
Over the past fifty to one hundred years of New Testament scholarship, few areas of study have generated as much interest and literature as the quest for the historical Jesus. Perspectives ranging from minimalist skepticism to stringent conservatism have all engaged in the debate at some point or another. With *Studying the Historical Jesus*, Darrell Bock, Research Professor of New Testament Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary, endeavors to provide beginning students of the Gospels a necessary primer to enter this important conversation (9).

**Summary**

Bock organizes his work into an introduction and two parts. The introduction has two primary aims. First, he attempts to set forward the basic issues that are known about each of the four Gospels. Second, he traces both biblical and extra-biblical sources to determine what they enlighten about each Gospel’s portrayal of Jesus (14). These sources include the Old Testament, the Apocrypha, the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Philo, Josephus, the four canonical Gospels, the midrashim, the Mishnah, the Talmud and brief mention of some non-Jewish sources.

Upon completion of the introduction, Bock outlines his goals for Part One. He asserts that the “entire unit places Jesus in his proper cultural-religious setting” (44). He accomplishes this goal by means of four chapters. The first chapter considers nonbiblical literary evidence for Jesus, and demonstrates literary attestation to an historical Jesus from Roman sources such as Seutonius, Tacitus, and Pliny the Younger. He also notes two indirect Roman references of Thallus and Peregrinus, a Syrian text by Mara Bar Sarapion, and numerous Jewish and Rabbinic texts. In chapter two, Bock provides the reader with a detailed discussion of the issues involved
with a chronology of Jesus’ life. Issues such as the death of Herod, the dating of the cleansing of
the temple, and the number of Passovers Jesus observes in John are among the many dates that
play into any determination of a chronology. After discussing the pros and cons of these
positions, Bock posits a date for Jesus’ birth around 6-4 BC and a date for his death in AD 30-33
(77).

In chapters three and four, Bock discusses political and sociocultural history respectively.
The discussion on political history begins with the Babylonian exile, then traces the political
changes through the Persian period, Alexander the Great, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the
Maccabean revolt and Hasmonean dynasty, and Roman rule from Pompey to Pilate. He ends the
chapter with various charts of timelines (102-104, 106) and a family tree of Herod the Great
(105). With respect to sociocultural history, Bock’s aim is to “point out some of the more
fundamental features of first-century life in Israel and Galilee that help us to better understand
the Gospels” (108). The fundamental features he addresses are population, geography, travel,
agriculture, values, life expectancy, literacy, family and home, politics and power, economics,
and religion. His discussion of religion receives the most detail. He posits three fundamental
aspects of Jewish belief: monotheism-election, covenant-land, and circumcision. He then argues
for six themes common to Jewish faith of the time: Sabbath, purity, temple, feasts, calendar, and
messianic hope (123). The most discussion on these six themes rests with the messianic hope,
likely because of his conclusion that there is no one single view of the messianic hope, although
he does suggest that the “predominant view, for those who had a hope, was of a Davidic regal
figure” (131). He concludes the chapter on sociocultural history with a brief discussion of the
key sects of Judaism, namely the Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes, Herodians, and Zealots.
In Part Two of his work, Bock concerns himself with presenting the reader with an overview of the various methods involved in historical Jesus study. He posits that such consideration “will reveal why people say such a variety of things about the same texts” (140). In order to set the context for the various methodologies, Bock uses chapter five to survey the three quests for the historical Jesus. The first quest, he asserts, “was an attempt to be ‘historical’ by noting how the scriptural accounts were not coherent and then seeing what remained” (143). The second quest was less radical than the first, accepting much of Jesus’ teaching (particularly ethical teaching) as authentic, though still rejecting the idea that Jesus thought of himself as Messiah (145-146). This quest made no distinction between canonical and non-canonical texts as historical sources (146). The third quest is far more accepting of the historicity of the Gospel narratives, though there remain many variations on this acceptance. For example E.P. Sanders finds it “doubtful that Jesus saw himself as Messiah,” but N.T. Wright does accept Jesus’ “messianic consciousness,” a position supported by James Dunn and Markus Bockmuehl among others (148). In chapters six through ten he moves on to address various methods for approaching historical Jesus studies: historical criticism (chapter 6), source criticism (chapter 7), form criticism (chapter 8), redaction criticism (chapter 9), and tradition criticism (chapter 10). In each chapter he defines the approach and gives positive and negative commentary on the method and its results. In chapter eleven, Bock concludes with the most recent approach, narrative criticism, and likewise identifies positive and negative aspects of this method. With respect to narrative criticism, Bock provides discussion on aspects such as plot, presentation of time, characterization, point-of-view, and type of narrator. He concludes the chapter with a brief discussion of the genre of Gospel.
Critical Evaluation

