Anyone interested in a quick update on current historical Jesus research will find this book worth reading because it covers the whole spectrum of mainstream historical Jesus research. Already the forty-five-page introduction and overview of historical Jesus research by the two editors is as good as it gets. James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy succeed not only in identifying the major trends but also in bringing to the surface some of the assumptions in current historical Jesus research. They offer a sympathetic review of some of the major exponents of Jesus research from Reimarus up to the present day. The quest for the historical Jesus is identified as a child of the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment that challenged both biblical and ecclesiastical authority and for those reasons continues to pose a scholarly challenge. Unfortunately, their interesting overview merely perpetuates existing assumptions instead of challenging them by means of rigorous analyses.

Besides the introductory chapter, the book contains five chapters written by prominent scholars across the spectrum of historical Jesus research. The five, Robert M. Price, John Dominic Crossan, Luke Timothy Johnson, James D. G. Dunn, and Darrell L. Bock, are each responsible for one of the chapters plus four shorter critical responses to their fellow contributors. One rarely finds this kind of debate and comparative perspectives compiled...
together anywhere in historical Jesus scholarship, and for this the editors are to be applauded.

The five major essays are similar in structure in that they all cover issues related to historical method as well as the picture of Jesus as historical figure. This allows for debate not only on the different presentations of Jesus but also on the underlying mechanics of producing such pictures. Although each author introduces a unique set of methodological and theoretical tools, there is enough overlap to ensure critical engagement.

At one end of the spectrum is Robert Price, who argues that “it is quite likely that there never was any historical Jesus” (55). In his view, most of the data that we have about Jesus are the product of haggadic midrash of the Hebrew Bible built on the well-known myth of the dying and rising gods of the Greco-Roman world. He maintains, “maybe the Was [not the Das of Jesus] was a myth, not a man” (82).

At the other end of the spectrum, Darrell Bock represents what he calls an “evangelical” view on Jesus (249), and he uses the criteria of authenticity to determine the “gist” of Jesus (252). Given the amount of material that overlaps between the Synoptics, Bock’s Jesus is painted based on a clearly identifiable gist affirming most of the deeds and words ascribed to him. Given the tried and tested criteria of authenticity, Bock confidently shows that many of the events, including the miraculous ones such as the resurrection, as well as the words ascribed to Jesus in the Synoptics, can by these means be shown to be historical. Therefore, due to the authenticity (multiple independent attestation) of so many passages, the “post-Easter Jesus” or the “Christ of faith” is one and the same as the historical Jesus.

In between there are three other portrayals. For John Dominic Crossan, Jesus “was a Galilean Jew within Judaism within the Roman Empire” (105). His picture is painted by means of the multiply attested earliest strata of texts that, according to his construction, determine the data base and that are placed within the context of Second Temple Judaism and the Roman Empire. Like the human emperor Augustus, Jesus was a divinity incarnate, but unlike the violence that dominated the Roman Empire, his program was characterized by nonviolence and peace. For Crossan, the most appropriate construction based on the authentic sources is of Jesus as a nonviolent figure (88).

Johnson distinguishes two modes of knowing. Faith as a way of cognition is for him the primary mode of obtaining knowledge about the “real Jesus” (155), who is also taken as a figure of the present time. However, Jesus can also be known through historical knowledge and historiography, and the latter should be potentially verifiable. Some of the activities ascribed to Jesus in the Gospels (such as that he proclaimed the kingdom of
God, taught in parables, and associated with the marginalized in society) can, in his view, historically be affirmed with a high degree of probability (159). At the same time, a large number of “events” (e.g., “the virgin birth, voices from heaven, exorcisms, healings, transfiguration, resurrection,” 164) fall outside the ability of the historian to decide upon and can only be known through faith. Consequently, the “human Jesus apart from faith in his resurrection” (157) can be known by means of historical methods, while the insider sources are replete with accounts of “events” that in principle fall outside of the historians’ scope (164) and can be unlocked by faith knowledge or narrative interpretation where the “full literary integrity” (167) of the Gospels is accepted. Therefore, Johnson is uncomfortable with the manner in which “Christian apologists, as well as some critics of Christianity” (89), too easily affirm assertions about Jesus based on historiography.

In his chapter Dunn does not actually provide his own picture of Jesus but addresses three core assumptions in painting such pictures. His presentation is more program than content. For him, there is no great divide between the Christ of faith and the historical Jesus, since the impact of Jesus was from the beginning part of the tradition, while the characteristics, emphases, and features of Jesus in the tradition give us the best picture of the characteristic Jesus (223). Instead of explicitly adopting the notion of the reality of supernatural “events” for salvaging much of the tradition, Dunn asserts that “Jesus evoked faith from the outset and … this faith is the surest indication of the historical reality and effect of his mission” (203). Historical interpretation can, in his view, ascertain a historical picture of Jesus based on this impact that was preserved in the oral tradition. His picture of the historical Jesus (known from his other works), therefore, is a reflection of the “characteristic Jesus” preserved in the Synoptic tradition (204).

At face value, the five pictures are as far apart as can possibly be expected, because they represent the broadest possible spectrum of viewpoints in current historical Jesus research. They are remarkably diverse but, from an analytical point of view, also remarkably similar. In fact, I would suggest that, despite the diversity, there is an even more remarkable unity in current historical Jesus research, including the present five views. Therefore, the question: What unifies the diversity, and what diversifies the unity among these portrayals?

