

John Dickson's *A Doubter's Guide to Jesus* is a unique resource. In a secular, ideology-driven age, it promises remarkably balanced, even-handed, fair-minded presentations of Christian beliefs about Jesus Christ—all deeply informed by the primary sources. I can't recommend this book enough.

TIMOTHY J. KELLER

Contemporary views of the person and mission of Jesus Christ are as varied as the kinds of faith that attach themselves to Christianity. From the somber Calvinists to the exuberant Word-Faith movement, practitioners of the Christian religious enterprise continue to find new and innovative ways of discovering the “Man from Nazareth.” In this exuberantly joyful meditation, Dickson, honorary associate in the department of ancient history, Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia, gathers the many facets of Jesus' life and explores each as one would study the facets of a valuable diamond. How can one man be both friend and judge, both God and servant? The author draws on ancient histories and Judeo-Christian religious studies to present a compelling and readable account of the complex figure that millions call Savior and Lord. There is no agenda except to place Jesus Christ before readers in ways that inform and refresh, inspire and encourage. This is a wonderful book and is highly recommended for readers, indeed seekers, at all levels.

PUBLISHER'S WEEKLY

A DOUBTER'S GUIDE TO JESUS

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE MAN FROM
NAZARETH FOR BELIEVERS AND SKEPTICS

JOHN DICKSON

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A Doubter's Guide to Jesus

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A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION

The aim of this book is to provide readers with an introduction to the major portraits of Jesus found in the earliest historical sources. I say “portraits” (in the plural) because our best information points not to a tidy, monolithic Jesus but to a complex, multi-layered, and, at times, contradictory figure.

Some might be troubled by this, fearing that plurality equals incomprehensibility or unreliability. Others take it as an invitation to do some rearranging for themselves, trying to make Jesus neater, more systematic, and digestible.

Then there are those—I admit to being one of them—who quite like the idea that after two millennia of spiritual devotion, and more than two centuries of modern critical research, we still cannot fit this figure into a single box. Jesus, it seems, is destined to stretch our imaginations, confront our beliefs, and challenge our lifestyles for many years to come.

If I have done my job properly, readers will find themselves (just as I do) both disturbed and intrigued by the images of Jesus found in the first sources.



IMAGININGS:

MAKING JESUS IN OUR IMAGE

Jesus the political rebel. Jesus the guru. Jesus the right-wing crusader. Jesus the left-wing activist. Jesus married-with-three-children-then-divorced. Jesus who never lived. Whether through misinformation, wishful thinking, or prejudice—and sometimes all three—the Jesus of public imagination is often markedly different from the figure we find in our earliest sources. Our assumptions prove misleading.

THE JESUS OF PUBLIC IMAGINATION

When I say “public imagination” I include here the imagination of the Christian church. Although I write as a participant in mainstream Christianity (a boring Anglican, if you want to know), I am frequently struck by the difference between the Christ preached in some contemporary sermons and the man who emerges from the pages of history. I confess that somewhere deep inside my computer’s hard drive are numerous sermons I have delivered in the past but, for reasons that will become clear in the following pages, I could no longer offer with sincerity and so will never preach again.

Equally questionable are some of the assumed Jesuses in popular discourse. We laugh now when we see those Hollywood blockbusters of the 1960s and 70s, such as *King of Kings* or *Jesus of Nazareth*. Jesus is transformed into a kind of peace-and-love California hippie, with beautiful things to say and sun-bleached blonde looks to boot. In the 1980s the controversial director Martin Scorsese gave us *The Last Temptation of Christ* in which the figure at the heart of Christianity is a sexually repressed prophet who isn't quite sure of his identity and mission.

Equally provocative was the 2003 Dan Brown novel *The Da Vinci Code*. In the story, experts effortlessly strip back the ecclesiastically conspired "Son of God" to reveal the true man—a simple, wise teacher who settled down with a wife and kids and whose descendants can be found living happily in modern France.

