

The first issue raised by Lessing was that of the critical examination of the NT documents. Was the Jesus presented in the Gospels the "true Jesus," or might he not have been someone quite different from the one presented to us. One of the earliest attempts to reconstruct the life of Christ was that of H. S. Reimarus (1694-1768). This rationalistic and skeptical work was never published in the author's lifetime, but after his death Lessing brought out parts of it under the title "Fragments by an Unknown Author." This initiated what has been called in Germany the *Leben-Jesu Forschung* ("Life of Jesus Research") or in English "the Quest for the Historical Jesus." Concerning this Alasdair Heron (*A Century of Protestant Theology*, p. 19) says:

"it was to produce a quite bewildering variety of 'reconstructions' of Jesus' personality and history, having for the most part only one thing in common--the conviction that whatever the truth about him might be, it was not the traditional Christian picture of him."

Another problem was even more fundamental for Lessing. As a historian he was conscious of the difficulties that attend any historical reconstruction especially when the interpreter is separated from the events interpreted by a large "culture gap." Thus says Lessing, "There is a broad, ugly ditch of history that I cannot jump across." If the reconstruction of history is marked by such uncertainty, how can religious conviction be built on such a shaky foundation?

Further, says Lessing, "The accidental truths of history can never become the proof of the necessary truths of reason." Religious truth belongs to the realm of the eternal and universal, but historical truth is not either of these. Therefore, the latter cannot be built on the former. This has posed a formidable problem for theologians in the following centuries.

To Lessing, how can faith be built on history, which was ~~prob~~ not completely certain & reliable?

We note just two of the ways that the faith-history problem was dealt with in the nineteenth century.

- a. David F. Strauss (1808-1874)--a student of F. C. Baur, influenced by Schleiermacher. He produced a two-volume work, *Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (1835-1836). Strauss attacked both Orthodoxy and Rationalism as over-simplifications of the proper understanding of the life of Jesus.

The supernatural elements of the Gospels were not simply historical events, but neither were they merely useless embroidery to be removed. Instead, says Strauss, the supernatural elements are "myths" which express the Church's perception of the truth about Jesus.

This marks the beginnings of the "mythological" approach to interpretation in German scholarship which would be developed extensively by Rudolf Bultmann in the next century.