

# David Friedrich Strauss, Conclusion, *The Life of Jesus* (1836)

## Abstract

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With his first major work of biblical criticism, *The Life of Jesus* (1835–36), the Protestant theologian David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1874) created a stir by postulating that Christ was a mortal elevated to divine status through Gospel accounts. While the book was consistent with the growing secularization of the time, it cost Strauss his position at the University of Tübingen and prevented his tenure at the University of Zurich in 1839.

## Source

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### Conclusion.

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Now that we have arrived at the end of our critical endeavor, this insight is all the more welcome, the more thoroughly the conviction is thrust upon us that our historical knowledge of Jesus is faulty and uncertain. After removing the mass of various kinds of mythical creepers that have wound themselves around the tree, we see that what we previously thought were the branches, leaves, color, and shape of the tree itself were instead largely part of these creepers; and instead of the tree being returned to us in its true shape and appearance after the these plants have been removed, we discover that the parasites have stripped it of its leaves, sucked out its sap, and withered its branches and limbs, and that its original shape thus no longer exists at all. Every mythical feature that was added to the picture of Jesus not merely covered up a historical one, which means that the removal of the former would have brought the latter back to light, but a good many historical features have been entirely consumed by the mythical ones that were overlaid upon them, and have been utterly lost.

It is not agreeable to hear, and [is] therefore disbelieved, but anyone who has examined the subject seriously and wishes to be honest knows as well as we do that there are few great men in history of whom our knowledge is as insufficient as that of Jesus. How incomparably more lucid to us is the figure of Socrates, who is four hundred years older. To be sure, we know just as little about his youth and education; but we know precisely what he was in his mature years, what he wanted, and what he did. The figures of his students and friends stand before us with historical clarity, and we are completely informed about the causes and the unfolding of his condemnation and his death. Above all, however, even though a few anecdotal additions are not lacking, his life was spared the mythical elaboration in which the historical figures of no small number of Greek philosophers, Pythagoras being one, have nearly disappeared, much like the figure of Jesus. Socrates owes the preservation of his image to the circumstance that he lived in the most educated city of Greece at a time of the most brilliant intellectual enlightenment and the highest flowering of literature; moreover, several of his students were distinguished writers and made their teacher the subject of some of their works.

Xenophon and Plato—who does not think of Matthew and John when he hears these names, but how unfavorable to the latter is the comparison. In the first place, the authors of the Socratic memorabilia, the two symposia, the *Phaedo* etc., were actual disciples of Socrates. By contrast, the authors of the first and fourth Gospel were not direct disciples of Jesus. If no external evidence had survived regarding the above-mentioned texts of the two Athenians, we would yet recognize them as the works of contemporaries and personal acquaintances of Socrates. In the case of the two Gospels, no matter how

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old and unanimous the testimony of their Apostolic authorship might be, we would not put our credence in it, for it is contradicted by the plainest appearance of the books themselves. Second, the two men who wrote about Socrates were quite intent on illustrating his uniqueness and worth as a human being, a citizen, a thinker, an educator of the youth. To be sure, our two Evangelists do the same in their own way. But that is not enough for them. Their Jesus, after all, is supposed to have been more than a man, a God-begotten miracle worker, indeed, according to one of them, the divine creative word incarnate. That is why their account not only contains a series of miraculous deeds and destinies alongside the activity of Jesus as a teacher, but this miraculous element is also intermixed with the teachings they place into his mouth, as a result of which they have Jesus say things about himself that no person of sound mind could possibly have uttered. Third, Plato and Xenophon are in agreement on all the essential things they report about Socrates. Some things they report in identical words; individual features that are unique to one still unite admirably into a single picture with those presented by the other. And when Xenophon, with respect to the philosophical importance of Socrates, often falls as much below his subject as Plato rises above it with his liberal inventions, and places Platonic speculations into the mouth of his Socrates, the two accounts correct each other through a comparison of the two authors, and the shortcoming is innocuous, on Xenophon's part because it results from an unintended inadequacy, on Plato's part because he makes no claim to being a historical writer in his Socratic dialogues. By contrast, we have seen how irreconcilable is the Christ of Matthew and that of John, and how earnestly the author of the fourth Gospel, in particular, asserts the truth of his account. But all the ways in which the accounts of Jesus that have come down to us are different—to their disadvantage—from those about Socrates with respect to historical accuracy, and they have their roots in the differences of time and nationalities. The pure air and bright light of Athenian culture and enlightenment, in which the image of Socrates appears so distinctly, contrasts with the thick, murky cloud of Jewish delusion and superstition and Alexandrine fanaticism, from which the form of Jesus looks out at us scarcely recognizable as human.

