

Der geschichtliche Jesus
Carl Clemen
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In this little volume Prof. Clemen proves himself a reliable and skillful guide through the mazes of a great theological controversy, the literature of which has already swelled beyond all bounds and the rancor of which perhaps exceeds even its voluminousness. The several phases through which the denial of the historicity of Jesus has passed are here described with great clearness. Kalthoff, Steudel and Jensen, W. B. Smith, Robertson and Drews, Lublinski and Niemojewski successively pass under review, not to speak of Bruno Bauer and the older radicals of the Dutch "modern" school of criticism. The opinions of all these are stated with due objectivity and criticized in a dignified manner. There is no hysteric in the discussion, no imputation of insanity. The author even gives Drews credit for having thoroughly familiarized himself with the literature of the problem, an acknowledgment which perhaps not all critics of the Christumythe will be prepared to make. But precisely because of this utter dispassionateness of the discussion the reader will rise from its perusal with an all the stronger conviction that the form of skepticism which it combats borders nigh upon the psychopathic. We regret that the author has not confined himself to this one phase of the question, but thought it expedient to add to this the further enquiry as to what aims Jesus actually pursued. In conducting this enquiry Dr. Clemen comes, in our opinion, near to undoing all the good accomplished in the preceding lectures. For what we here get is nothing else than the well-known "liberal" Jesus, the one whose Messianic consciousness was developed out of his sense of ethico-religious sonship, in accordance with the Harnackian exegesis of the reconstructed text of Matt. 11:27, the Jesus in whose teaching eschatology was a mere peripheral matter, who claimed neither preexistence nor aught else in which he would have transcended human nature in its ideal conception. The Synoptics are made sponsors for this type of Christology and it is depicted as preceding in point of time and order the Pauline and the Johannine conceptions of Christ. Just as if the Synoptics were not subsequent to Paul as documents and as if for this reason alone already, it did not become exceedingly improbable that they can have meant to present a Christology so far below the conception avowedly current in the church at the time of their production. Of course Clemen would not actually deny this: only he thinks it possible to get behind the opinions of the Synoptics at the historical facts. But precisely here lies the weakness of the author's position. This quasi-historical Christ can be recovered from the Synoptics only by a process of persistent denial of their accuracy and trustworthiness as historical witnesses, by frequent repudiation of what they do say and by as frequent substitution for it of something they do not want to say. It is this unprincipled treatment of the Gospel-narrative, more than anything else, that has fostered the skeptical attitude of the modern mind and brought it to a point where it is almost compelled in deference to its regard for honesty and frankness to face the question, whether there is any confidence to be placed in the narrative at all, whether Jesus is actually a historical person. The "liberal" biography of Jesus is largely responsible for the emphasis with which these questions are now answered in so many quarters in the negative. And Prof. Clemen, by incorporating in his lectures a miniature sketch of the life and teaching of Jesus, drawn entirely after the liberal pattern, takes with one hand what he has given with the other. And this applies to the exegesis as well as to the criticism. It is true of the "liberal" exegesis also that it has in so small degree produced the "mythological" interpretation of the Gospel records, if only by way of reaction. The modern mind has grown weary of all the toning down of the superhuman elements in the Gospel-story, of all the laborious desupernaturalizing, which the "liberal" school has so long been

practicing. The union in wedlock of extreme skepticism with regard to history and of the modern desire for realism with regard to exegesis has given birth to the new method, against which all the "liberals" are now up in arms not knowing that they are fighting their own offspring. There is no escape from this fatal law which the liberal theology carries in its members in virtue of which it is bound to produce what it would not. And after all is said and done, Clemen himself, though he may have proven the historical reality of Jesus, does not succeed in proving the necessity of this historical reality for the type of Christianity he professes himself and would recommend to his readers. It is the Christianity in which Christ figures, not as a Savior, but as an ideal and inspirer. And only insofar is his historic existence of importance as an ideal will make a more effectual appeal and supply a stronger inspiration, when we can believe that it is not a pure abstraction, but has somewhere been embodied and lived and fulfilled in a concrete person. But the heroic idealists surely would be able to dispense with this help. Such is the flimsy thread on which the religious usefulness—for necessity it cannot be called—of the historical existence of Jesus is suspended.