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Nathalie Richard, *La Vie de Jésus de Renan: La Fabrique d'un best-seller*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2015. 316 pp. Bibliography and index. €20.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2-7535-3648-7.

Review by Robert D. Priest, Royal Holloway, University of London.

It would be too much to say that Ernest Renan is back in fashion, but the religious side of his thought—by far the most prominent in his own lifetime—has certainly provoked plenty of renewed interest in the last decade. Renan was the subject of the Collège de France's *colloque de rentrée* in 2012, has seen new biographies by Jean-Pierre van Deth and Jean Balcou (whose effort won the Académie Française's *prix de la biographie*), notable revaluations by Maurice Hayoun and François Hartog, and even featured prominently in the celebrated writer Emmanuel Carrère's genre-bending imaginative history *Le Royaume*.<sup>[1]</sup> It is only natural that, within this resurgence, attention has turned to what was by far Renan's best-known book, and one of the first nonfiction "bestsellers" of the modern publishing era: his *Vie de Jésus* of 1863. This historical biography of the founder of Christianity jettisoned the supernatural and divine revelation to win enormous commercial success and public controversy both within and beyond France. In 2015, Renan's book found two of its own biographers: Nathalie Richard's *La Vie de Jésus de Renan: La fabrique d'un best-seller*, under review here, and my own *The Gospel According to Renan: Reading, Writing, and Religion in Nineteenth-Century France*.<sup>[2]</sup> Given the manifest intersections between our two studies, I will conclude this review of Richard's scholarship with some reflections on our similarities and differences.

Since Richard is a historian interested in the formation of academic disciplines, she might agree that it is important to place her latest book within her own disciplinary background, which is the history of knowledge and especially what became known as the human sciences in nineteenth-century France. Richard's work on Renan should be seen as another strand in her ongoing effort to excavate that moment, before the great wave of professionalisation and discipline-formation at the *fin-de-siècle*, when scholars drew on the authority of science and reason but ranged widely and creatively across varied domains of knowledge, as well as seeking to let these cross-pollinate. A figure like Hippolyte Taine could write both *De l'intelligence* (1870), an influential work of experimental psychology, and *Les origines de la France contemporaine* (1876-1893), a multivolume national history that incorporated psychological reasoning, while Renan, though notionally a philologist, produced work that drew in philosophy, theology, history, and even playwriting. Richard's interest in this moment has already yielded important publications on Taine and Alfred Maury, who like their friend Renan established themselves as leading intellectual lights of the Second Empire and early Third

Republic, but whose work was also superseded and, in many ways, forgotten by the early twentieth century.[3] As the most prominent example of this comfortably diverse period in French scholarship, *Vie de Jésus* has special importance for the story Richard has been telling across her recent work.

Richard's book situates *Vie de Jésus* in the context of the histories of print, religion, and scholarship in Second-Empire France. The first chapter explores the techniques that allowed Renan and his publishers, the Lévy brothers, to exploit the new context of mass publishing in the 1860s for maximum impact. Richard demonstrates how *Vie de Jésus* arrived in a nascent "culture médiatique" (p. 40) accompanied by declining print costs and expansion of the newspaper-reading public, drawing particular attention to the way Renan and his publishers used various techniques to roll the pitch of French public opinion for the book's appearance in 1863. The following three chapters—"l'histoire des langues et des religions," "l'histoire comme science," and "histoire et psychologie"—step back to examine the formation of the particular model of historical writing that Renan deployed in *Vie de Jésus*. Richard's expertise in the intellectual field of mid-century France shines through these chapters, grounding Renan's approach to Jesus in his own remarkably broad intellectual hinterland, ranging from contemporary debates on embryology or race to the origin of language.

Turning then to the print reception of *Vie de Jésus*, Richard offers four chapters that examine the different circuits and controversies that the book traversed during the remarkable outpouring of print in the immediate aftermath of its publication. Drawing in the national and regional press, as well as many pamphlets, sermons, and caricatures, Richard offers a rich and carefully classified analysis of the print response to *Vie de Jésus* that is attentive to themes such as partisan politics, gender, and satire. In the process she also provides a careful itemisation of Renan's innovations in the popular edition, 1864's *Jésus*, that goes far beyond Georges Pholien's classic analysis.[4] The account of the clerical attack on Renan is particularly well-drawn and shows how the fear of private reading could dovetail with broader Catholic anxieties: "Plus que du panthéisme...l'œuvre fait surgir les spectres du piétisme et du quiétisme et la menace de concurrences protestantes" (p. 200). In the final chapter, Richard analyses the letters from lay correspondents to Renan that are kept in the family archives at the Musée de la Vie Romantique, emphasizing particularly how the paranoid clerical discourse had the paradoxical effect of drawing readers to Renan's book. Noting that "à la diversité des lecteurs répond la diversité des lectures" (p. 271), she picks through the array of fans and enemies who wrote to Renan in response to *Vie de Jésus*. The book's conclusion addresses the position and legacy of *Vie de Jésus* in the context of the academic disciplines in late-nineteenth-century France.