Johnson criticizes Bock for reading the Gospels as “reliable on every point” (294) without noticing that behind the notion of reliability lies two other related distinctions that all of them share to a certain degree: a literal instead of cultural reading of the texts and a modernist Enlightenment yardstick of what is real and what is not real. What is real depends on worldview and is not the same for all people on the planet. Without realizing it, all of them read the texts literally as if they talk about real events; they differ only as to
whether the claims should be accepted as real or not. Literal readings depend on the myth of realism or what is known as temporocentrism: the viewpoint that assumes the natural veracity of narratives without asking whether such narratives perhaps come from and speak about different cultural or consensus realities. None of the authors reads the texts as products from a distinct cultural system that talks about cultural realities at home in such a system. Instead, they all read the texts (especially those parts containing the extraordinary events) at face value and take them to contain claims about reality out there as known from their own (Western) reality register. They only disagree as to whether and in which way such extraordinary or supernatural “events” as reported by the Gospels should be accepted as real or not. This can be illustrated by briefly looking at their viewpoints from this analytical perspective.

At the one end of the spectrum of the literal reading, Price finds such events not real but myths. His modernist reality register simply overrules issues of reliability or cultural reality. For him, textual claims about supernatural events are the product of myth. Although he differs on the fundamental issue that Jesus actually existed, Crossan’s Jesus comes mostly from the sayings tradition. But his remark about the virginal conception in this publication (“‘Virginal conception’ is a theological claim about Jesus and not a biological claim about Mary and the only thing sillier or sadder than taking ‘virginal conception’ literally, is opposing it literally,” 85) shows that, with regard to the extraordinary events in the tradition, he also simply relies on a literal reading and a modernist reality register, as is also the case with his view on Jesus’ resurrection (published elsewhere): his literal reading forces him into a choice between real historical events or myths, legends, or theologizing. Johnson’s literal reading produces two kinds of events that are equally real: those in time-space (that remarkably all fit into the Western reality register) and belief-events that are known by faith only (and obviously only knowable by believers). In his case the Gospels are privileged as reliable sources in that they contain data about real events as well as events known through faith (and in this sense real to the believer). At the other end of the spectrum, Bock believes that a figure with all the (miraculous and incredible) features such as the ones ascribed to Jesus could actually have existed. It is doubtful whether this belief is the product of historiography. It is more likely that he takes the Gospels as historically reliable and his historiography is simply a function of that belief. Although Dunn does not express his portrait in these terms, it is clear that privileging the experience of Jesus’ followers (he talks about the impact of Jesus on his followers that allowed access to the historical reality of his person) contains a similar strategy as Johnson and Bock, namely, to increase his taken-for-granted view of what is real. The reports and witnesses about Jesus’ impact provide access to a historical reality. Similar miraculous or supernatural claims in other texts would for
Price and Crossan also be myths, while the other authors would probably consider only such accounts as myths or dismiss them as unauthentic.

None of these portrayals even considers the possibility that most of the accounts in the Gospels report about cultural events that were real and experienced as real within the worldview and cultural system of people living in a differently constructed reality. Even though they expressed these events (as all people on the planet do) as (objectively) real for them, it does not mean that they were indeed events in time-space. Events or phenomena from different cultural systems can be accepted to exist without endorsing them as real for all people. What is missing from all five viewpoints is that, like many figures in traditional societies, Jesus’ biography (whether seen as reported by eyewitnesses, presented by followers based on his impact, or based on hearsay) was made up of a variety of events and phenomena, some of which were out there in time-space whereas others can be regarded as real only if viewed as institutional or as experiential realities within particular cultural systems. Without realizing it, these portrayals remain trapped in an Enlightenment reading of the Gospels that cannot account for cultural events unfamiliar to that reality register.

Let me conclude by reflecting about the level of analysis and critical debate in this publication. At face value, it seems as if there is genuine critical debate due to the differences between these scholars. Unfortunately, they read each other like they read the Gospels: literally from their own framework of meaning. While it is reasonable to assume that all the authors had access to all the chapters, it is remarkable that no one asked the critical question of how it is possible that, based on exactly the same sources, five scholars can come up not only with such diverse portrayals of the historical figure but with such excluding views on what they think the data is about. Within the shared reality register of the Enlightenment, they come up with a remarkable spectrum of pictures: the data are about a myth, a man-myth process, a man-superman figure (Johnson and Dunn), or an extraordinary superman (divine man), respectively. Essentially, the differences in the debate have very little to do with historical method or which texts are used but what the authors think could be real or not. Bock, Dunn, and Johnson accept that certain beliefs and experiences ascribed to Jesus could have belonged to the world of reality, whereas Crossan and Price consider such beliefs and experiences when they surface in texts as not real but myths; no one considers that such beliefs and experiences could have been real within a different cultural system that also took angels and demons for real. In short, they are unified in that no one considers the data as coming from and speaking about cultural realities that could come from a worldview different from their own.

Jesus of Nazareth certainly was a unique, extraordinary, and remarkable historical figure—but within the framework of a different cultural system and reality construction.
Unfortunately, the shape of current historical Jesus research is still dominated by the absence of such insights, and for that reason we are over and over presented with pictures of a historical figure (a myth, a man-myth, a man-superman, or simply a superman) that neither fit this nor that cultural system and worldview. The diversity in current historical Jesus research as represented by this publication is one of a unity limited by the literal reading of texts within the framework of an Enlightenment reality register.