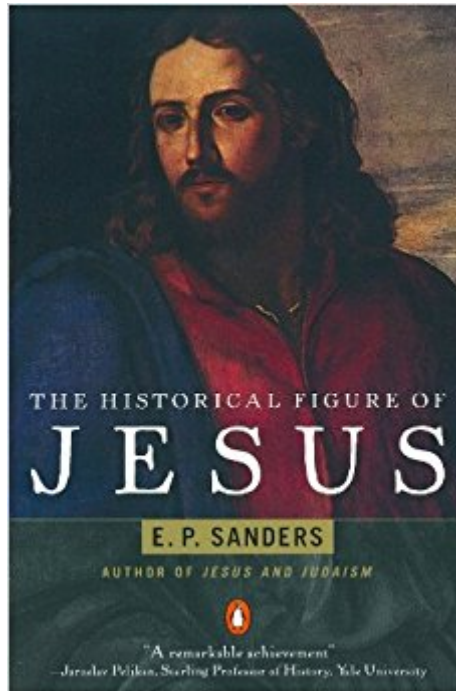




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# The Historical Figure Of Jesus



## Synopsis

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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

What, if anything, can be known with certainty about the life and work of a first-century itinerant preacher named Jesus of Nazareth? Since the 19th century, scholars have attempted to answer that question; and out of their studies, Jesus has emerged variously as a Cynic philosopher (Crossan), a "marginal Jew" (Maier), an apocalyptic preacher (Schweitzer), a teacher (Robbins) and a magician (Smith). Sanders (Jesus and Judaism) portrays Jesus as a miracle worker and eschatological prophet whose deeds point to a coming Kingdom of God where good will reign over evil. Sanders's book is a masterful historical reconstruction of the political, social and theological context of the life of the enigmatic Nazarene. The first half of the book provides a detached examination of late Judaism and the Hellenic world into which Jesus came, as well as an exploration of the authenticity of the gospel accounts of Jesus's life. Following such introductory matters, Sanders recounts the gospel narratives in an attempt to separate myth from history and to determine how much we can actually "know about the historical figure of Jesus." The result is a thorough, accessible and conservative study that should have a wider appeal than other recent work on the historical Jesus. Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an

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Sanders neither pronounces on the Jesus of faith nor sets his view against later Christian dogma in this study of "Jesus the human being." Thus he closes the door at the outset to the polemic passion such agendas can inspire (as in Uta Ranke-Heinemann's *Putting Away Childish Things*, LJ 6/1/94). Beginning with a brief look at Jesus' life and its religious/historical context, Sanders next evaluates source materials and then-in the bulk of the book-explores what he thinks we can confidently say about Jesus' miracles, for instance, or his attitudes on the kingdom of God. Regarding the latter, Sanders believes (unlike John Dominic Crossan in *Jesus*, LJ 12/93) that "picking and choosing among the sayings" is misguided and opts instead to "calmly survey all sayings," seeking apparent convergence. Highly readable, this is a key addition to literature on the historical Jesus. For academic, theological, and larger public libraries. Elise Chase, Forbes Lib., Northampton, Mass. Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This is without doubt the best book written on the historical Jesus. The author surveys the evidence and puts down convincing theories of who the historical Jesus was and what he did by analysing verses from the New Testament and setting them in their historical context as can be ascertained by reading sources like Josephus. Professor Sanders' Jesus is an apocalyptic prophet who preached the imminent intervention of God in the affairs of the world, expected a privileged place for himself in the kingdom and died a disappointed man on the cross when the anticipated kingdom did not arrive. In particular, the author invalidates John Dominic Crossan's Jewish cynic philosopher cum social reformer image of Jesus by convincingly demonstrating that no evidence exists for such a view. Read this book to get perhaps the closest understanding of who the real Jesus was.

