2. Ernest Renan
THE LIFE OF JESUS (1863)[6]

In 1835, the same year that Baur's academic work on St. Paul appeared, another member of the Tübingen school, David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1874), published a book that introduced the techniques of Higher Criticism to a wide general audience and earned the movement immediate renown as well as infamy. In his otherwise cautious *Life of Jesus,* Strauss boldly dismissed all of the supernatural elements of the four gospels as creative myths, a stance that led to his own expulsion from academe. Almost thirty years later, another scholar, the Frenchman Ernest Renan (1823–1892), published an even more controversial biography of Jesus, bringing its author similar academic exclusion but also huge commercial success. Like Strauss, Renan portrays Jesus as an amiable Galilean preacher whose life was later given mythic dimensions by his followers. Drawing on extensive scriptural cross-referencing and historical evidence, however, Renan places even greater emphasis on the ordinariness of Jesus' background and early life, including in his book a speculative description of Jesus' village and the suggestion that he came from a typically large family. Embarrassed by the miraculous elements of the gospels, Renan concludes that Jesus would never have dreamt of passing himself off as divine, and that his healing and other so-called miracles were merely "performances" necessary to establish his preaching credibility alongside the other wonder-working rabbis of the day. Despite strong clerical opposition in his native France, Renan was eventually restored to his seat in the prestigious Collège de France in 1870 and continued to write popular books about St. Paul and other aspects of Christianity.

CHAPTER II
INFANCY AND YOUTH OF JESUS—HIS FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Jesus was born at Nazareth [Mt 13:54; Mk 6:1; Jn 1:45–46], a small town of Galilee, which before his time had no celebrity. All his life he was designated by the name of "the Nazarene" [Mk 1:24; Lk 18:37; Jn 19:19; Acts 2:22, 3:6], and it is only by a rather embarrassed and round-about way, that, in the legends respecting him, he is made to be born at Bethlehem. We shall see later the motive for this supposition, and how it was the necessary consequence of the Messianic character attributed to Jesus [Mt 13:54; Mk 6:1]. The precise date of his birth is unknown. It took place under the reign

[6]Most of the author's extensive footnotes have been omitted. All of Renan's scriptural citations, however, are included in the text.

of Augustus, about the Roman year 750, probably some years before the year 1 of that era which all civilized people date from the day on which he was born.

The name of *Jesus,* which was given him, is an alteration from *Joshua*. It was a very common name; but afterward mysteries, and an allusion to his character of Savior, were naturally sought for in it [Mt 1:21; Lk 1:31]. Perhaps he, like all mystics, exalted himself in this respect. It is thus that more than one great vocation in history has been caused by a name given to a child without premeditation. Ardent natures never bring themselves to see aught of chance in what concerns them. God has regulated everything for them, and they see a sign of the supreme will in the most insignificant circumstances. . . .

He proceeded from the ranks of the people. His father, Joseph, and his mother, Mary were people in humble circumstances, artisans living by their labor [Mt 13:55; Mk 6:3; Jn 6:42], in the state so common in the East, which is neither ease nor poverty. The extreme simplicity of life in such countries, by dispensing with the need of comfort, renders the privileges of wealth almost useless, and makes every one voluntarily poor. On the other hand, the total want of taste for art, and for that which contributes to the elegance of material life, gives a naked aspect to the house of him who otherwise wants for nothing. Apart from something sordid and repulsive which Islamism bears everywhere with it, the town of Nazareth, in the time of Jesus, did not perhaps much differ from what it is to-day. We see the streets where he played when a child, in the stony paths or little crossways which separate the dwellings. The house of Joseph doubtless much resembled those poor shops, lighted by the door, serving at once for shop, kitchen, and bedroom, having for furniture a mat, some cushions on the ground, one or two clay pots, and a painted chest.

