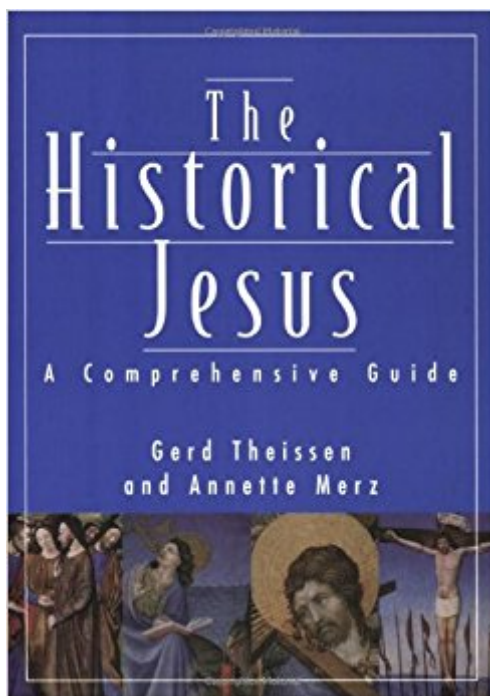


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# Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide



## Synopsis

In the continuing quest for the elusive but compelling figure of Jesus of Nazareth, Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz's authoritative yet engaging book is the single most helpful resource to date. Comprehensively detailing the sources for our knowledge of Jesus, Theissen and Merz fully explore the historical and social context of Jesus and his activity. They then unfold what we can know about Jesus' characteristics as a charismatic teacher, a Jewish prophet, a healer, a teller of parables, and an ethical teacher. Finally, they examine closely the historical questions surrounding Jesus' last supper, his violent death, the accounts of Easter, and the beginnings of Christology. Beholden to neither ancient dogma nor contemporary fantasy, written in a clear style with a variety of learning aids, *The Historical Jesus* will provide students, teachers, and other individuals with a fascinating and reliable guide into this most exciting field of Jesus research.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

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Gerd Theissen is Professor of New Testament at the University of Heidelberg in Germany. His

books include "The Religion of the Earliest Churches" and "The Shadow of the Galilean: The Quest of the Historical Jesus in Narrative Form". Gerd Theissen is Professor of New Testament at the University of Heidelberg, Germany. His Fortress Press books include *The Shadow of the Galilean* (1987), *The Gospels in Context* (1991), *The Religion of the Earliest Churches* (1999), and *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (with Annette Merz; 1998).

I am a layman with an interest in the historical Jesus and I bought this book based on reviews here. The forward states explicitly that "each topic [is] self-contained" and "it is possible to skip sections," so after reading Ch. 1 I went to Ch. 15, "The Risen Jesus" where I was quite disappointed. 1 Cor 15:3ff must play a significant role in any discussion, but Theissen woodenly declares, with emphasis, that its status "as tradition is undisputed" and "Its pre-Pauline origin is certain" (pp 487-8). To the contrary: in a 1995 "J. of Higher Criticism" article, "Apocryphal Apparitions: 1 Corinthians 15:3-11 as a Post-Pauline Interpolation," Robert Price explicitly addressed this question (also found as Ch 4 of "The Empty Tomb" by Price and Lowder as well as elsewhere). In addition to his own arguments, Price shows that the discordant nature of 3-11 has been noted even by those not arguing for a post-Pauline origin (including by Bultmann, Evans, Conzelmann, and Schillebeeckx). My point is not that Price is correct. It is, rather, that in at least one critical chapter in this book apologetics is being passed off as historical analysis.

This is an incredibly scholarly discussion of the historical Jesus. It cites many different sources. While somewhat in textbook format (with questions at the end of chapters, etc.) this stands alone well as research and scholarly writing. Theissen and Merz are both well-read scholars of the historical Jesus, and they have a deep understanding of the different views surrounding this topic.

