

The Historical Figure of Jesus Study Guide

The Historical Figure of Jesus by E. P. Sanders

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Plot Summary

"The Historical Figure of Jesus" by E.P. Sanders is an in-depth look at the historical life of Jesus. Over the centuries, there have been many conflicts, in both the historical and theological fields because there is little documented historical information regarding the life and times of Jesus. It is clear to most that the New Testament cannot be considered as an historical document for a number of reasons. These include the fact that the New Testament has much room for interpretation, was written by men many years after Jesus died, and that the book has been altered. All these facts have been proven.

Sanders chooses to look not only at Jesus, but at his surroundings shortly before, during, and after his death. The first century in Galilee and Palestine is quite different than it is today, and Sanders does a good job outlining the Palestinian way of life. This includes the political setting of the region as well as the weather, terrain, and traditions of the people. Sanders asserts that it is necessary to consider all factors when trying to uncover the truth about the Christ.

Sanders is an historian, scholar, and academician. There are few opinions regarding the actual facts, or lack thereof, rather the author tends to focus on casting doubt where doubt should be cast. It is one thing to believe certain stories for belief's sake but another thing entirely if one is expected to take parables and interpretations to heart as historical fact.

Another of the problems surrounding scriptures can be seen in the synoptic gospels. The same events are often told in varying ways by Matthew, Mark and Luke, casting questions on the exact occurrences.

The reader is also introduced to the many laws and customs, some of which support Biblical accounts, while others discount them.

There are sketches of the lives of the Apostles, as well.

Sanders is able to point out little known facts about the length, area and structure of Jesus' ministry. This includes the fact that the disciples were often cared for by prominent female followers as well as the kindness of the villagers while they traveled from place to place spreading the Word of God.

There are insights into the concept of the Kingdom of Heaven, Hell, and the existence of Satan.

The book is a fascinating read for anyone who is interested in history, whether or not he or she is religious, Christian, or interested in theology. One can see the work as a biography, albeit abbreviated when it comes to Jesus himself. Rather, it is a telling picture of Galilee and its peoples and customs.



Chapters 1-4

Chapters 1-4 Summary and Analysis

Chapter one, "Introduction," begins by asking the question, why was Jesus important? The author claims that he will not attempt to explain but rather focuses more on the relationships, history and the teachings of the Christian savior. Sanders outlines the book and the intent on discussing early theology, up to approximately 80 C.E., as well as the dogma of the contemporary Christian Church. The account of Jesus' life in the book is purely historical.

A historian must review and weigh all facts, news stories, rumors, etc. The chief characters in this book are considered to be legendary figures. Leaders such as Thomas Jefferson and Winston Churchill have historical proof of the things they said and did and of their existence. The same cannot be said about Jesus, either socially or politically. There are no surviving documents, if any had ever existed. The history of Jesus was not examined until approximately 200 years ago. Before that time it was considered to be sacrilegious to doubt the existence or validity of the Christ.

Chapter two, "An Outline of Jesus' Life," is a bare-bones account. The date of birth of Jesus has always been a topic of controversy. Although Jesus' birthday is traditionally celebrated on December 25, there are varying accounts of the actual date. In this case, it is assumed to have occurred in the spring around the time of the death of Herod the Great. Herod died in 5, 6, or 7 B.C.E. (before common era), which would place the date of Jesus birth. Around 5, 6 or 7 B.C.E.—many scholars believe it was 5 B.C.E. This brings up another curiosity. If Jesus was born in 5 B.C.E. for example, why did the year of our Lord not begin until 5 years later?

Sanders explains the terms B.C.E. and CE. B.C.E. stands for, "Before the Common Era"; C. E. stands for "Common Era." These are alternative abbreviations to those which are more traditional, such as B.C. as in "Before Christ" and A.D. or Anno Domini.

Jesus spent the majority of His childhood and adolescence in Nazareth, before being baptized by John the Baptist in his late 20s. At that time, Jesus claims to have had a spiritual awakening. Jesus began to teach in the towns and rural areas of Galilee, where he developed a following of disciples. Around the year 30, Jesus went to Jerusalem where he instigated a conflict in the area of the Temple. The Last Supper took place before Jesus was arrested and executed by the Jews. After the crucifixion, Jesus was buried and resurrected.

Although Jesus greatly admired John the Baptist, Jesus healed the sick, which John did not do.

According to Sanders, Jesus was crucified, alongside two other insurgents but only suffered for a relatively brief time. Following the resurrection, the disciples continued to



preach the Word of God. Eventually, there was a separation between the religion at the time into two factions, Judaism and Christianity.

