



# The Historical Figure of Jesus

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## **The Historical Figure of Jesus** E.P. Sanders

A biography of the historical figure of Jesus. The book studies the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, distinguishing the certain from the improbable, and assessing the historical and religious context of Christ's time. The spread of Christianity is also discussed.

## **The Historical Figure of Jesus Details**

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## Ushan says

Jesus seems to have existed; Josephus mentions him in his Jewish Antiquities among other prophets, of whom there were many in 1st century CE Holy Land. John the Baptist was one; another claimed that he could part the waters of Jordan, like a latter-day Moses, and yet another that he could cause the walls of Jerusalem to fall, like a latter-day Joshua; the Romans arrested one and the other escaped. I was surprised that the Monty Python movie set in this historical period was accurate in this respect. Our surviving manuscripts of Jewish Antiquities say that Jesus was the Christ, which Josephus would not say as he was not a Christian. A Christian copyist put either this sentence there, or the entire paragraph about Jesus - but if it were the latter, presumably he would have put it next to the discussion of John the Baptist, so it must have been the former. We know some things about Jesus: he preached in the villages and small towns of Galilee; he exorcised demons; he was arrested by Caiaphas, whose official duty was to prevent uprisings; he was crucified during the governorship of Pontius Pilate. However, we don't know a lot more: for example, when Jesus was crucified. The Gospel of John says that it was Nisan 14, and the other three Gospels say that it was Nisan 15. If he was crucified on a Thursday, it would have been possible to calculate the year of his death - but the Jewish calendar was not fixed during the first centuries CE, but instead depended on astronomical observations. Nor do we know, who (claimed that he) saw Jesus after his resurrection: different books of the New Testament say that different people did.

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## Neil White says

E.P. Sander's work on rethinking the way Christians think about Judaism in relation to Paul and the gospels cannot be overstated. The work is now twenty years old and reflects the questions of an earlier time and carries some of the academic tone of that age but there are still some good insights to be harvested in working through the book.

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## Mary says

a reaction, more than a review, here; my reaction is like the other reader who asks what about Jesus' sanctity in the context of history. Sanders' book is so evocative, so true an exploration, that you do have to confront: what do I really know about Jesus? What is mere belief? Who do I really say he was?

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## Pete says

i mostly bought this because i wanted to buy something at verbatim books in san diego (definitely worth a browse if you are in SD) and i thought this might be useful for this thing i have been trying to write. i was hoping for more like, social historical context of mr. christ, but this was kind of cool despite a lot of necessary disclaimers that there really isn't too much concrete to know about jesus the guy (even though i want him to say like, jesus was short and bald and smelled like freshly baked bread or something to that

effect). anyway: this is good history, humanely written, especially good in puzzling out what stuff in the gospels is especially forced (the moses echos, etc). but not sure it's necessary unless you are a christology superfan.

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## **Vegantrav says**

random thoughts:

-for Sanders, Jesus was (and this is not surprising to anyone who has read his other works on Jesus and Paul) very much a faithful, observant Jew; I largely agree; the conflicts with the Pharisees seem, when actually read in context, fairly minor in and of themselves, though the gospel writers tend to exaggerate the conflicts (probably due in large part to the fact that, at the time that the gospels were written, there was a substantial rift between rabbinic Judaism, which was the successor of the Pharisees, and Christianity); I think that the consensus of most modern scholars is that Jesus certainly lived and died as a practicing, observant Jew

-like Schweitzer before him, Sanders sees Jesus largely as an apocalyptic prophet; here again, I think Sanders is on the mark; the oldest parts of the New Testament (Paul's letters, Q, and Mark) all give clear indications that Jesus thought that the kingdom was coming soon, and Jesus, according to Sanders (and, I think, a fairly plain reading of the text) saw himself as pivotal to ushering in the kingdom