Bock’s work offers a concise yet accurate introduction to the major concerns of historical Jesus study. He does an excellent job of introducing the reader to key topics without belaboring the point. For example, in his discussion of extra-biblical sources that shed light on the Gospel narratives (Introduction, 15-40), Bock alerts the reader to sources such as the Mishnah and Talmud, as well as key figures like Philo, without going into excessive detail that would distract the reader from the main point. Nevertheless, completely ignoring these sources would not only leave the reader uninformed on how these individuals and sources aid in the historical Jesus debate, but likely many of his readers would remain ignorant of these sources at all. Thus, his decision to include the material yet keep it brief succeeds at maintaining a good balance.

With respect to other issues, however, Bock is rightly more detailed. For example, while a detailed discussion of the issues above would be too lengthy and moderately helpful to his audience of beginning students, his more detailed discussion of the chronology of Jesus’ life is appropriate to his audience and of much more significant aid. Bock discusses various issues such as the date of the death of Herod, the cleansing of the temple, and the number of Passovers Jesus observed in John to provide a wealth of information that could speak to Jesus’ chronology. In places that are more certain, such as Herod’s death being no later the 4 BC, Bock is rightly confident in his dating. With respect to more difficult issues, such as Quirinius’s census, Bock argues that of the two main options, “neither solution is clearly preferable, but either is a possibility” (70). One may be dissatisfied with this answer, but it seems acceptable on three accounts. First, Bock is right to be less dogmatic on an explanation for a difficulty that lacks sufficient evidence to conclude one position or the other. Second, Bock likely realizes that a full discussion of this issue would be too lengthy and detailed for his purposes, so rather than discuss
it here, he points his readers to his commentary on Luke 1:1-9:50. Third, the supporting evidence that he provides that seems more sure, coupled with the more minor issue of the date of Quirinius’s census, make this inconclusive statement less problematic. Another strength of this section is his consistent ability to show how one decision may positively or negatively affect another position. For example, though he defends a date of AD 33 for Jesus’ death as “slightly more likely” than AD 30 (77), he points out that this would leave a small window of time between Jesus’ death and Saul/Paul’s conversion (76). A similar approach is taken when he summarizes the assumptions necessary for a view of AD 30 or AD 33. If the date of Jesus’ death is AD 30, Bock argues that the conclusion would entail an acceptance of the Syrian reckoning of counting from Tiberius’s coregency, the beginning of Herod’s temple construction in 20BC, and a short ministry of Jesus (75). Conversely, an AD 33 date would use a Roman reckoning, a later starting date for “holy place” in John 2:20, and a longer ministry of Jesus (76). For many just being introduced to the discussion, it would be easy to accept contradictory positions for any of the individual pieces of evidence; however, Bock’s approach reminds the reader that each decision affects another and then gives the reader help in assessing his or her own conclusions.

There is little that one can negatively critique in this work, but one moderate weakness is the relative scarcity of examples from the New Testament when discussing the various methods employed. Bock does give a couple of examples in the section on narrative criticism, but the extent of his application is usually limited to a Scripture reference in parentheses. Especially for issues such as dissimilarity (200), the principle of coherence (201), or the principle of double similarity and double dissimilarity (202), it would aid the reader if Bock gave a case study for each to demonstrate what the principle looks like in application and how it could be reproduced. Despite the lack of examples, the definitions and brief discussions of each are understandable at
a basic level, even for beginning students, but adding case studies from specific Scriptures would improve the applicability of these sections.

**Conclusion**

After weighing the strengths and weaknesses in the book, Bock’s *Studying the Historical Jesus* tips the scales dramatically to the side of strengths. The minor issue of needing more specific examples to improve applicability does little to detract from the immense success of the overall content of the work. For a student just beginning his or her foray into historical Jesus studies, this work will be helpful in presenting the basic issues of sources and methods so as to provide a solid foundation for future study.