Chapter three, "Political Setting," discusses of the form and function of the government at the time of Jesus' birth and through to the end of his life. There were three main powers in the government: Herod Antipas, the tetrarch, ruled over Peraea and Galilee; Pontius Pilate served as the prefect of Judea which included Judea, Samaria, and Idumaea; and Joseph Caiaphas served as the high priest of Jerusalem.

Most of the historical information on record comes from Josephus, a scholar who studied history and biblical law, as well as principal religions, including the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Essenes. Josephus went on to become a great and powerful man. Josephus was also an author and wrote the history of the Jews, as well as a history of the war.

The Roman Empire was the successor of empires that existed before including the Persian Empire and various Hellenistic empires. Even though empires gained and lost power, the imperial system tended not to go through many changes.

Sanders details many finer points of the political setting at the time including the appointment of Herod the Great.

Sanders ends the chapter by making six main points regarding to the political setting that would help the reader understand Jesus. They include the fact that Rome did not govern Palestine directly, but rather used a client such as a king, tetrarch or governor. During the period in which Jesus lived, the tetrarch was Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great. Antipas tended to be a semi-independent ruler, although he may have been less ruthless his father. Day-to-day government was under the control of the high priest in Jerusalem as the Roman prefect tended to stay away from the capital city. There may have been some tension between the Jews and Pontius Pilate during the time of the crucifixion but Jewish Palestine was not on the brink of revolt. During this time there was always an element of fear of insurrection, although there was no major violence during Pilate's reign as prefect. Finally, most Jews wanted to be free from Rome's power and believed that could only be accomplished through holy intervention via a messiah.

Chapter four, "Judaism as a Religion," details the basic beliefs and traditions that were commonly practiced in Jewish Palestine during the first century. There were many things upon which the Gentiles and Jews agreed during the first century in the Mediterranean. Many believed in supernatural entities, in various purifications and rights, and sacrificing animals in the name of God. There were also many common ideals regarding ethics, including the disapproval of theft, murder, adultery, and robbery.

Sanders outlines the main points of common Judaism, as well as the central beliefs of the Jewish orthodoxy.

One very sensitive area was the question of leadership. Life was governed by divine law; therefore, a leader must be knowledgeable in said law. A member of the military could take over political control without having expertise in Jewish tradition and



scripture. However, it was important for the leader to be prudent and consult expert religious advisers so as not to offend the religious leaders. Although the typical picture of the political atmosphere at the time shows strict rule by the political rulers, individuals still had autonomy in several areas regarding observation of the Sabbath, rituals, and rules regarding sexual intercourse.

Expertise in the divine law could be achieved if one knew and understood the precise interpretation of Mosaic law and how it should be observed.



Chapters 5-9

Chapters 5-9 Summary and Analysis

Chapter five, "External Sources," details various examples of non-Christian literature that may shed light on the life of Jesus, as well as the sciences. The first topic addressed is non-Christian literature. According to non-Christian literature, Jesus was relatively unknown during his lifetime, particularly in areas outside Palestine. In the first century literature that is still in existence, Jesus was either unknown or considered to be a "troublesome rabble-rouser" in the most rural part of their world. Even the trial and crucifixion of Jesus did not make headlines in Rome, and the Roman archives contain no mention of it. If there were any records, they were most likely destroyed during a revolt that broke out in Palestine in 66 CE. In the book, "Antiquities of the Jews," written by Josephus, there was a mention of Jesus. However, the book was revised by Christian scribes so that Josephus referred to Jesus as the Messiah and made reference to the resurrection. Because the text was revised, no one will ever know exactly what was written by Josephus. On the bright side, there were most likely mentions in the original text that were merely adjusted by the scribes. It is not surprising that Jesus was not mentioned in most of the histories written by authors in Rome because the texts deal mostly with Rome proper and not the surrounding areas. Even then, Pontius Pilate was mentioned only incidentally.

One of the most confusing aspects of history from the first century is the fact that it is extremely difficult if not impossible to determine dates of the ancients. The ancient world did not use a uniform calendar; therefore, it is imperative that historians refer to external sources for information. Sanders gives two examples of how dates may be determined and refers to three major problems in regards to the date of Jesus' birth as well as his death. The first is that the references to people, times and events throughout the Gospels are often in conflict with one another. The second problem is that it is often difficult to reconcile the writings of Josephus with the Gospel. The third problem deals with the key differences between the Gospels and astronomy. One of the biggest issues is in Matthew, where the star guides the wise men from the east to attend to Jesus in Nazareth. Another issue is that the Gospels conflict with John's account of the crucifixion. Both claim the events took place on Friday, 15 Nisan; however, matching a particular month to the date as well as the astronomical positions during the time of the reported crucifixion is difficult, particularly when the two sources are conflicted as to in which month the event occurred.