-Sanders spends much time discussing Jesus's major teaching in Mark: the kingdom of God, but Sanders is hard pressed to say exactly what Jesus meant by this term; he admits that the sayings on this matter are just not clear; his skepticism, I believe, is quite warranted; at times, it appears that the kingdom is a place here and now on earth where humans can live a new life in relationship to God the father; at other times, it seems that the kingdom is something that has not yet come (though it is coming soon) and which will bring about a new rule of the justice of God; many of the kingdom saying are enigmatic or are in parable form and open to a wide variety of translations, so I very much respect Sanders's reticence in this matter

-Sanders never once mentions Q, and I think he gives rather short shrift to the Q material: he does not really analyze any of the ethical teachings from the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew)/Plain (Luke) other than a brief discussion about Jesus's prohibition of divorce; similarly, many of the Q parables (and a few of the stand alone Lukan parables) are completely passed over by Sanders; as a result, the ethics of Jesus are not really examined in any great detail; I think that this results in a Jesus who is almost completely an apocalyptic prophet (and I don't disagree that Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet) and not much of a teacher of ethics which, if the Q material really does go back to the historical Jesus (and I think most scholars believe that it does, and I am inclined to agree), then ethics were, along with his apocalypticism, a key element of his message

-the preceding thoughts notwithstanding, Sanders does have an excellent discussion of exactly who the "sinners" were that Jesus saw himself as called to preach to: sinners were not people who merely had sinned but not yet offered the proper sacrifices and been cleansed; rather, Sanders argues, sinners were those who lived outside the law: they were the tax collectors and prostitutes and lepers, those with whom most Jews would not associate; Sanders argues that Jesus envisions bringing these people into the kingdom which he proclaims, and what is really radical is that Jesus invites these people in without demanding that they observe any of the cultic rites of purification; instead, according to Sanders, Jesus grants these people admittance to the kingdom solely on the basis of Jesus's own authority; this Sanders sees as unique; this is something that Sanders believes really sets Jesus apart from all the other prophets and reformers of his time; while I am

much attracted to this idea of Jesus and while I fully grant that such a view of Jesus is certainly possible, I don't think that the textual evidence is that strong: there are just not enough references to "sinners" as a general category to ascertain just who is and who is not a sinner and exactly what qualifies one as a sinner, but I do agree that Jesus saw a primary part of his mission as bringing sinners into the kingdom

-Sanders assessment of passion week is excellent scholarship; he shows why and how Jesus was executed: Jesus's disruption of the temple was an acted parable, showing that the temple was going to be destroyed; Sanders argues that we can take the text here quite frankly: Jesus was not himself threatening (as some witnesses claimed) to destroy the temple himself, but he did believe that the temple was going to be destroyed by God; nevertheless, Caiaphas, who had as one of his main duties maintaining peace and order in Jerusalem, perceived Jesus as threatening the temple and as someone who could possibly instigate a riot, which could result in negative repercussions from the Romans, so Caiaphas arrested Jesus; because Caiaphas did not have the authority to execute Jesus, he handed him over to Pilate; Sanders argues that Pilate did not hesitate to execute Jesus; the gospels' attempts to exonerate Pilate appear to be attempts to make Christianity more palatable to its Roman rulers, and Pilate, as we know from other sources, was a brutal ruler who executed many Jews with little provocation; here again, I find myself agreeing completely with Sanders; I think that Sanders's portrayal of Jesus's arrest, trial (such it was: it was probably little more than a reading of the charges against Jesus and the passing of his death sentence), and execution is as close to historically accurate as can be