The family, whether it proceeded from one or many marriages, was rather numerous. Jesus had brothers and sisters [Mt 12:46, 13:55; Mk 3:31, 6:3; Lk 8:19; Jn 2:12, 7:3, 5, 10; Acts 1:14], of whom he seems to have been the eldest [Mt 1:25]. All have remained obscure, for it appears that the four personages who were named as his brothers, and among whom one, at least—James—had acquired great importance in the earliest years of the development of Christianity, were his [first cousins]. Mary, in fact, had a sister also named Mary, who married a certain Alpheus or Cleophas (these two names appear to designate the same person), and was the mother of several sons who played a considerable part among the first disciples of Jesus. These [first cousins] who adhered to the young Master, while his own brothers opposed him [Jn 7:3], took the title of "brothers of the Lord." The real brothers of Jesus, like their mother, became important only after his death [Acts 1:14]. Even then they do not appear to have equaled in importance their cousins, whose conversion had been more spontaneous, and whose character seems to have had more originality. Their names were so little known, that when the evangelist put in the mouth of the men of Nazareth the enumeration of the brothers according to natural relationship, the names of the sons of Cleophas first presented themselves to him.

His sisters were married at Nazareth [Mk 6:3], and he spent the first years of his youth there. Nazareth was a small town in a hollow, opening broadly at the summit of the group of mountains which close the plain of Esdraelon on the north. The population is now from three to four thousand, and it can never have varied much. The cold there is sharp in winter, and the climate very healthy. The town, like all the small Jewish towns at this period, was a heap of huts built without style, and would exhibit that harsh and poor aspect which villages in Semitic countries now present. The houses, it seems, did not differ much from those cubes of stone, without exterior or interior elegance, which still cover the richest parts of the Lebanon, and which, surrounded with vines and fig-trees, are still very agreeable. The environs, moreover, are charming; and no place in the world was so well adapted for dreams of perfect happiness. Even in

our times Nazareth is still a delightful abode, the only place, perhaps, in Palestine in which the mind feels itself relieved from the burden which oppresses it in this unequaled desolation. The people are amiable and cheerful; the gardens fresh and green. . . .

This name of *"kingdom of God,"* or *"kingdom of heaven,"* was the favorite term of Jesus to express the revolution which he brought into the world.[7] Like almost all the Messianic terms, it came from the book of Daniel. According to the author of this extraordinary book, the four profane empires, destined to fall, were to be succeeded by a fifth empire, that of the saints, which should last forever. [Dan 2:44, 7:13, 14, 22, 27] This reign of God upon earth naturally led to the most diverse interpretations. To Jewish theology, the "kingdom of God" is most frequently only Judaism itself—the true religion, the monotheistic worship, piety. In the later periods of his life, Jesus believed that this reign would be realized in a material form by a sudden renovation of the world. But doubtless this was not his first idea [Mt 6:33, 12:28, 19:12; Mk 12:34; Lk 12:31]. The admirable moral which he draws from the idea of God as Father, is not that of enthusiasts who believe the world is near its end, and who prepare themselves by asceticism for a chimerical catastrophe; it is that of men who have lived, and still would live. *"The kingdom of God is within you,"* said he to those who sought with subtlety for external signs [Lk 17:20, 21]. The realistic conception of the Divine advent was but a cloud, a transient error, which his death has made us forget. The Jesus who founded the true kingdom of God, the kingdom of the meek and the humble, was the Jesus of early life—of those chaste and pure days when the voice of his Father re-echoed within him in clearer tones. It was then for some months, perhaps a year, that God truly dwelt upon the earth. The voice of the young carpenter suddenly acquired an extraordinary sweetness. An infinite charm was exhaled from his person, and those who had seen him up to that time no longer recognized him [Mt 13:54; Mk 6:2; Jn 5:43]. He had not yet any disciples, and the group which gathered around him was neither a sect nor a school; but a common spirit, a sweet and penetrating influence was felt. His amiable character, accompanied doubtless by one of those lovely faces which sometimes appear in the Jewish race, threw around him a fascination from which no one in the midst of these kindly and simple populations could escape. . . .