There is no dispute about the place where Jesus lived, although the date of the crucifixion is in question. According to historical documents the crucifixion took place between 26 and 36 CE. Although there is no definitive way to determine the dates, it is basically accepted by scholars that Jesus was born in 4 or 5 B.C. and died between the years of 29 and 31 CE although some prefer of the year 33 CE.



Despite all the conflicts, there is a great deal of generalized information regarding Jesus. Sanders poses the question of how people can make the most out of the Gospels.

Chapter six, "The Problem of the Primary Sources," focuses on the Gospels. Sanders outlines the five main points regarding the Gospels. The first point is that the early Christians did not document Jesus' life through a narrative but rather recorded short passages which were later strung together by editors. The second issue is that some of the material has been edited and revised by early Christians. The third problem is that the Gospels were actually written by unnamed authors. The fourth issue is that the Gospel of John differs greatly from the other Gospels. The fifth issue is that the Gospels do not have many of the standard characteristics of biographies and therefore must be not be referred to be a biography.

Sanders reviews the history of the material in the Gospels and how much of the information was not written but rather was passed from generation to generation via the oral tradition.

A major issue with the Gospels is that they were written anonymously. It is clear that in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John did not write the Gospels, and there is little if any proof of these gospels' existence. There is documentation that the Gospels were unnamed until the year 180 C.E. At this time there were many Gospels, although the Christians eventually decided on including only four as the authoritative history.

Sanders refers to the differences between the synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John, particularly regarding the conflicts of the various important dates and times.

Because Sanders is a historian and scholar by inclination, the author claims he will attempt to make sense of the existing pieces of information regarding the Gospels.

Chapter seven, "The Two Contexts," attempts to correlate the two major contexts surrounding the life of Jesus. The first context is titled "The Theological Context: The History of Salvation." The context in which many people see Jesus is based on theology and salvation. Sanders gives a brief outline of Jesus' life and writes that the early Christians believed that he was in fact, a fulfillment of a prophecy and a major part of a divine plan. The second context, "The Context of Jesus' Own Career," outlines the historical aspect of Jesus and his activities. The chapter details John's influence on Jesus as well as the documented actions of Jesus, of which there are few with proven historical accuracy.

Chapter eight, "The Setting and Method of Jesus' Ministry," begins with Sanders stating that the majority of Jesus' work took place in Capernaum, a small town in Galilee. It was in Capernaum that Jesus called his disciples, most notably two pairs of brothers, John and James, and Andrew and Peter.

According to Sanders one of the most conflicting pieces of information concerns the synagogues. Many historians have claimed that there were no synagogues in Palestine in the first century. It is clear that synagogues and temples were not the same thing and



should not be confused with one another. However, the Bible claims that Jesus taught in the synagogues. Additionally, how would Jesus manage to teach in the synagogues of a strange town? There were no laws pertaining to the behavior in a synagogue; however, there were traditions.

The information is conflicting, yet archeologists have uncovered the remains of three synagogues that date back to 70 CE. There is also evidence that there is a fourth synagogue. It would seem that Jesus was able to teach in synagogues despite opinions to the contrary.

Sanders describes Galilee, its location, landmarks and history.

Chapter nine, "The Beginning of Jesus' Ministry," considers how the disciples may have made their living during Jesus' ministry. There is no evidence that the disciples worked. In fact, it is probable that the disciples stayed with whoever would take them in and feed them. In addition, there were many women who helped take care of the disciples, many of whom were prominent and most likely wealthy.

Sanders also comments upon the correlation between forty days and forty years. Jesus is said to have fasted in the desert for forty days. In Jewish tradition, "fasting" does not mean that Jesus had no sustenance. It is written that He "ate nothing," but it is physically impossible to survive for forty days without food or water. It is assumed that Jesus had water to drink. The reference to forty years is attributed to the amount of time the Israelites wandered through the desert after fleeing from Egypt.

Another curiosity is the change in the way the Jews worshiped. About this time, the Jews had become monotheists. It was due to this change that Satan or the Devil, an entity that permitted to tempt the faithful to test their strength of will, could no longer be seen as being at God's right hand. Instead, Satan was cast out to his own realm, thereby creating the modern version of hell.