-Sanders has a few comments about the resurrection accounts; he states that the accounts are so confused (Jesus appears to different people in different places and in different time sequences) among the gospels and Paul's account that it is impossible to do draw any substantive conclusions from textual analysis; Sanders also focuses on the fact that all of the appearances seem to indicate clearly that this was not merely a resuscitation of Jesus's body: for example, if Jesus had been simply raised from the dead in his same physical body, why did some of his followers have trouble recognizing him, and why could he appear and disappear and pass through walls, which a physical body could not do, and why does Paul equate his own experience of the resurrection (clearly a visionary experience) as being equal to that of Peter and the other disciples (if Paul's experience was a visionary experience and it was like that of Peter and the other disciples, wouldn't that mean that their experiences were also visionary?)? Sanders, ever the careful historian, refuses to speculate on what the exact nature of the resurrection experiences were, but it is clear that he does not believe that it was simply the physical resuscitation of Jesus's corpse

-all in all, this is a very careful historical and textual analysis; it lacks the depth of sociological, cultural, and political analysis that one finds in say, JD Crossan, but it is still a rather thorough and, I think, excellent analysis, and Sanders avoids the all too common and all too often referenced (and yet I am referencing it again) problem of seeking to paint a picture of the historical Jesus and finding, in the end, that one has actually painted, in large part, a picture of oneself

-Sanders's Jesus is a failed apocalyptic prophet: his prophecies about the coming the kingdom did not come true, but Jesus also sought to widen the circle of who was a part of the Jewish community to include the sinners; Jesus, convinced that he was God's viceroy (Sanders's term), went to Jerusalem and began to act to try to bring about the coming of the kingdom by his actions at the temple; Jesus thought that even if he died, he would be vindicated, and the kingdom would come; Jesus was wrong, and so Jesus is, ultimately, in my reading of Sanders and in my own personal opinion, a tragic figure

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## **Lora Shouse says**

I added this to my booklist years ago when I was looking for information relating to a unique theory about Jesus I had heard on some TV show that I only heard part of. I finally found the book I thought I wanted, and this wasn't it. However, I kept it on the list for comparison purposes, if nothing else.

This is a strictly historical study of the life of Jesus. It looks lightly at some of the theological and doctrinal issues of Christianity but does not go deeply into those, as its primary purpose is to recount the history of the time.

The author's primary sources were the Gospels and the letters of Paul. He supplemented these with the works of Josephus and some other material on Palestine during the Roman period. His dating of the Gospels and the letters of Paul differs somewhat from what I had read from other sources, and he played down the influence of the Roman occupation of Jerusalem and Galilee and also the possible influence of groups like the Zealots during Jesus' life which other authors seem to give more weight to.

His reconstruction of how the Gospels came to be composed was interesting and sounds pretty likely. But it is kind of amazing how little really reliable historical information is available about possibly the world's best-known figure. It is possible to reconstruct generally how Jesus taught, and the broad outlines of his life (although the birth stories seem to be largely constructed to prove associations with passages from the prophets rather than to tell an actual story of Jesus' birth).

But, although the author examines in great detail the possible reasons for the trial and execution of Jesus, the best explanation he can come up with for why he was executed is that the high priest was worried that he might somehow cause a riot during the very crowded conditions in Jerusalem during the Passover period.

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## **♥ Ibrahim ♥ says**

I was in the seminary for five solid years. I am not interested in theological theses anymore. Now I check this book out of the library in the hope to get inspired, to meet Jesus the person since the book is about the historical figure of Jesus. The book is written by a sceptic who will take the gospels and shred them to pieces and tell if some of its stories are probable or not. Well, many of its stories seem to be improbable for the author. I am not interested in what is probable and what is not. I want to meet Jesus the person and follow in His steps and save your theological garbage for your students of theology. This book won't inspire you to love Christ. It will cause you to doubt your Gospel.