Richard and I have both written biographies of *Vie de Jésus* that place it back into the world of mid-century publishing practices, intellectual history, national politics, and popular reading. We differ slightly in emphasis: Richard's book stays closer to the ground of the controversy in the mid-1860s, offering much richer classificatory detail on the press and academic reaction, whereas mine opens out more onto the centrifugal whirl of appropriation and rejection that continued to surround Renan's work in the culture and ideas of the early Third Republic. Reassuringly, Richard and I draw many similar conclusions about the *Vie de Jésus* controversy. We agree that the book's hybridity was key to its achievement, since it encouraged a fruitful variety of readings. As Richard summarises: "C'est à la pluralité de ces lectures possibles, aux multiples manières d'aborder le texte qui sont proposées par Renan, par ses critiques et par ses lecteurs qu'il faut assurément rapporter en premier lieu le succès du livre" (p. 271). We also

agree that the book was received rather cautiously by many liberals and free-thinkers, despite the accusations of its Catholic opponents. Its real fanbase was found among a subset of liberal-minded readers who approached religion with a combination of faith and scepticism. As the *Opinion nationale's* reviewer put it: “nous voulons prier et croire, sans cesser pour cela de chercher, d'étudier, de réfléchir” (cited on p. 132). Richard and I are also both keen to show that, despite their representative limitations, letters to Renan from lay readers demonstrate not only the book's broad social reach but also a remarkable degree of private engagement with *Vie de Jésus*, wherein an “explosion émotionnelle” (p. 261) overlapped with meditative criticism. As such, our books can be read together as a coherent shift in the historical analysis of *Vie de Jésus* towards an accentuation of the complexity and hybridity of its content, as well as the breadth and depth of its social reach. Fundamentally, we both take seriously Renan's intention to make an intellectual and religious intervention in French culture, despite the (in)famous irony of his prose style (of which Richard has a short discussion, see pp. 52-53).

The most prominent analytical difference between Richard's book and mine comes in our assessments of the ultimate meaning of *Vie de Jésus* for the history of ideas in late-nineteenth-century France. Where I accentuate Renan's borrowings and departures from the canon of European biblical criticism, religious history, and comparative geography, with particular attention to Renan's reading and writing practices, Richard is more interested in his debts and contributions to the French academic world at mid-century. A central plank of Richard's argument is that *Vie de Jésus* constituted a manifesto for Renan's vision of scholarly practice: “Ce livre peut donc se lire comme un manifeste, où l'auteur expose sa conception d'une science des religions et définit la manière dont celle-ci s'intègre dans le projet plus vaste d'une 'science de l'humanité', ainsi qu'il la nomme. La *Vie de Jésus* est ainsi, sous ses dehors peu techniques, une œuvre complexe qui dessine un projet intellectuel dont la lisibilité s'est effacée à mesure que les 'sciences de l'homme' se sont spécialisées et institutionnalisées sous la forme moderne des 'sciences humaines et sociales' que nous connaissons” (p. 47).

In other words, *Vie de Jésus* showcased the blend of historical criticism, linguistic determinism, and introspective psychology that Renan hoped might become a model for humanistic enquiry. One of the great contradictions of Renan's book, then, is that what soon appeared eccentric had aimed at being exemplary. In this respect, *Vie de Jésus* must be counted as both an unprecedented success and a fundamental failure: “Au sens où elle concrétise l'idéal d'un discours historien tel que l'a défini Renan et parce qu'elle a définitivement établi la réputation de son auteur, la *Vie de Jésus* peut être considérée comme une réussite. Mais elle a aussi échoué à transmettre toute la subtilité du message philosophique et méthodologique qu'elle portait” (p. 123).

Through this argument, Richard makes a convincing case that *Vie de Jésus* should not simply be thought of as a dilution or vulgarisation of “serious” scholarship that was a consequence of Renan's dilettantism or appeal to market forces, but rather as an ambitious public performance of an academic approach in which Renan was deeply invested. When Richard tugs again at this string in her final chapter, on Renan's legacy, she concludes that the “a-disciplinaire” (p. 277) quality of Renan's book meant that, like Taine's work, its reputation could not survive the moment of disciplinary formation in France that followed in 1870-1900. Because of its anti-supernatural aims, *Vie de Jésus* could endure as a nostalgic origin-point for the positivist ambitions of later scholars, but it was nonetheless condemned to serve as a “démodé” (p. 275) counter-model of the eclectic and dilettantish scholarship against which the founders of

disciplines such as history, sociology, and the science of religions--which Richard treats carefully, each in turn--sought to define their own more rigorous procedures.