Jesus' first attempt to call on disciples was met with failure. Jesus attempted to preach in Nazareth but was too well known for people to take him seriously. In Capernaum, Jesus found a willing audience. Disciples were called. Jesus promised that anyone who was willing to make the sacrifice now would become one of the judges of the twelve tribes of Israel and would also be given eternal life.

Sanders examines Mark's summary of the happenings early in Jesus' career. Mark offers an outline of events, and while it is clear regarding the sequence of events, there are often conflicting statements about what happened and where.

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Chapters 10-13

Chapters 10-13 Summary and Analysis

In chapter ten, "Miracles," Sanders talks about how many people see Jesus as a miracle worker and the act of performing miracles therefore proves His divinity. Others believe that Jesus' divinity makes it possible for Him to achieve miracles. Sanders claims that these views are false.

Jesus was not the only miracle worker in the world, or even in Palestine. It is not clear what constitutes a miracle. However, it is clear that people in the ancient world were more willing to believe in miracles than the people of today. Additionally, miracle workers were more likely to be celebrated in the ancient world since the reputations of many of the doctors was poor and people were not always cured or even helped with their ailments.

Mark points out that Jesus could have made a good living by healing the sick and could have used that skill to become rich and famous. Jesus chose to follow the path of the ministry.

While the Gospel of Mark tends to focus on the detailing of miracles, the Gospels of Matthew and Luke focus more on the teaching aspect of Jesus' life. This may show that the two areas in Jesus' life existed together yet remained separate.

Chapter eleven, "The Coming of the Kingdom," details the meaning of the phrase the "Kingdom of God." In many places in the Bible, the term is clear while in others, it is ambiguous at best.

While different factions certainly have varying beliefs, two points are made clear. One is that the governing in Heaven will not be the same as it is on earth. While rulers change, die or are overthrown, in Heaven, there is one ruler that is always present. That ruler is God. The other point is that God does not reign on earth yet there will come a day when that will happen. Sanders points out that some people believe one or the other while a large number of Christians believe both are true.

In chapter twelve, "The Kingdom: Israel, Gentiles and Individuals," Sanders examines the separation of the Gentiles and the Jews, even as they appear in the scripture. It would appear that the majority of the scripture caters to the Gentiles, which makes one wonder if the ministry believed the Jews were not as willing or able to accept God as He was presented by Jesus.

Regarding individuals, Sanders looks at the concept of the apostles claiming their places in Heaven. The scripture regarding Jesus' conversation with the apostles could not have taken place after the crucifixion, since all twelve apostles were promised a place in Heaven. Historians and scholars would not have awarded Judas a place in Heaven due to the betrayal.



It is important to note that although a great deal of Jesus' work catered to the individual, there was also a focus on specific groups of people, such as the Israelites.

Chapter thirteen, "The Kingdom: Reversal of Values and Ethical Perfectionism," outlines the theme of the reversal of values. In various scriptures, Jesus uses parables to note that when the kingdom comes to earth, he who is first will be last; he who is last will be first. This suggests what many people may refer to as karma. One of the most famous parables tells the story of the Prodigal Son in which the son who has gone away and spent his fortune is welcomed home with open arms while the loyal son is all but ignored.

Ethical perfectionism is also addressed in regards to marriage and the law. Divorce is against God's wishes and for a man to divorce and remarry is considered adultery. God also calls upon His people to live a higher standard than is required by law.



Chapters 14-15

Chapters 14-15 Summary and Analysis

Chapter fourteen, "Contention and Opposition in Galilee," speaks of the conflicts Jesus may have faced regarding the laws in Galilee. Although it is recorded that Antipas wanted to kill Jesus, the historical truth suggests that Jesus kept a relatively low profile, at least compared to John the Baptist. However, one of the main issues surrounding Jesus' presence in Galilee was the law. Today, many of the conflicts may seem trivial. In the first century, those same conflicts were serious. This may be in part because the ruling law in the world at that time was divine law; therefore, anyone who opposed the law could be seen as a blasphemer or heretic. Opposing the law, whether or not it was correct or just, was the basis for major conflict, particularly between the government and its peoples. Sanders goes into great detail regarding the types of conflicts experienced by Jesus and his disciples.

In chapter 15, "Jesus' View of His Role in God's Plan," outlines two aspects to Jesus' claim that He is the Son of God. One side of the claim makes Jesus seem like an egotistical, arrogant man because he preached that He was the Son of God. In this way, Jesus granted Himself a title, a practice which was highly inappropriate. The other side of the claim shows Jesus telling His followers to sacrifice all and follow Him so that they may know the kingdom of Heaven. When Jesus was asked what the disciples would receive in return, Jesus declared that each would receive their sacrifices in return by a hundred fold, have eternal life and the twelve apostles shall rule over the twelve tribes of Israel. The apostles would be accountable to Jesus, who in turn, was accountable only to God.

