



The Gospel According to Renan: Reading, Writing, and Religion in Nineteenth-Century France (Oxford Historical Monographs)

Robert D. Priest

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The Gospel According to Renan provides a new and holistic interpretation of one of the non-fiction sensations of the nineteenth century: Ernest Renan's *Life of Jesus* (*Vie de Jésus*). Published in 1863, Renan's book aroused enormous controversy through its claim to be a historically accurate biography of Jesus. While *Life of Jesus* provoked the ire of the Catholic Church in hundreds of sermons and pamphlets, it also sold hundreds

of thousands of copies, making a fortune for its author and his publisher.

Based on research into a huge range of print and manuscript sources, *The Gospel According to Renan* demonstrates how Renan's work intervened in a remarkable range of debates in nineteenth-century French cultural life. These went far beyond questions of religion, from the role of individuals in history to the meaning and significance of 'race'. Through an engaging reconstruction of Renan's intellectual formation, Priest shows how Renan's ideas grew out of the context of Parisian intellectual life after his loss of faith in the 1840s. Going beyond a traditional intellectual history, Priest uses a wide range of new manuscript sources, many of which have never been examined by modern historians, in order to reconstruct the ways that ordinary French men and women engaged with one of the great religious debates of their age. By tracing the legacy of *Life of Jesus* into the early years of the twentieth century, Priest finally shows how Renan's work found new political meaning in the heated debates over secularisation that divided French society in the young Third Republic.



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