CHAPTER XV
COMMENCEMENT OF THE LEGENDS CONCERNING JESUS—HIS OWN IDEA OF HIS SUPERNATURAL CHARACTER

Jesus returned to Galilee, having completely lost his Jewish faith, and filled with revolutionary ardor. His ideas are now expressed with perfect clearness. The innocent aphorisms of the first part of his prophetic career, in part borrowed from the Jewish rabbis anterior to him, and the beautiful moral precepts of his second period, are exchanged for a decided policy. The Law would be abolished; and it was to be abolished by him. The Messiah had come, and he was the Messiah. The kingdom of God was about to be revealed; and it was he who would reveal it. He knew well that he would be the victim of his boldness; but the kingdom of God could not be conquered without violence; it was by crises and commotions that it was to be established [Mt 11:12; Lk 16:16]. The Son of man would reappear in glory, accompanied by legions of angels, and those who had rejected him would be confounded. . . .

One great difficulty presented itself—his birth at Nazareth, which was of public notori-

[7] [Author's note:] The word "heaven" in the rabbinical language of that time is synonymous with the name of "God," which they avoided pronouncing. Compare Mt 21:25; Lk 15:18, 20:4. This expression occurs on each page of the synoptical Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, and St. Paul. If it only appears once in John (3:3, 5), it is because the discourses related in the fourth Gospel are far from representing the true words of Jesus.

ety. We do not know whether Jesus strove against this objection. Perhaps it did not present itself in Galilee, where the idea that the son of David should be a Bethlehemite was less spread. To the Galilean idealist, moreover, the title of "son of David" was sufficiently justified, if he to whom it was given revived the glory of his race, and brought back the great days of Israel. Did Jesus authorize by his silence the fictitious genealogies which his partisans invented in order to prove his royal descent? [Mt 1:1; Lk 2:1] Did he know anything of the legends invented to prove that he was born at Bethlehem; and particularly of the attempt to connect his Bethlehemite origin with the census which had taken place by order of the imperial legate, Quirinus? [Mt 2:1; Lk 2:1] We know not. The inexactitude and the contradictions of the genealogies lead to the belief that they were the result of popular ideas operating at various points, and that none of them were sanctioned by Jesus. Never does he designate himself as son of David. His disciples, much less enlightened than he, frequently magnified that which he said of himself; but, as a rule, he had no knowledge of these exaggerations. Let us add, that during the first three centuries, considerable portions of Christendom[8] obstinately denied the royal descent of Jesus and the authenticity of the genealogies.

The legends about him were thus the fruit of a great and entirely spontaneous conspiracy, and were developed around him during his lifetime. No great event in history has happened without having given rise to a cycle of fables; and Jesus could not have put a stop to these popular creations, even if he had wished to do so. . . .

That Jesus never dreamt of making himself pass for an incarnation of God, is a matter about which there can be no doubt. Such an idea was entirely foreign to the Jewish mind; and there is no trace of it in the synoptical gospels [cf. Acts 2:22], we only find it indicated in portions of the Gospel of John, which cannot be accepted as expressing the thoughts of Jesus. Sometimes Jesus even seems to take precautions to put down such a doctrine [Mt 19:17; Mk 10:18; Lk 18:19]. The accusation that he made himself God, or the equal of God, is presented, even in the Gospel of John, as a calumny of the Jews [Jn 5:18, 10:33]. In this last Gospel he declares himself less than his Father [Jn 14:28]. Elsewhere he avows that the Father has not revealed everything to him [Mk 13:35]. He believes himself to be more than an ordinary man, but separated from God by an infinite distance. He is Son of God, but all men are, or may become so, in diverse degrees [Mt 5:9, 45; Lk 3:38, 6:35, 20:36; Jn 1:12, 13, 10:34, 35. Cf. Acts 17:28, 29; Rom 8:14, 19, 21; 6: 26; 2 Cor 6:18; Gal 3:26; and in the Old Testament, Deut 14:1; and especially Wis 2:13, 18]. Every one ought daily to call God his father; all who are raised again will be sons of God [Lk 20:36]. The divine son-ship was attributed in the Old Testament to beings whom it was by no means pretended were equal with God [Gen 6:2; Job 1:6, 2:1, 28:7; Ps 2:7, 82:6; 2 Sam 7:14]. The word "son" has the widest meanings in the Semitic language, and in that of the New Testament.[9] . . .