Sanders wonders if there is any proof that Jesus ever gave Himself a title. There is not. There are many vague claims that Jesus was a Messiah or the Son of God but there are also many conflicting opinions. Although Jesus accepted the term Messiah, the meaning is quite different today. In ancient times, Messiah meant "anointed" and there could be many Messiahs.



Chapters 16-17

Chapters 16-17 Summary and Analysis

In chapter sixteen, "Jesus' Last Week," Sanders outlines the events leading up to the crucifixion. There are quite a few conflicts in the stories leading up to the crucifixion. Perhaps the most controversial is the scene at the Temple. There are two common views to the encounter at the Temple. The first is that Jesus overturned the money-changers' tables, saying that the Temple was a place of worship, not dishonesty. Jesus then predicted that the Temple would fall. The other side saw it as Jesus confronting the money-changers' and creating chaos before threatening to destroy the temple. Jesus was arrested for the offense but never convicted due to the overwhelming amount of differing testimonies.

There are also many conflicts regarding the Last Supper, even in the scripture. However, most do agree on the breaking of the bread and the wine as the new covenant.

It is unclear why Jesus did not flee when he learned the soldiers were after Him. When Jesus was arrested, he was tried before the prefect and as a result of questioning, was convicted of blasphemy.

Pilate was put into an awkward position when he was asked to execute Jesus. The punishment should have been flogging and Jesus most likely could have talked his way out of the sentence. However, he did not try. Pilate ordered Jesus to be flogged. Pilate's wife advised him to let Jesus go, but Pilate caved under the pressure from the crowds and allowed Jesus to be crucified. Sanders notes that sometime later, Pilate was relieved of duty stemming from the charge of permitting too many large-scale, unwarranted executions.

Chapter seventeen, "Epilogue: The Resurrection," details the final stages of Jesus' life on earth. Sanders declares this chapter to be an epilogue since Jesus had already died.

The final source of conflict involves the details of the resurrection. The disciples were not present when the women rolled away the stone from the tomb because they were still in hiding. The conflict comes about in the details surrounding the appearance of Jesus as a divine being. Some claim that Jesus was instantly recognizable. Others, such as Luke, claimed that it was not clear that Jesus had been resurrected and some disciples walked with Jesus for some time before discovering his identity.

Sanders says that there will never be historical certainty regarding the life of Christ. However, there is a great deal known about him, his ministry, and the lessons taught. Perhaps the most historically significant is that there was a small following to this man that continued to spread and grow since the first century and has done more than any other movement to change the course of history.



Characters

Ed Parish Sanders

Ed Parish Sanders (1937 -) is a well-known biblical scholar with a specialty in the principles of the New Testament. Sanders spent 15 years as the Professor of Religion at Duke University until his retirement in 2005.

Sanders is a well respected historian on the subject of religion and seeks to enlighten his readership by presenting a practical view of religious history. Sanders has published many books on Judaism, both as the author and co-author. The author has received a number of prestigious awards including the Grawemeyer Award in the category of best book on religion.

Sanders' education is of some note. The author attended Wesleyan College in Fort Worth, Texas before moving on to the Perkins School of Theology at Texas' Southern Methodist University. Sanders also devoted 1962-1963 studying at various institutions of learning including Oxford, Göttingen, and in Jerusalem.

In 1966, Sanders completed his thesis at the Union Theological Seminary in New York. The work, titled "The Tendencies of the Synoptic Tradition" became the author's first published work in 1969.

When defining his stance on religion, Sanders often refers to himself as a "liberal, modernized Protestant."

One of Sanders' more popular and controversial subjects is the Apostle Paul, which appears as the main subject in two of the author's books.

Jesus

Jesus is considered to be the living embodiment of the Supreme Being of the universe, most commonly referred to as God. Jesus may also be seen as belonging to the Holy Trinity - the Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

Jesus was born in Nazareth, in the province of Galilee circa 5 B.C.E. Little is known about Jesus' life as a child except that He was the son of a carpenter and also practiced the same vocation. In Jesus' late twenties, he met John the Baptist and was baptized. Jesus claimed to have seen the light and began his own ministry.

The story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, are common knowledge to most people. Sanders chooses to leave behind all the parables and myths to explore the historical aspect of Jesus as a man, a teacher, and savior.