The next year Mel Gibson tried to redeem the task of popularly portraying Jesus with his \$600 million box office success, *The Passion of the Christ*. Complete with dialogue in Aramaic and Latin, the languages of Jesus and the Romans respectively, Gibson wanted to tell the story of Jesus' trial and death in an authentic way. I admit, I was deeply moved by the film and found it realistic: those who criticised Gibson for "exaggerating" the sufferings of Christ forget that scourging and crucifixion were intentionally horrifying modes of punishment in the Roman world (more about that in chapter 10). Nevertheless, the Jesus that emerged from Gibson's portrayal was, despite the attempted realism, a one-dimensional figure. He was a mere sacrificial lamb. There is of course a truth here, as any first-year theology student will tell you, but it is a truth devoid of historical context and detached from the extraordinary life that preceded this suffering and gives it its proper meaning. My atheist

friend had a point when he said that, without an appreciation of what Jesus said and did, watching the poor guy get beaten up for two hours was not spiritually enlightening.

THE JESUS OF ACADEMIC IMAGINATION

Some *academic* images of Jesus are equally open to criticism. Readers may be surprised to learn that scholarly books and articles on the “historical Jesus” number in the tens of thousands. A vast industry has emerged in the last thirty years dedicated to uncovering the real Jesus—as opposed, it is thought, to the Christ of the church.

Typically, however, the only studies to attract public attention are the “sensational” ones—those that contradict mainstream perspectives on Christ. These studies hit the headlines and make their way into documentaries. The viewing public is left understandably perplexed, unaware that most of the best scholarship never reaches them.

I have explored this in detail in another book (*The Christ Files*), but it is worth repeating here. It is a sad fact of scholarship (in many academic fields) that the most impressive work is too subtle, cautious, and sophisticated (i.e., boring) to be considered newsworthy by the regular media outlets. The headline “Jesus Ate Meals with Sinners and Outcasts” is hardly going to excite a newspaper editor, even though it is based on solid data. The headline “Jesus Was Gay,” on the other hand, will cause a small media storm, even if it is based on the musings of astrology! (“Jesus Was Gay, Says Academic,” <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/05/29/1054177665090.html>.)

This highlights something that is well worth knowing about the scholarly game. In any field of academia, especially in New

Testament studies it seems, scholarship tends to fall into three broad camps, or three points along a continuum. Somewhere out on the left-hand margin is skeptical scholarship. Experts here ply the scholarly craft in the service of nay-saying and hyper-skepticism. They relish offering new theories that call into question the results of broader scholarship. On the opposite margin is apologetic scholarship, where experts focus mainly on defending traditional Christianity from skepticism. They often take their cue, in fact, from skeptical scholarship. Like skeptical scholars, most apologists have good credentials, but they tend to bypass the normal process of academic review and publish directly for the public.

Between these two margins is what you might call mainstream or middle scholarship. This is where the majority of professional scholars are to be found. Mainstream scholars rarely hit the headlines or the shelves of popular bookstores, but they are regularly published in the hundred or so peer-reviewed journals dedicated to the subject area. This basically means that to get a research article published in a reputable periodical, the article must first be read and approved by at least two international scholars (not connected to the author). Only then will the research become part of the scholarly conversation.

On the whole, mainstream scholars are little interested in debunking or defending Christianity; they are neither staunch skeptics nor devout apologists. They just get on with the business of analysing the New Testament and related material in the way historians treat any other comparable historical source from the period: whether Caesar, Seneca, or Tacitus on the Latin side, or Plutarch, Epictetus, or Lucian on the Greek.

THE APPROACH OF THE *DOUBTER'S GUIDE*

I have no delusions about where along this spectrum of scholarship my own little book lies: nowhere. This is not an academic work, and I do not wish to suggest to readers that what follows is a careful distillation of the current scholarly debate about Jesus. My goals and approach are quite different.

In what follows I intend to keep within the bounds of the mainstream. While I am personally sympathetic to the aims of apologetic scholars—to commend Christianity for the consideration of others—I have drawn almost nothing from them in writing this book. I have drawn little from skeptical scholarship, either.