CHAPTER XVI
MIRACLES

. . . As to miracles, they were regarded at this period as the indispensable mark of the divine, and as the sign of the prophetic vocation. The legends of Elijah and Elisha were full of them. It was commonly believed that the Messiah would perform many [Jn 7:34; IV. Esdr 13:50]. In Samaria, a few leagues from where Jesus was, a magician, named Simon, acquired an almost divine

[8][Author's note:] The Ebionites, the "Hebrews," the "Nazarenes," Tatian, Marcion.

[9][Author's note:] The child of the devil (Mt 13:38; Acts 13:10); the children of this world (Mk 3:17; Lk 16:8, 20:34); the children of light (Lk 16:8; Jn 12:36); the children of the resurrection (Lk 20:36); the children of the kingdom (Mt 8:12, 13:38); the children of peace (Lk 10:6), &c.

character by his illusions [Acts 8:9]. Afterward, when it was sought to establish the reputation of Apollonius of Tyana, and to prove that his life had been the sojourn of a god upon the earth, it was not thought possible to succeed therein except by inventing a vast cycle of miracles. The Alexandrian philosophers themselves, Plotinus and others, are reported to have performed several.[10] Jesus was, therefore, obliged to choose between these two alternatives—either to renounce his mission, or to become a thaumaturgus ["wonderworker"]. It must be remembered that all antiquity, with the exception of the great scientific schools of Greece and their Roman disciples, accepted miracles; and that Jesus not only believed therein, but had not the least idea of an order of Nature regulated by fixed laws. His knowledge on this point was in no way superior to that of his contemporaries. Nay, more, one of his most deeply rooted opinions was, that by faith and prayer man has entire power over Nature [Mt 17:19, 21:21, 22; Mk 11:23, 24]. The faculty of performing miracles was regarded as a privilege frequently conferred by God upon men [Mt 9:8], and it had nothing surprising in it. . . .

It is probable that the hearers of Jesus were more struck by his miracles than by his eminently divine discourses. Let us add, that doubtless popular rumor, both before and after the death of Jesus, exaggerated enormously the number of occurrences of this kind. The types of the gospel miracles, in fact, do not present much variety; they are repetitions of each other and seem fashioned from a very small number of models, accommodated to the taste of the country.

It is impossible, amongst the miraculous narratives so tediously enumerated in the Gospels, to distinguish the miracles attributed to Jesus by public opinion from those in which he consented to play an active part. It is especially impossible to ascertain whether the offensive circumstances attending them, the groanings, the strugglings, and other features savoring of jugglery [Lk 8:45, 46; Jn 11:33, 38], are really historical or whether they are the fruit of the belief of the compilers, strongly imbued with theurgy,[11] and living, in this respect, in a world analogous to that of the "spiritualists" of our times [Acts 2:2, 4:31, 8:15, 10:44]. . . .

We will admit, then, without hesitation, that acts which would now be considered as acts of illusion or folly, held a large place in the life of Jesus. Must we sacrifice to these uninviting features the sublimer aspect of such a life? God forbid. A mere sorcerer, after the manner of Simon the magician, would not have brought about a moral revolution like that effected by Jesus. If the thaumaturgus had effaced in Jesus the moralist and the religious reformer, there would have proceeded from him a school of theurgy, and not Christianity. . . .

In a general sense, it is therefore true to say that Jesus was only thaumaturgus and exorcist in spite of himself. Miracles are ordinarily the work of the public much more than of him to whom they are attributed. Jesus persistently shunned the performance of the wonders which the multitude would have created for him; the greatest miracle would have been his refusal to perform any; never would the laws of history and popular psychology have suffered so great a derogation. The miracles of Jesus were a violence done to him by his age, a concession forced from him by a passing necessity. The exorcist and the thaumaturgus have alike passed away; but the religious reformer will live eternally. . . .

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[10]Renan here refers to the Neo-Platonist Plotinus (205–270 C.E.) as well as Proclus (410–485) and Isidore of Seville (560–636).

[11]I.e, miraculous powers.