Jesus' purpose on earth was to teach the world about the Kingdom of God and one's place in it should one choose to embrace the Father and follow the doctrine of Christianity. This is often a conflicting role due to the fact that Jesus was Jewish and therefore, the concept of the Son of God is quite confusing to some.

No one will ever know the complete indisputable truth about Jesus' life but the author presents all that is known and documented to date.

John the Baptist

John the Baptist was the teacher who ministered to and baptized Jesus.

Matthew

Matthew is credited as being an author of one of the four Gospels.

Mark

Mark is credited as being an author of one of the four Gospels.

Luke

Luke is credited as being an author of one of the four Gospels.

John

John was an author of one of the four Gospels. Unlike the other "synoptic gospels," John tended to be the most thorough in his writings about Jesus.

Pontius Pilate

Pontius Pilate was the prefect who ordered Jesus' execution.

Judas Iscariot

Judas Iscariot was the Apostle who betrayed Jesus.

Paul

Paul was a convert who took up the mantle of spreading Christ's words and deeds.



Objects/Places

Galilee

Galilee is the region in which Jesus lived and taught. The main industry in Galilee was agriculture. The area was conducive to growing figs, olives, and walnuts. There was also a great deal of fishing on the Sea of Galilee, which also served as a port for ships that were carrying goods to other regions. The Sea of Galilee was quite small and often referred to as a lake. It was fed from the north by the Jordan River. To the south, the Jordan River continued and emptied into the Dead Sea.

Sanders details the habits and methods of the fishermen. The boats were typically small and manned by two or three sailors. The fish in the region were unusual and were not found in any other nearby region.

Capernaum's character was shaped by the fact that it rested on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Capernaum has often been referred to as Jesus' home base although Sanders thinks that the reference is a bit grand. At best, Capernaum was a small town that would provide living space for up to 1,500-2,000 people.

Jesus taught in surrounding small towns, including Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Magdala, which historians believe was the home of Mary Magdalene.

Historians know even less about Nazareth than they do Capernaum. It is believed Jesus also spent a good deal of time in Sephoris, which was a center for trading food and goods.

Rome

Rome is the capital of Italy and what most people consider to be the center of the religious world. In the first century, Rome controlled a great deal of the world, its empire responsible for making and enforcing laws, as well as the interpretation of the divine law.

Contrary to popular belief, Roman soldiers did not police every town and village in its empire. There were many reasons for this. Two of the main reasons include the fact that the empire was simply too large and it was easier to employ governors, priests, tetrarchs, and prefects; the second reason was that there was a good chance of the Romans inciting a war if they interfered too much in the traditions and laws of the Jews.

The Roman rulers, priests, and prefects were by and large political posts even though some also had religious duties. Many of the rulers were greedy and corrupt, or like Pilate, gave in too easily to pressure from the constituents.



Today, Rome still remains the center of much of the Christian religious world, although the atmosphere is quite different in regards to the separation of politics and government.

Capernaum

Capernaum - the town in which Jesus did the majority of His teaching and may have had a house there as well.

Nazareth

Nazareth - the small town in Galilee where Jesus was raised.

Sephoris

Sephoris - the center of trading for villagers in Capernaum and surrounding towns.

Galilee

Galilee - the region in which Jesus was born, lived and taught. The province includes Nazareth, Capernaum and other small towns and villages.

Jordan River

The Jordan River runs through Galilee and offered the villagers a small seaport from which they could import and export goods. The Jordan River continues past the Sea of Galilee to empty into the Dead Sea.

The Last Supper

The last meal when Jesus told the Apostles that he was on the brink of death and that they should partake of the new covenant.

Jerusalem

Jerusalem is the main religious center for the Hebrew people of Christ's time.

Temple

The Temple is the site of the conflict with the money-changers which led to Christ's first arrest.



Themes

Politics

Politics were an integral part of the life of Jesus and how His ministry was conducted. Rome controlled Galilee as well as many other regions. However, Roman soldiers did not patrol each area for a number of reasons, including the fact that the area was simply too large. Another reason was that the Romans were concerned that a dominating presence may interfere with Jewish law and custom and therefore incite riots or even a war.

Sanders points out how the political system worked and how the laws cooperated with the religions and traditions of the time. What might be considered to be minor conflicts today were significant in first-century Palestine, due in part to the fact that the law governing the land of Palestine was divine law, not separate from political systems.