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## **Sam Eccleston says**

This is a great read; thoroughly informative throughout, Sanders vividly contextualises the life of Jesus using the relevant analytical categories. For most people, every page will contain some information they had not been aware of before, or throw new light on a familiar passage by rendering what had seemed unremarkable remarkable. Nevertheless, it suffers from the pitfalls of its genre; sweeping, often rather under-evidenced claims are made with a conviction which is not justified on the basis of the evidence. Although more careful than other historians, Sanders still occasionally throws words like 'certain' and 'impossible' around in a rather

casual manner. Oddly, he also seems to treat the historical evidence in a rather isolated way; he rarely seems to take into account the psychological impact the relevant historical context would have had on the people described in the Gospels. Where we might find a picture of Jews reacting to their third imperial subjugation in the last half millennium, struggling to maintain group solidarity, a sense of the righteousness of God (etc) we instead find a group of rather relaxed, liberal, quasi-modern Jews who seem to have been somehow relocated to ancient Israel. I do not think I am alone in finding this a less than compelling picture.

It is also obvious that, while the work goes into great detail, inconvenient details are sometimes left out; Sander's portrait of Herod, for example, survives only through certain details of Herod's life not receiving a mention. Despite these weaknesses, definitely worth the read.

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## **Noah says**

A quite noble and enlightening attempt at historical analysis of Jesus life. Attempting to draw out the pericopes (assumed short texts of stories, teachings, and sayings of Jesus) which the Gospel writers drew on in writing their accounts, as well as Pauline epistles, Josephus, and more general Roman history, E.P. Sanders attempts to assemble a picture of what Roman controlled Judea (as well as not Roman controlled, but protected Galilee), and how Jesus life and teachings fit into it. Even Sanders admits that a lot of this is conjecture, but I believe he uses the textual evidence in such a way that his arguments are often quite convincing. A few quite enlightening points include: Jesus was not a social radical or reformer, instead simply being a "spiritual radical" emphasizing God's love for even the lowliest sinner; Rome had a very small military/governing apparatus in Judea at the time and did not rule like a oppressive dystopian police state; ancient Jewish authorities, like the Sadducees and Pharisees, were not religious extremists who persecuted all dissent, and were instead quite lenient as long as you followed the commandments; much of the Christmas story probably never happened, and quite a few of Jesus' specific life events were written by later authors with seeming Old Testament Messianic prophecies in mind; and Jesus was probably executed by a corrupt and negligent Roman governor (Pilate) under recommendation of the Jewish High Priest Caiaphas, who quite realistically feared potential mob violence and Roman retribution after Jesus' destruction of property in the Temple and prophesy of its impending destruction, which was taken as a threat. Besides offering a summary of what things we can be pretty sure about in Jesus' life (his status as an exorcist, his association with sinners, the Last Supper and the Lord's Prayer, his execution, etc.) it also gives a good summary of common Jewish ritual and religious life of the time, and how the religious authorities cooperated with Rome's governance and oversight. Overall, a very solid look at the historical Jesus and his time, and I think it would be hard to do much better considering the lack of primary material on his life.

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## **Pete daPixie says**

Here is another very valuable book on the historical Jesus. E.P. Sanders's book was published in 1993, and his work is on a par with the likes of Geza Vermes. I had been looking for E.P.S. in my local library, with no luck, so I bought this copy from Amazon and I'm glad I did.

It's in the treatment of New Testament Gospels where the author shines. He clearly explains the chronology of M.L.M. & J. + Paul & Acts etc., while fishing out redaction and early Christian agenda. His knowledge of first century Judaism helps greatly to light up many frustratingly vague N.T. passages, while leaving alone the speculative theorizing.

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## **Jonathan says**

A very good resource for basic theology on the Christ.

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## **Danny Daley says**

This book is an important one for historical Jesus research, partially because it's a coherent review of the major issues related to studying Jesus from a historical perspective, and party because it's a summary that is based on the judgments of an important Jesus scholar in E.P. Sanders. This book does feature some novel suggestions, as well as unique arguments in relation to Sanders' own views, but it is also intended as an introduction to the major issues of historical Jesus research rather than an academic inquiry into new terrain. The book is both learned and popular, and does not get bogged down with technical language and interaction with other scholars.

