William Farrar, p. 194.
124 In *The Critical School and Jesus Christ*, Edmond de Pressensé writes that Renan ‘calls Jesus adorable in the same sense that we apply the word in society to a pretty woman’ (p. 5).
131 While there is general agreement that the story of the adulteress is an authentic fragment of early tradition, there is little evidence to support it being Johannine or even evangelical. Its acceptance into the four-fold Gospel can be traced back to the medieval period, when Jerome saw fit to leave it to stand as part of the Fourth Gospel. While Farrar acknowledges the indeterminacy of the text’s origin, it is evident that he expects his readers to appreciate the unique qualities of the narrative regardless of its provenance.
132 Wilde asserts that the story of the woman taken in adultery ‘was worthwhile living to have said’. See *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, vol. ii, *De Profundis*, ed. Ian Small (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 121. Unless otherwise stated, all references from the works of Oscar Wilde are taken from the Oxford University Press editions, under the general editorship of Ian Small.
139 In *The Crucifixion* from the York pageant, for example, the focus throughout is on the physically violent act of Christ’s hands and feet being nailed to the cross by four brutal soldiers who mock him as they carry out their task. See *The Crucifixion*, printed in Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays, ed. A. C. Cawley (London: J. M. Dent, 1974).
141 Farrar, *The Life of Christ*, II, p. 401, n. 2. Farrar’s reasoning here has been echoed recently by the actor and director Mel Gibson, in his defence of the extreme violence depicted in his film *The Passion of the Christ*, released in Britain in March 2004. In an interview given during ABC’s Primetime programme on 16 February 2004, Gibson justified the graphic nature of his film, stating that it was necessary to ‘push [viewers] over the edge so that they see the enormity […] of that sacrifice’. Quoted in the news section of *The Guardian*, 17 February 2004, p. 16.
John's Gospel was the subject of fierce critical debate, having been rejected by Strauss as historically invalid. Farrar makes clear in his preface to *The Life of Christ* that he takes an entirely orthodox line on the authorship and authenticity of the Fourth Gospel, and considers it a valid source for his work.


In *The Bible; Its Meaning and Supremacy* (London: Longmans, Green, 1897), Farrar estimates the significance of the Bible's influence on the nation's great writers: "All the best and brightest English verse, from the poems of Chaucer to the plays of Shakespeare [...] are echoes of its lessons; and from Cowper to Wordsworth, from Coleridge to Tennyson, the greatest of our poets have drawn from its pages their loftiest wisdom" (p. 244).

At times, Farrar's grasp of the plays is somewhat insecure. In his discussion of Christ's Temptation, he quotes approvingly Angelo’s lines from *Measure for Measure*, ‘Tis one thing to be tempted, Escalus, / Another thing to fall’, seemingly unaware of the irony of the words, spoken as they are by a man who goes on to attempt a novitiate into sleeping with him (*The Life of Christ*, I, p. 126).


Alfred Edersheim, *Jesus the Messiah* (London: Longmans, 1890).


*The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, p. 478.


On taking over the co-editorship of the *Freethinker* in 1881, Foote introduced a
column to the journal entitled ‘Profane Jokes’ along with a series of comic woodcuts, ‘Comic Biblical Sketches’. It was the comic sketches in particular that caused Christians great offence and Foote was put on trial for ‘wickedly and profanely devising and intending to asperse and vilify Almighty God’. The twelve-month prison sentence that followed brought Foote considerable notoriety, boosting the sales of his journal appreciably.

166 G. W. Foote, *Christmas Eve in Heaven*, reprinted from the *Freethinker* in *Arrows of Freethought*, p. 93.


169 Orthodox French Lives of Jesus were often sentimental and lacking in any serious engagement with biblical criticism, making them particularly vulnerable to parodic treatments. One of the few to enter into the Higher Critical arena was Father Henri Didon’s *Jésus Christ*, published in Paris in 1891, and translated into English in the same year: *The Life of Jesus Christ*, 2 vols (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1891). While entirely Catholic in spirit, it nevertheless followed Renan in its evocative descriptions of Palestine.

170 Taxil, *Vie de Jésus*.


173 Nicolas Notovitch, *The Unknown Life of Christ*, trans. Violet Crispe (London: Hutchinson, 1895). In this modern Apocrypha, Notovitch claims that, during a stay in Tibet, he was given access by the chief Lama to ancient documents recording the life of Jesus. Notovitch insists that Renan had been aware of his findings and was anxious to acquire them for his own purposes and inevitable glory. For this reason, Notovitch insists, the publication of the work had been delayed until after Renan’s death. This unlikely scenario, along with the extreme dubiety of Notovitch’s evidence, and his translator’s refusal to be associated in any way with the work she had undertaken to translate, confirms the account as more fiction than fact.


177 *A Copy of a LETTER Written by Our Blessed Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* (London: 1724).