Since the Romans did not rule directly over the region in which Jesus lived and taught, there were two lesser forms of government that were responsible for upholding the laws: the high priest, who resided in Jerusalem, and the prefect. In the case of the crucifixion, it was the prefect, Pontius Pilate, that ordered Jesus' death.

Sanders also points out that politically speaking, Jesus would have been able to avoid the crucifixion if He had chosen to agree to the laws regarding blasphemy and returned to Nazareth or Capernaum and stopped the traveling ministry.

Fact vs. Myth

It is common knowledge that the historical facts and myths surrounding Jesus' life are often in conflict. There are many reasons for that, which Sanders addresses briefly. Sanders chooses to focus on which items are myths, which are facts, and which are ambiguous. The conclusion is that both will continue to survive and each faction will always have its believers and detractors. There are ideas and tales which may be accepted as fact but have no documentation or proof and vice-versa. In the end, it is up to the reader to decide what is true or perhaps simply recognize that this is one of the topics in which myth and fact must co-exist if one desires a complete story.

Two of the largest myths in regards to Jesus' life pertain to the date of His birth as well as the date of the crucifixion. The date of birth can be narrowed down to a three-year period, although the time of year has never been proven. It is almost certain that it was not in December as modern Christianity believes; rather it was more likely to have taken place in the spring. The tale of the Three Wisemen does not align with astrological charts nor was it possible for the men to travel such a great distance in such a short period of time.



Another main source of puzzlement for historians is the date of the crucifixion. According to scripture, Jesus was executed on Friday, 15 Nisan, a month in the Jewish calendar. However, there is a one-month discrepancy in the Gospels. Regardless, there is little information regarding the Jewish calendar at that time because there was no universal format. According to what fact is known, there was no Friday 15 Nisan during the years in which Jesus may have been crucified.

Historical Truth

The purpose of "The Historical Figure of Jesus" by E.P. Sanders is to examine the historical truth surrounding the life and ministry of Jesus. Sanders does an excellent job in detailing all that is known about Jesus from a historical perspective. There is much that the author acknowledges as beliefs but does not discuss, such as Gethsemane, the virgin birth, and the trip to Bethlehem.

The points that Sanders chooses to make are directly related to the documented historical truth of the life of Jesus and how the myths often interfere with the scholarly study of the man's life and ministry.

The political setting of the region during the first century is documented in the Roman archives. There is proof that a great number of documents in the Roman archives were destroyed and perhaps were more details and facts regarding the time of Jesus. However, Sanders points out that it may be unlikely since Jesus was relatively unknown in Rome until long after His death. In fact, there is only one mention of Pilate in the archives, and it had nothing to do with Jesus but rather a political reference to another member of the government.

Sanders acknowledges that the entire truth will never be known about Jesus and while historians will continue to seek proof of His life and ministry, there will always be an element of myth and personal belief that will override any historical discoveries.

Style

Perspective

Ed Parish Sanders is a highly-respected biblical scholar who specializes in the principles of the New Testament. Until Sanders' retirement in 2005, he spent 15 years at Duke University as the Professor of Religion.

Sanders has spent his career honing his skills as an historian on the subject of religion. Unlike many students of the New Testament, Sanders is more interested in the historical fact rather than the theology. The author seeks to enlighten his readers by presenting a practical view of religious history, including facts, unsubstantiated tales, and myths. Sanders has published many books on Judaism, both as the author and co-author. The author has received a number of prestigious awards including the Grawemeyer Award in the category of best book on religion.

Sanders is well educated. The author attended Wesleyan College in Fort Worth, Texas before moving on to the Perkins School of Theology at Texas' Southern Methodist University. Sanders also devoted 1962-1963 studying at various institutions of learning including Oxford, Göttingen, and in Jerusalem. In 1966 Sanders completed his thesis at the Union Theological Seminary in New York. The work, titled "The Tendencies of the Synoptic Tradition" became the author's first published work in 1969.

Some of Sanders' work may be seen as controversial, particularly his writings on Paul, of which there are many. Sanders seems to adopt a fairly objective perspective to the presentation of his research.

Tone

The tone used in "The Historical Figure of Jesus" by E.P. Sanders varies between objective and partisan. The objective tone is seen most in areas where there is indisputable fact, such as the politics of Palestine, locales, structure of the region, and so forth. The partisan tone is used in areas where there are many conflicting stories, unsubstantiated facts, and obvious myths. There are also some areas in which Sanders may fluctuate from one tone to another, depending on the topic.