The book is good because Sanders is a thoughtful scholar, and because he writes with cogency and a helpful structure. All of the major issues are addressed, and again, anything where one can derive Sanders' views has reading value. He's has spent a career thinking well on these issues. One aspect to praise in particular is Sanders' insistence that Jesus was far more consistent with his Jewish roots than most modern Christians would realize (or be comfortable with), and Sanders does a brilliant job of grounding Jesus in his Jewish life.

The book is not without some serious difficulties. As introductions go, I see them best serving their readers when they describe issues without too much direct judgment. They present the relevant information and allow the readers to explore more on their own and make judgments for themselves. This is where some restraint, and more engagement with other scholars, would have helped. Sanders does not take this approach, instead casting his own judgments on the issues, many without adequate reflection on evidence that would cast his arguments in a doubtful light. This leads to an even more concerning criticism, that rather than rooting his arguments in data, at times, Sanders simply relies on his faith in his own faculties of judgment, and he too often speaks to what is likely, or probable, based on little more than his own fancy. This tendency leaves too many of his judgments with an arbitrariness that fails to convince. Sanders is a good and careful historian, but this book leaves the impression that he had become too aware of that fact, and no longer felt the need to justify his understandings of what could, or did, happen in the life of Jesus.

Overall, I disagreed with many of Sanders' conclusions. On the whole, I tend to be much more trustworthy of the texts, unless evidence points me otherwise. I'm uncomfortable with Sanders' insistence on relying upon judgments based on "It seems to me" sort of reasoning. Having said that, this book is a classic of the field, as introductions go, and anyone interested in historical Jesus studies would benefit greatly from reading and taking in Sanders' undeniable insight and learning on this issue, as well as his remarkable ability to evaluate data from a historical perspective.

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## **Christopher Chandler says**

**Critical look at the historical Jesus. Great foundation for those unfamiliar with the field.**



In attempting to sketch a critical and historic picture of what we can know about the historical Jesus, Sanders does a wonderful job as scholar and guide. Sanders begins *The Historical Figure of Jesus* by correcting popular misconceptions about the religious, political, and geographical settings of the life of Jesus. He employs “rigorous cross-examination” as a historian while he attempts to get back to what we can know about Jesus with some level of confidence (8). What is most notable about the opening chapters is how persuasively he demonstrates the wrong assumptions many readers have had through the centuries. I am particularly pleased to see Sanders set Jesus in his Galilean and Jewish context. He makes the world of Jesus’ ministry small and insignificant until the final weeks of Jesus’ life. This comes over and against a current theological fad that sees Jesus directly and intentionally against Rome and “empire.” Sanders correctly shows that Jesus had little interaction with Rome in his ministry (15) because Galilee had no Roman presence during his lifetime (27).

Sanders is superb when dealing with Judaism and Jesus. He makes some debatable claims about sources and authenticity throughout the book, but he always acknowledges when he is making an educated guess and when he is standing on solid historical ground. The middle sections of the book deals with sources, redactions, and narrative creations in the Gospels. Sanders doesn’t take any unexpected positions here, but his numerous examples evaluating the text are helpful to develop an understanding of redaction criticism. In the chapter on miracles, he argues that Jesus rose to fame because of his numerous healings (154). Sanders compares Jesus with Honi the circle-drawer and shows how the healings and miracles of Jesus were not the impetus for people seeing him as the Messiah (132) and certainly not for viewing him as God (163). Sanders is critical of miracles and says he himself doesn’t believe in them (141), but his arguments about the role of miracles in Jesus’ ministry are largely in agreement with what Matthew and Mark tell us. Most readers will agree with the general points Sanders makes about miracles. It is his point about the message of Jesus will cause contention. Essentially, Sanders argues that Jesus was a good Jew who agreed with the law and simply expanded its reach (e.g. The Beatitudes). It was Jesus’ lack of repentance preach that began his trouble with the religious leaders (230-232). Since Luke is where we get the majority of Jesus’ teaching on repentance, it is likely that Luke adds or emphasizes them to be more than what they ever were (232-233). For such a radical claim, Sanders offers insubstantial evidence in the few pages it occupies. The claim that Jesus did not teach repentance leads into what Sanders believes Jesus thought of his followers; mainly, that they could make it into the kingdom of God without having to repent in the way Jewish law required (235). Sanders writes, “Did [Jesus] hope that they would change their ways? Probably he did. But ‘change now or be destroyed’ was not his message, it was John’s. Jesus’ was, ‘God loves you (233).’” This would have been incredibly offensive to most Jews and it is likely that this message of Jesus began the serious tension with religious leaders. Sanders conclusions about the execution of Jesus are standard for critical historical analysis. He sees Jesus’ threat of the temple and the perceived potential for his teaching to start a riot at Passover as the catalyst that led Caiaphas to recommend execution to Pilate (269,273). The resurrection experiences of the disciples and others were according to Sanders, “a fact. What the reality was that gave rise to the experiences I do not know(280).” Sanders calls the resurrection experiences the most mysterious aspect of studying the historical Jesus and offers little in way of judgment (280).

