

Craig A. Evans. *Jesus and His World: The Archaeological Evidence*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012. 192 pages. \$25.

Jesus and His World: The Archaeological Evidence is an insightful investigation of contemporary archaeology and its relevance for understanding New Testament descriptions of Jesus, his teaching and activities, and the world in which he lived. Evans sets the stage for our investigation by highlighting the importance of verisimilitude, meaning “the resemblance or likeness of the way that things really were,” as a tool for assessing the reliability and historicity of ancient literary sources, including biblical narratives (1). Challenging biblical minimalism and its insistence upon archaeological evidence to verify the literary sources, Evans proposes that we give greater attention to the extent to which narratives such as the New Testament Gospels match the way that things really were during the specified period. The Gospels and their characterization of Jesus are historically reliable, therefore, because of their high degree of verisimilitude. They describe real people, places, events, political systems, religious practices, beliefs and customs. Paul and other historical figures, including Papias, Polycarp, Clement, Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch also testify to having known people who knew Jesus, were acquainted with his family members and the original disciples, or who were familiar with his movement. Archaeological discoveries clarify and corroborate these sources, deepening our understanding of Jesus and his world.

Having set the stage for our investigation, each of the remaining chapters explores a topic of interest in the life of Jesus in dialogue with contemporary archaeology and other historical sources. Chapter one responds to questions about Jesus’ Jewish upbringing in Nazareth and to inferences that Jesus may have been a Jewish Cynic. The evidence reveals that Nazareth was a Jewish village of about 400 people with a local synagogue and no pagan temples or schools. Located just a few kilometers from a major city, Sepphoris, Nazareth may have been a regional supplier of pottery. The literary evidence also refutes the idea that Jesus became a Cynic as an adult, revealing essentially no parallels between Jesus’ teaching and practices and those of the Cynics. Evans notes, for example, that the characteristic markers of the true Cynic were his cloak, purse, and staff. In the Gospels, Jesus instructs his disciple to take no purse, no money, no staff and no more than one cloak.

In response to questions about the existence of synagogue buildings during the time of Jesus, chapter two provides textual as well as archaeological evidence from numerous sites suggesting that such buildings indeed existed during Jesus’ lifetime. Chapter three grapples with the question of literacy between Jesus and his disciples. Evans’ careful examination of written documents, inscriptions, and archaeological findings throughout Palestine and the Mediterranean support his contention that Jesus was literate. He read Hebrew Scripture, interpreted it in Aramaic, and was familiar with interpretive practices of the time. Though Jesus may not have received scribal training, Evans stands by his conclusions noting, “I find an illiterate Jesus harder to explain than a literate one” (88).

Chapter 4 investigates Jesus’ relationship with the “powerbrokers” of his time. Inscriptions, tombs, ossuaries, and excavated buildings and houses support the textual evidence regarding the tension that existed between Jesus and the religious and political leaders of his time. In Chapter 5, Evans explores Jewish burial traditions in ancient Palestine and provides significant support for the idea that Jesus, though executed as a criminal, would have received a burial. He suggests that Roman officials would have respected Jewish burial traditions during peacetime, particularly on the eve of Passover, and would not have wanted to “provoke the

Jewish population and incite Jewish nationalism” (130). The Gospel narratives, given their high degree of verisimilitude, also provide support for Jesus’ burial on the day of his execution, as would have been consistent with Jewish law.

Evans concludes his writing with two appendixes. In the first he refutes the 2007 claim that builders had stumbled upon Jesus’ tomb while constructing town houses in East Talpiot, located between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. The second appendix ponders questions about Jesus’ physical appearance and ethnic identity.

I can imagine using this book in courses such as: Preaching the Synoptic Gospels, Preaching and the Life of Jesus, Introduction to the New Testament, or a course on biblical archaeology. It might also prove a valuable resource for professors who teach preaching or biblical studies as well as for pastors and church educators who may want to add depth to their Bible studies. Evans’ carefully examines the archaeological and textual data for each of the questions that he explores and augments his discussions with photographs and summary charts, making the book accessible to a broad range of readers. He accomplishes his purpose of presenting the archaeological evidence in a manner that piques the interest of everyday readers.

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