It might be said, and [it] often has been, that the inadequacies of the biographical Gospel accounts of Jesus are sufficiently compensated for by the fact that we still have his work, the Christian Church, before us, and that we can now draw inferences from it back to its founder. Thus we also have little historical knowledge of Shakespeare, for example, and many fabulous things are said about him; but we are not much bothered by this, since his works enable us to create a picture of his personality in perfect clarity. The comparison would be apt if we likewise had the work of the prophet of Galilee at first hand, as we have the works of the British poet. But the former has passed through a great many hands, which had no scruples about interpolations, omissions, and revisions; the Christian Church was already in its earliest form, as it appears in the New Testament, shaped by so many factors other than the personality of Jesus that any inference from it to him is highly uncertain. After all, the risen Christ, upon whom the church was founded, is already very different from the man Jesus, and from here the idea of him and of his earthly life, as that of the community itself, was reshaped in a way that makes it very doubtful that if Jesus had returned, say around the time of the destruction of Jerusalem, he would have recognized himself in the Christ that was then being preached about in the church.

I do not believe that the situation is so dire—as some have asserted—that we cannot know for certain whether a single one of the sayings that the Gospels place into the mouth of Jesus was actually uttered by him. I believe that there are sayings which we may, with all the probability that is the best one can achieve in historical matters, ascribe to Jesus, and I have endeavored to indicate the signs by which we can recognize them. But this probability approaching certainty does not go very far, and when it comes to the deeds and events in the life of Jesus, excepting his journey to Jerusalem and his death, the situation is even bleaker. Little is certain, and precisely those things to which the church faith prefers to attach itself, the miraculous and the superhuman in the deeds and destinies of Jesus, certainly did not happen. But that the salvation of man should depend on the belief in things, some of which certainly did not take place, some of which may or may not have taken place, and only the smallest number of which took place without any doubt—that it should depend on the belief in such things is so absurd that it does

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not, in this day and age, require further refutation.

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No, the happiness of man, or, to speak more intelligibly, the possibility that he might fulfill his destiny, develop the powers implanted in him, and thus enjoy the corresponding measure of well-being, this happiness cannot possibly—and here the old Reimarus will forever be right—depend on the recognition of facts which hardly one in a thousand has carefully examined, and that person, too, is not able in the end to arrive at a certain conclusion. Instead, as surely as the human destiny is a universal one and attainable by all, the conditions to attain it, that is, outside of and prior to the will that moves in the direction of the goal, the knowledge of this goal itself must be given to every man; and this knowledge cannot be an accidental acquaintance with history coming from the outside, but is a necessary understanding of reason that every person can find in himself. That is the meaning of Spinoza's profound saying that for the attainment of happiness it was not by any means necessary to know God in the flesh; but the matter was different with that eternal Son of God, namely divine wisdom, which appears in all things, especially in the human mind, and which was so excellently manifested in Jesus Christ: without it, nobody could attain happiness, because it alone teaches what is true and false, good and evil. Like Spinoza, Kant also distinguished from the historical person of Jesus the ideal of God-pleasing humanity that lies within human reason, or the ethical sense in all the purity that is possible in a worldly being dependent upon needs and inclinations. Raising oneself up to this ideal is the general duty of mankind; although we cannot conceive of this ideal any other way than in the picture of a perfect man, and even though it is not impossible that such a man once lived, since we are all supposed to resemble this ideal, what matters is not that we know of the existence of such a man or believe in it, but merely that we keep that ideal before us, recognize that it is obligatory, and strive to make ourselves like it.