Sander's consistently rigid historical approach guides his sketch of Jesus from beginning to end. On a few occasions this leads him to unpopular conclusions, but the whole, Sanders does an honorable job as a historian guiding the reader through the biases of writers, preachers, and scholars to arrive at a surprising wealth of information we can know with assurance about the historical Jesus.

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**Russell Ince says**

As a Jesus agnostic eager to see what I could learn about the historicity question I decided to read a few books from varying viewpoints. After having read this title by Sanders I turned to 'The Historical Evidence for Jesus' by G.A. Wells which takes a more pessimistic perspective. Overall I found Sanders' work to be an eloquent and enlightening if not a flawed account.

From the outset it might be helpful to add that unlike myself, Sanders assumes an historical Jesus and his work is neither an attempt to prove his historicity nor a discussion on the nature of historical evidence (which apparently he discusses in an earlier work) but, rather, an attempt to paint an historical Jesus based on the assumption that, firstly, he existed and, secondly, that the gospels can tell us something about him. Rightly or wrongly, however, I do not share these same two assumptions and my review will be coloured by this fact. I am, however, aware that the consensus opinion amongst scholars (not that this is of itself proof) is strongly to the contrary and that works focusing on his life and teachings generally presuppose these assumptions and focus on whom Jesus was and not if he was.

The first few chapters on the historical and theological context of Jesus and Judaism are very well written and enlightening. On the external evidence for Jesus Sanders admits that the pagan and Jewish sources do not so much mention Jesus himself rather than Christianity and that the Testimonium Flavianum is problematic. Disappointingly, however, Sanders only devotes some 7 and a half pages to his chapter on the external evidence. One might say that Sanders can hardly be blamed for the (limited) nature of this external evidence but Sanders does not mention Pliny the Younger, the lesser of Josephus' comments or the Rabbinic literature which may contain references to a Jesus. Put simply, you can get more in depth analysis on the external sources for Jesus from Wikipedia than you can here!

Sanders, not being a conservative evangelical, admits that there are problems with the gospel accounts:

1. Jesus' first followers did not write a narrative but only preserved short passages of his words and deeds – later arranged by the Evangelists.
2. Some material was revised or even created by the early Christians.
3. The Gospels were originally anonymous.
4. The Gospel of John is significantly different from the Synoptics.
5. The Gospels are not modern biographies

Sanders lays out the process by which he believes the gospels came to be written - through a succession of steps beginning with the teachings of Jesus himself followed by an oral tradition, followed by pericopes (short collections of sayings), followed by a collection of pericopes leading then to the Gospel of Mark and the later gospels. Sanders acknowledges however: "I wish to emphasise that we do not know that this is precisely how the gospels originated. We infer the process from the finished product." p.60

It seems to me, however, that, given the paramount importance of the gospels when reconstructing the historical Jesus, the process by which these gospels came into being is perhaps the single most important question one can ask and I would like to have seen a more convincing explanation as to why the process Sanders infers should be accepted.