This book by the well-known German New Testament scholar and his research assistant aims at being a comprehensive textbook for studying the historical Jesus - and largely achieves that aim. This book is not short nor for the casual reader and anyone attempting to enter its portals must be prepared to be questioned by the text as much as expecting a thesis to be laid out before them. The book even shades into discussions of Easter and early Christology, thus transgressing recognised disciplinary boundaries in an ever more defined academic world. It has to be said that this book is hard going. This is a million miles away from previous books by Theissen, particularly his "The Shadow of the Galilean", which was narrative. Here we have dense argumentation, tables, questions and all the things we would expect to find in an academic textbook. I believe that this will

(and maybe should) limit its readership. One interesting feature is the authors' decision to go with a "Jesus as" approach to its discussions. Thus, we have "Jesus as poet", "Jesus as healer", "Jesus as prophet" and "Jesus as a charismatic", etc. Jesus is also seen as the "founder of a cult" and as a "martyr". I would say that these designations meet with greater or lesser success - both in themselves and within the argumentation of this book. But the treatments here are thorough if not also totally convincing. In short, this book is for the committed student most of all. The casual reader will have to struggle with technical background argumentation and ancient documentation. If they feel able and willing to do that then this book is worthy of their attention. It is a full and thorough discussion of the historical Jesus.

Read this textbook with a critical eye, especially re. supercessionist tendencies. It does a great job of presenting much of the context of the search for historical Jesus, and probably remains the most comprehensive textbook for approaching this field. Of course it was written before some aspects of this field of scholarship were underway, but pay attention to the lens through which the writers looked at the subject.

The subtitle 'A Comprehensive Guide' is well-earned. .com incorrectly lists its length as 624 pages; in actuality, it is 642 pages long, and every page is large. There is plenty of information here on almost every aspect of Jesus research. The book consists of the following sixteen chapters. 1. The Quest of the Historical Jesus 2. Christian Sources about Jesus 3. The Non-Christian Sources about Jesus 4. The Evaluation of the Sources: Historical Scepticism and the Study of Jesus 5. The Historical and Religious Framework of the Life of Jesus 6. The Chronological Framework of the Life of Jesus 7. The Geographical and Social Framework of the Life of Jesus 8. Jesus as Charismatic: Jesus and his Social Relationships 9. Jesus as Prophet: Jesus' Eschatology 10. Jesus as Healer: The Miracles of Jesus 11. Jesus as Poet: The Parables of Jesus 12. Jesus as Teacher: The Ethics of Jesus 13. Jesus as the Founder of a Cult: The Last Supper and the Primitive Christian Eucharist 14. Jesus as Martyr: The Passion of Jesus 15. The Risen Jesus: Easter and its Interpretations 16. The Historical Jesus and the Beginnings of Christology Finally, there is a retrospect in which a short life of Jesus is presented. This work was created with use as a textbook in mind. At the end of each chapter, there are 'Tasks' required of the reader that encourage a direct participation in the interpretation of the primary source materials. While it is suited for use in the classroom, it is also easily adaptable to personal study. Each chapter can be easily covered in a convenient session of a couple hours. There are extensive bibliographic notes for further study in particular topics. The

following historical facts about Jesus emerge from *The Historical Jesus*: 1. Jesus was from Galilee (p. 164). 2. Jesus was baptized by John (p. 207). 3. Jesus performed exorcisms and healings (p. 301, p. 304). 4. Jesus was accused of being in league with the devil (p. 76, p. 297). 5. His family thought him to be mad (p. 570, p. 582). 6. Jesus rejected an overestimation of himself as 'good teacher' (p. 558). 7. Jesus preached about the Kingdom of God; e.g., the logion concerning 'Taking the kingdom by storm' (p. 580). 8. Jesus spoke most of the parables that have been preserved (p. 338). 9. Jesus said something against the Temple cult (p. 432). 10. The disciples of Jesus fled at his arrest (p. 428). 11. Jesus was crucified with the titulus 'The King of the Jews' (p. 458). 12. The disciples were disappointed that Jesus did not 'redeem Israel' (p. 428). One possible weakness of the book is that it offers no over-arching explanation or model for the historical Jesus. Rather, the book investigates each aspect of Jesus ('Jesus as...') more or less individually. On the other hand, this may be considered a strength, especially given that the real Jesus himself is not a cardboard cut-out figure but rather an actual human being. This is brought out beautifully in another book by Theissen, *The Shadow of the Galilean*.

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