This distinction between the historical and the ideal Christ, that is, the primal image in human reason of man as he is supposed to be, and the transfer of the salvific faith from the former to the latter, this is the indisputable result of the modern development of the mind; it is the forward development of the religion of Christ into the religion of humanity, at which all the nobler efforts of our time are directed. That many see in this an apostasy from Christianity, a denial of Christ, rests on a misunderstanding, for which the manner in which the philosophers—who made this distinction—express themselves, and maybe also their way of thinking, is partly responsible. For they speak as though the primal image of human perfection by which the individual is to be guided is given in reason once and for all; this creates the impression that this image—i.e., the ideal Christ—could be present in us exactly as it is right now even if a historical Christ had never lived and worked. But that is by no means how it really is. The idea of human perfection, like other ideas, is initially imparted to the human mind only as a potential that gradually takes shape through experience. It displays a different shape among different peoples, according to their natural character and their climatic and historical conditions, and it reveals progress over the course of history. The Roman thought differently about man as he ought to be than the Greek, the Jew differently than either of them, the Greek after Socrates differently and undoubtedly more perfectly than before. Every morally outstanding person, every great thinker who makes the active nature of man the object of his investigation, has helped, in narrower or wider circles, to correct, supplement, and improve that idea. And among these improvers of the ideal of humanity, Jesus unquestionably ranks first. He introduced into this ideal features it lacked before, or which had at least remained underdeveloped; he reduced others that obstructed its universal applicability; he imparted to it a more exalted consecration through the religious form he gave it, and the most vivid warmth by embodying it in his own person; at the same time, the religious community that arose out of him ensured this ideal the widest diffusion among mankind. Needless to say, this religious community proceeded from things very different than the moral significance of its founder, and thus initially expressed the latter in a form that was less than pure—in the only text from our New Testament that may have been written by a direct disciple of Jesus, the Revelation of John, lives a Christ from whom little can be derived for the ideal of humanity; yet the traits of patience, gentleness, and charity, which Jesus made dominant in that picture, have not been lost to

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humanity, and are exactly the ones from which everything we now call humanity was able to sprout.

And yet, no matter how high Jesus ranks among those who have modeled more purely and clearly to humanity what it ought to be, he was neither the first nor the last to do so; rather, just as he had precursors in Israel and Hellas, at the Ganges and the Oxus, he has not been without followers—instead, even after him, that model has been developed further, more perfectly fashioned, its various features brought into greater balance. One cannot fail to see that in the model as exhibited by Jesus in his teachings and life, alongside the full development of some sides, others are only faintly outlined or are not indicated at all. Fully developed is everything that refers to the love of God and one's neighbor, to purity of heart and the life of the individual; but already the life of man within the family recedes into the background with the teacher who had no family of his own, while his relationship to the state appears as merely passive; not only is he unconcerned with trade by virtue of his calling, he is visibly averse to it; finally, whatever concerns art and the enjoyment of the pleasures of life remains completely outside of his purview. That these are substantial defects, that we are dealing here with a one-sidedness that is grounded partly in the peculiarities of the Jewish people, partly in the conditions of the time, and partly in the special living conditions of Jesus—no one should seek to deny this, since it is impossible to deny. And the defects are not of the kind that only the complete implementation is lacking, while the ruling principle is given; rather, when it comes to the state, in particular, to trade and art, the proper conceptions are missing from the outset, and it is a futile undertaking to try and determine—by following the prescriptions or the model of Jesus—the activities of human beings as citizens, their efforts to enrich and beautify life through commerce and art. Instead, what needed to be added came from both other peoples and from the conditions of other times, states, and systems of education—some of which were found by looking back at what Greeks and Romans had produced in these respects, some of which were reserved for the further development of mankind and its history.

Yet all these additions fit perfectly with what was given by Jesus, as long as one has recognized the latter as a *human* accomplishment, and therefore both capable of and in need of further development. But if one conceives of Jesus as God-man, as the universally and exclusively valid exemplar placed by God among mankind, one must of course reject any addition to this exemplar, turn its one-sidedness and incompleteness into the rule, and either reject or simply regulate externally all those aspects of human activity that are not represented in it. Indeed, because Jesus himself remains standing as God-man alongside and above the moral exemplar embodied by him, belief in whom is—apart from and before the recognition of that exemplary image—every man's duty and the condition of his salvation, that on which everything depends is pushed back into the second line; the full force of the moral greatness of Jesus withers away, and the moral duties, which can derive their validity only from the fact that they are rooted in the nature of the human being, are placed into the false light of being positive commandments from God. The critic therefore lives in the conviction that he does not commit a sacrilege against the holy, but is instead doing good and necessary work, when he sweeps away all those things that make Jesus into a superhuman being, as being a well-meant and at first perhaps beneficial, but in the long run harmful and now truly destructive delusion; when he restores the image of the historical Jesus in his simple human traits, as well as can still be done; when he refers mankind for the salvation of its soul to the ideal Christ, to that moral exemplar of which the historical Jesus first brought to light several principal traits, but which, as an endowment, belongs as much to the general gift of our kind as its further development and perfection can only be the task and work of all of mankind.

Source: David Friedrich Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu*. Leipzig: Alfred Kröner Verlag, n.d., vol. 2, pp. 158–62.

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Translation: Thomas Dunlap

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