At times this will mean I have to be circumspect about things I actually believe to be true. For instance, when I mention the unavoidable topic of Jesus' reported miracles, readers will notice that I make no attempt to *prove* Jesus did in fact heal the sick, restore the blind, and so on. This is not because I do not accept these things; it is simply because I think the historical sources are incapable of proving (or disproving) things like healings. In this, and many other instances, I find the assessment of mainstream scholars more realistic as a historical conclusion: While historians cannot say Jesus actually healed the sick, they can, and mostly do, say that Jesus did things that those around him believed to be miraculous. Whether or not you and I concur with this belief depends not on historical considerations but on philosophical assumptions (such as what we regard as possible in the universe). More about this later.

**BOOK
NOTES**

Some readers may be eager for some examples of what I am calling “mainstream” scholarship on Jesus, volumes that avoid both Christian apologetics and arbitrary skepticism and have enhanced my own study of Jesus. Some of my favourites—which doesn’t mean I agree with everything in them—include the following:

- Meticulous research is on display in the 800-page volume (half dedicated to footnotes) by Craig Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009.
- The scholarly “A-Z” for this topic with over 227 entries from 110 international scholars is Craig A. Evans, ed. *The Routledge Encyclopedia of the Historical Jesus*. London: Routledge, 2008.
- A superb volume on my favourite theme in historical Jesus studies (discussed in chapter 8) is by Craig Blomberg, *Contagious Holiness: Jesus’ Meals with Sinners*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005. (Blomberg has also written an excellent introduction to the Gospels as historical sources, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2009.)
- Two breakthrough volumes on Jesus, highlighting the importance of oral tradition for the first Christians, are James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003; and Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006.
- Thoroughly balanced and reliable is the volume edited by Oxford University’s Markus Bockmuehl, *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

- A scholar renowned for his sophisticated philosophy of history as applied to the New Testament is Jens Schröter, *Jesus of Nazareth: Jew from Galilee, Savior of the World*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014.
- A volume that serves as a perfect textbook for Jesus is Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1998.
- More skeptical than most about the detailed results of the historical study of Jesus but nonetheless compelling in his analysis of what is core to Jesus is Dale C. Allison, *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010.
- Equally cautious but no less important is E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985.
- A tour de force over the last twenty years is the British bishop and biblical expert N. T. Wright, among whose key works is *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1997.
- Four important Jewish contributions to the study of Jesus include David Flusser, *The Sage of Galilee: Rediscovering Jesus' Genius*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007; Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews*. New York: Vintage Books, 1999; Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels*. London: Collins, 1973 (and Vermes's, *The Authentic Gospel of Jesus*. London: Penguin Books, 2003); and the fascinating Jewish commentary on some of Jesus' parables in Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*. San Francisco: HarperOne, 2015.

- A brief expert contribution to the topic is that by James Charlesworth, *The Historical Jesus: An Essential Guide*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2008.
 - Finally, I want to recommend the works of two highly productive Australian experts: Michael Bird, *The Gospel of the Lord: How the Early Church Wrote the Story of Jesus*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014; and Paul Barnett, *Finding the Historical Christ*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009.
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But this isn't just a book about history. Conscious of the evocative dimension of the figure of Jesus, I have tried throughout the book to give readers an idea of how these portraits of Christ have influenced church, society, and individuals, both ancient and modern. Each chapter ends with what I have called "Reflections." These should not be read as homilies designed to put readers on the spot. They are an attempt to highlight how both believers and unbelievers through the ages have found themselves confronted and/or inspired by these particular images of Jesus. While it is true that people have fashioned versions of Christ into their own digestible image, it is equally true that the figure of Jesus has exerted an enormous influence over those who have taken the time to ponder his life and teaching. I want to offer some insight into this more existential dimension of Jesus' story.

We begin with the obvious first question: How do we know what we know about Jesus? What are the sources, both direct and indirect, of our knowledge of the man?