After Richard has taken us on such a rich tour of the extraordinarily broad outpouring of reaction that greeted *Vie de Jésus*, it is something of a shame to find ourselves welcomed back at the conclusion into the narrower world of the academic disciplines. While important and revelatory in Richard's hands, I would argue that thinking about Renan's legacy in intellectual-historical or institutional terms steers us away from the sheer cultural and indeed psychological weight of Renan in France at the fin-de-siècle and after, which owed so much to his authorship of *Vie de Jésus*. While it is true that Renan's book found few scholarly imitators, what is remarkable is that it could still draw people out onto the street--and their hands into their wallets--long after academics had stopped critiquing its findings and indeed after its author had died. *Vie de Jésus* remained a prominent feature of Catholic "reconversion" narratives into the early twentieth century and divided hundreds of angry protestors against one another on the streets of Renan's hometown of Tréguier when republican activists erected a statue to him in 1903. Into the 1930s, a prominent intellectual like Paul Claudel would cling onto a profound personal loathing for Renan, whom he blamed for destroying his family's religion, while many figures who rejected the Breton historian's ideas, such as Maurice Barrès, Alfred Loisy, or Ferdinand Brunetière, continued to treat his memory with a conflicted fascination. Meanwhile, Renan's studied aloofness, exemplified in part by his approach to the *Vie de Jésus* controversy, offered an alternative model of intellectual engagement that would find twentieth-century admirers and imitators such as Julien Benda.

Richard's book offers a wide-ranging account of the intellectual foundations and reception of *Vie de Jésus*, which testifies to the awesome breadth of activity that greeted Renan's most important work at the same time as it never loses sight of his academic ambitions. By situating *Vie de Jésus* firmly in the context of the mid-century *sciences de l'homme*, Richard helps establish its importance as a serious product of the century's intellectual history, while by demonstrating and accounting for the extraordinary array of audience responses in the 1860s, she contributes to restoring *Vie de Jésus* to the centre of Second-Empire cultural history. Given the intimidating volume of primary material thrown up by the *Vie de Jésus* controversy, as well as the national academic milieu to which she sees Renan as primarily contributing, it is little wonder that Richard's book (like mine) focuses its attention primarily on metropolitan France. In its own time the renown of *Vie de Jésus* extended far beyond this frame--as Richard notes, the book appeared in German, Italian, Dutch, and Swedish in 1863, was being printed in Bogotá by 1865 (p. 272) and was translated into many more languages besides--and so one hopes that some enterprising scholar(s) will ensure that the next chapter in the turbulent afterlife of *Vie de Jésus* is as international as its contemporary audience. Until then, Richard's important book helps historians to understand why Renan was so enormously important to the cultural, intellectual, and religious life of nineteenth-century France, as well as some of the processes that helped that importance to be forgotten.

## NOTES

[1] Henry Laurens, ed., *Ernest Renan: Colloque annuel 2012, Collège de France* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2013); Jean-Pierre van Deth, *Ernest Renan: Simple chercheur de vérité* (Paris: Fayard, 2012); Jean Balcou, *Ernest Renan: Une biographie* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2015); Maurice-Ruben Hayoun, *Renan, la Bible et les Juifs* (Paris: Arléa, 2008); François Hartog, *La nation, la religion, l'avenir: Sur*

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*les traces d'Ernest Renan* (Paris: Gallimard, 2017); Emmanuel Carrère, *Le royaume* (Paris: POL, 2014).

[2] Robert D. Priest, *The Gospel According to Renan: Reading, Writing, and Religion in Nineteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); reviewed by Kevin Hart in *H-France Review*: <http://www.h-france.net/vol16reviews/vol16no266hart.pdf> (accessed May 8, 2018).

[3] Jacqueline Carroy and Nathalie Richard, eds., *Alfred Maury, érudit et rêveur: Les sciences de l'homme au milieu du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2007); Nathalie Richard, *Hippolyte Taine: Histoire, psychologie, littérature* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2013).

[4] Georges Pholien, *Les deux « Vie de Jésus » de Renan* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1983).

Robert D. Priest  
Royal Holloway, University of London  
robert.priest@rhul.ac.uk

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