This is a concise and informative presentation of the historical evidence on Jesus of Nazareth. I bought it based on reviews here at and am now so impressed I could read just about anything Sanders may have written. One reviewer here complains of the author's habit of telegraphing, of informing the reader how he will proceed; this was to me a welcome indication of Sanders' concern for the reader. Other strategies I found helpful were summarizing points made in a previous part of the text (rather than simply referring the reader to a previous chapter), end-of-chapter summaries, placing comparative quotes in tables, and extensive explanations of sources and methods. It seems other readers feel Sanders has evaded dealing with the historical accuracy of supernatural issues

such as miracles and the resurrection, but it is hard to see how these can be addressed historically except to report, as Sanders does, that certain people claimed to see or experience certain things. How can an historian judge whether Jesus was \_in fact \_ resurrected when there are no previous or subsequent cases of resurrection, and hence no definition of resurrection against which to judge Jesus' reanimation? Sanders cites the evidence (he even presents it in tabular form) and offers the only conclusion possible, that although contradictory, the evidence points to the occurrence of something unusual. Of more interest to me was his portrait of Jesus as a charismatic prophet of radical eschatology, a man motivated by a sense of impending change who believed himself to be "God's viceroy." According to Sanders, the canonical texts reveal a man who believed God would at any moment radically alter the world, initiating a new way of living (a new "kingdom") in which even the wicked would be welcome. Observant Jews probably felt threatened by the Nazarene's disregard for tradition, and insulted by his arrogant claim of knowledge of the divine will. When Jesus caused a commotion at the Temple during the Passover festival, he was arrested for disturbing public order. Had he promised to return to Galilee with his followers, Sanders believes, he might have been spared. But Jesus chose otherwise. The high priest Caiaphas saw in him someone likely to cause riots and by extension someone threatening his own position with Rome. He was willing to execute to maintain the peace - and his own life. There is historical evidence of Pilate's excesses and cruelty; he had no trouble dispatching what he may have regarded as nothing more than a religious fanatic. Sanders' depiction of Jesus on the cross is touching for its human quality: "My guess is that Jesus' cry was his own reminiscence of [Psalms 22.1], not just a motif inserted by the early Christians. It is possible that, when Jesus drank his last cup of wine and predicted that he would drink it again in the kingdom, he thought that the kingdom would arrive immediately. After he had been on the cross for a few hours, he despaired, and cried out that he had been forsaken."

[pp274-275] I am not a Christian, just someone curious about history and religion. I enjoyed Sanders' work precisely because he set aside issues of theology to look at what an historical investigation might reveal (unlike another scholar I recently read, who seeks to legitimize his evangelizing under a title including the word "historical"). Sanders' conclusions seem to this non-specialist sober, well-reasoned and supported with adequate examples. Can we weigh the same evidence and come to different conclusions? I think Sanders would not disagree. Several times throughout the text he makes clear where he is in disagreement with common scholarly opinion, or where others are in disagreement with him. This is on the whole an honest investigation, one well worth the read. The one disappointment I had with this book is the same I had with Borg's Jesus, namely the lack of a recapitulation of Jesus' core program, his path for personal transformation. But in the context of

Sanders' Jesus, this makes more sense. If God were coming soon, there was no need for a detailed program of renewal. As Sander himself argues, the idea of Jesus as a kind of social or political reformer is not supported by the evidence. There is no program of reform to be found in the texts. But one wasn't needed. There was no time. God would be acting soon. It was enough to simply follow the law. #

The book by EP Sanders is a well written, scholarly and somewhat dry examination into the life of the historical Jesus. More than many of his contemporaries that write for a general (as opposed to a scholarly) audience, Sanders doesn't make radical assumptions or hypotheses into the life of Jesus. Rather, relying heavily on anthropological arguments, Roman history and the Gospels, Sanders paints a picture of a Galilean healer, exorcist and teacher who managed to irritate the high priests and Romans during a festival time, and was summarily executed to keep the peace. Looking at the practice of Judaism during the first century, as well as the interplay between Roman rule and the areas of Judea and Galilee, Sanders also argues that Jesus was likely a pious and observant Jew, and that many of the elements of the Gospels where he condones the breaking of dietary and other Jewish Biblically commanded customs were later additions by authors looking to balance and appeal to a Gentile readership. (He cites the works of Paul and Acts with the arguments around circumcision and unclean foods as proofs that Jesus probably never addressed these first and in his ministry). In all, the book is a well written look at Jesus of history - where not much can be known for certain. Sanders makes reasonable hypothesis, rational arguments, and cites examples of challenges with dating, source materials and interpretations as limitations to definitively saying "who" the Jesus of history was. A good book, and one not likely to stir as much controversy as his contemporary authors on the same subject.

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