As I later learned from reading Wells, given that the historical Jesus barely appears (if at all) in the Pauline corpus it is all the more important that the gospels be put on much firmer ground. Given that the gospel accounts contain legendary aspects (the annunciation, the virgin birth...); are non-contemporaneous to events they purport to describe (with most scholars including Sanders dating them to after AD 70); are internally contradictory (the nativities of Luke vs. Matthew) and externally inconsistent with known history (the dating of Quirinius); are not entirely independent of one another (Matthew and Luke both apparently having used

Mark as a source) and are highly biased in their theological agendas and that we cannot be certain of the process by which they came into being (with Ehrman in particular emphasising the importance of the oral tradition as a truth-bending recruitment tool) it would seem that the gospels are not in fact the most reliable of historical sources. After having established the problems with the texts we are, however, told: "Nevertheless, it is the four canonical gospels that we must search for traces of the historical Jesus." p.65

It would seem that it is indeed true that we must search the gospels for traces of the historical Jesus but not, however, because they are reliable (it is clear that they are not) but because in the desperate search for Jesus they are all we have.

Sanders describes a close interplay of themes in the gospels which reveals literary art, that they are very episodic in nature and that Matthew and Luke are mythological elaborations based on fact. Sanders seems committed to the assumption that, whilst allegorical and symbolic (with the 12 disciples representing the 12 tribes of Israel and the 40 days in the desert representing the 40 years of Exodus in the Sinai) these stories must be based on a kernel of truth because it seems probable that an itinerant preacher could have been living in the first half of the 1st century. Whilst I would agree that this is eminently plausible it does not prove that the Jesus described in the gospels is the Jesus of history.

Sanders seems fine with exposing the problematic nature of the gospels with all their inherent contradictions, embellishments, and insertions that are tantamount to pious fraud but struggles desperately to argue that the gospels do preserve some kernels of truth from an earlier written and oral tradition ultimately going back to Jesus' words and deeds. But is it not unreasonable to assume that, since the gospel writers were themselves writing theological propaganda that the sources they drew upon were similarly compromised?

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## **James Lindsay says**

This is another book that I put on my must-read list for anyone that wants to understand the history of Christianity better. It is clear, almost always an interesting read, and is surprisingly critical of many of the details of the life of a historical Jesus, if we can assume it is correct that he was a real (and singular) historical figure. Sanders does a great job laying plain the historical, social, and theological agendas of the various gospel writers (the Evangelists), and puts in the proper context the synoptic gospels versus the clearly theological Gospel of John--which he says is likely to contain some accurate details on minutiae but otherwise be quite the embellishment.

Now, even though this book is on my "must-read if you want to understand Christianity, therefore especially if you are a Christian," it only gets four stars from me here because Sanders loses me a bit. That he is a Christian historian is a double-edged sword here. On the one hand, it adds tremendous weight to his highly critical rendering of the details presented in the gospels, often noting that various among those cannot possibly be accurate and must therefore be understood as an embellishment or outright fabrication of its author. He is also stunningly critical of the weight of the gospels as evidence for more than a very bare-bones story about a man that may have lived in the first century--along with great historical context in which to understand his purported actions. On the other hand, when he gets to certain points, notably the resurrection of Christ, he loses me. It feels like his attention to detail and careful treatment get punted right out the window for "yeah, the resurrection.. that happened... not sure how or what happened, but it did...." This kind of wispy wish-thinking on the hardest-to-swallow point of the religious construction goes at least a little way

to undermining his credibility on the matter. That the entire resurrection myth is most likely to be an imported literary embellishment, a point not missed by non-Christian writers like John W. Loftus, seems lost on Sanders, which is a pity given how careful he appears everywhere else in the text.

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