There are many areas in which the facts are proven and some that are not. For example, one of the pressing questions for historians is proof that there were Temples in Palestine during the first century. Many historians cast doubt upon a great deal of Jesus' story since there were no Temples in Palestine or Galilee at that time. It is clearly stated that Temples are not synonymous to synagogues, that the two were entirely different. Sanders refers to discoveries of the remains of four synagogues discovered in the region which casts new light on the tale of the money-changers.



Another point on which Sanders combines the two tones regards Pontius Pilate. For centuries there have been misconceptions regarding Pilate's participation in the crucifixion. The schools of thought are widely varied. Basically, there is one school of thought that subscribes to the fact that Pilate was a merciless and greedy man and cast Jesus to the wolves on a whim. Another school teaches that Pilate's hands were tied and the man simply caved into pressure. According to Sanders, the truth lies somewhere in the middle.

Structure

"The Historical Figure of Jesus" by E.P. Sanders is a work of non-fiction. The book is 281 pages in length and is comprised of 17 chapters. The shortest chapter is 5 pages in length; the longest chapter is 37 pages in length. The average length of a chapter is 17 pages.

In the beginning of the book, Sanders includes a map of Palestine around the time of Jesus' life, as well as a chronological table that serves to set the scene in regards to the government and region.

Chapters 1-2 are an introduction to Jesus' life, including an outline that gives the reader a time frame around which to place the important series of events.

Chapter 3 details the political structure and setting during the first century and Palestine and beyond. The inclusion of the political structure is vital if one wishes to understand how the law operated and how it applied to Jesus.

Chapter 4 explores Judaism as a religion.

Chapters 5-7 focus on primary and external sources of information and the advantages and disadvantages of fact versus belief.

Chapters 8-9 review the beginning of Jesus' ministry and which methods were employed throughout.

Chapter 10 covers the important topic of miracles and how they affected the beliefs of Jesus' followers and detractors.

Chapters 11-14 thoroughly examine the concept of the Kingdom of God, how it affects various cultures and peoples and why it threatened political entities. It also covers the type of opposition Jesus faced in Galilee.

Chapter 15 examines Jesus' role in God's plan.

Chapter 16 details the well-known events of the last week of Jesus' life, including the Last Supper, arrest, and crucifixion.

Chapter 17, the epilogue, reveals what is known about the resurrection and Jesus' continued importance.



Quotes

"That Jesus was born a few years before the beginning of the era that starts with his birth is one of the minor curiosities of history."

Page 11

"In the first century Mediterranean world, Jews and Gentiles agreed on a lot of things. Most of them believed in supernatural beings, and worshiping God (or the gods) by sacrificing animals, and in various kinds of rites and purifications."

Page 33

"Since the law was written, all literate Jews could read it, and the non-literate heard it read and discussed in the synagogue."

Page 43

"When Jesus was executed, his followers fled or hid, but their hopes were renewed when they saw him alive again."

Page 58

"I share the general scholarly view that very, very little in the apocryphal Gospels, could conceivably go back to the time of Jesus. They are legendary and mythological."

Page 64

"The more parallels there were between Jesus and characters or prophecies in Hebrew Scripture, the more likely Matthew, Mark and Luke were to invent still more."

Page 85

"All the evidence indicates that, by the first century, synagogues were common wherever Jews lived, although we do not know when or where they originated."

Page 99

"The story of Jesus' temptation in the desert is both symbolic (40 days) and mythological."

Page 113

"We shall see that Jesus looked forward to the coming of the kingdom of God, but that it is difficult to say just what sort of kingdom he expected."

Page 116

"It is interesting to speculate on why Jesus wanted disciples."

Page 124

"It is noteworthy that Jesus' family were not followers."

Page 125



"It lies beyond my meager abilities as an interpreter of dogmatic theology to explain how it is possible for one person to be 100% human and 100% divine, without either interfering with the other."

Page 134

"Jews were especially well known as miracle-workers."

Page 138

"In order to see Jesus says he really was, we must recognize that the ethical teaching of the Sermon on the Mount does not tell the whole story."

Page 153

Topics for Discussion

In your opinion, how important is the historical documentation of Jesus' life? Explain.

Do you think Jesus would have fulfilled his mission and ministry if he had not met John the Baptist?

What might have happened if Jesus had managed to talk his way out of the flogging that led to the crucifixion?

What might have happened if the women had not found the empty tomb?

Does the Biblical history of Christ seem more or less plausible than the historical story? Discuss.

How might things have changed if Judas did not betray Jesus?

Examine possible reactions from the disciples' families when they announced the pilgrimage with Jesus.

Do you think the ministry would have succeeded without the presence of the devoted and prominent women followers?