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## A GUIDE FOR JESUS SKEPTICS: AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN DICKSON

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John Dickson

Apart from the Bible, what are the earliest historical sources that speak of Jesus? How is he portrayed? And why should skeptics take a second look at this central of all historical figures?

Bible Gateway interviewed John Dickson (@johnpauldickson) about his book, *A Doubter's Guide to Jesus: An Introduction to the Man from Nazareth for Believers and Skeptics* (Zondervan, 2018).

You say this book is an introduction to the major portrayals of Jesus found in the earliest historical sources. What are those sources?

John Dickson: First, there are what you might call the 'background' sources: texts and artefacts that set the scene for the life of Jesus. All good history begins with knowing as much as we can about the politics, culture, economics, geography, and religion of the area under investigation. For the study of Jesus, it's important to explore Jewish writings such as the Pseudepigrapha, Josephus, Philo, the Dead Sea Scrolls, as well as Graeco-Roman texts like Tacitus, Plutarch, along with the many papyri we have containing letters, contracts, and the like. One might also include archaeological remains among these 'background' sources, which provide a wealth of information about life in Jesus' day.

Once we have a decent idea of this background, the historian is in a good position, secondly, to investigate the 'direct' sources for Jesus, which include some scraps of information from non-Christian writings, such as the paragraphs in Josephus and Tacitus, but really should focus on the New Testament writings—Paul, as the earliest witness to Jesus, and of course the Gospels, which provide full biographies (in the ancient sense) of this figure. Many scholars will also distinguish between sources found within the Gospels themselves—Q, L, SQ, and the like. Just as other ancient biographers and chroniclers in antiquity employed earlier sources in their works, it does seem as though our Gospel writers followed this expected pattern.

What can be determined about Jesus without even opening the Bible?

John Dickson: If we never had a Bible, and just relied on Josephus, Tacitus, Mara bar Serapion, and Pliny the Younger we would still know that Jesus was a famed Jewish teacher of some kind, who had a reputation for ‘baffling deeds’—in other words, healings—and who, despite being executed by Pontius Pilate, was declared the ‘Christ’ and was even worshipped in song by the earliest Christians. We would also know Jesus had a brother named James, who led the Christian movement and suffered martyrdom under the high priest Ananus in about AD 62.

It’s not a lot of information, but it’s enough for most specialists, regardless of their belief or unbelief, to think there cannot be any reasonable doubt about the broad narrative of Jesus’ life. These sources are so diverse—Jewish, Roman, and Syriac—it’s most improbable that an invented story would make it into unconnected writings.

Most people can agree that Jesus was a teacher. What was the heart of Jesus’ teaching?

John Dickson: Sometimes people split apart Jesus’ teaching. They either think of him as a theological preacher who proclaimed the coming of the kingdom of God and the judgment and salvation of the world, or they cast him as a simple ethical teacher of love and kindness. Of course, both are true, and both are connected.

Jesus did preach the kingdom of God. That seems to be his central message, as most scholars agree. But that kingdom, according to Jewish tradition and Jesus’ own statements, involves the overthrow of all evil and the establishment of divine justice and love in the world. Jesus’ ethical teaching is intimately connected to this. He called on people first to repent and depend on the mercy of God so that they might escape the judgment of this great reversal, and he called on people to live now in anticipation of the future kingdom. The kingdom is about righteousness, so we should live in righteousness. The kingdom will establish love, so we should practice love toward all. And so on. Theology and ethics cannot be split apart in Jesus’ teaching.

You say that ‘Christ’ is more than a mere surname. What do you mean?

John Dickson: Yes, I grew up—without any church involvement—thinking ‘Christ’ was his family name. But, of course, it’s a title of utmost respect, employed by both Orthodox Judaism and Christianity.

In the Judaism of, say, the ancient Pharisees or Essenes, the Christ or Messiah or ‘anointed one’ was a figure possessing divine power to speak and act God’s will in the world. One text written in Jerusalem shortly before Jesus says the Christ will destroy all the sinners who dare to tread down God’s people and that he will establish holiness everywhere.

Jesus acted and spoke of himself in messianic ways but any reader of the Gospels knows he was a bit cagey about accepting the declaration that he was the Christ. Even when Peter declares him “the Christ” (Mark 8:27ff), he warns the disciples not to spread the word. Perhaps Jesus wanted to ensure that this title was interpreted correctly by his disciples before he allowed his status to be public. He had come to serve people not conquer them (Mark 10:45), and it seems he had quite some difficulty

getting this idea across to the disciples, who were perhaps raised with an expectation of messianic power over all.

Describe how Jesus was seen as a friend during his lifetime.

John Dickson: Jesus was criticized by some in his day as a “friend of sinners” (Matt 11:19; Luke 7:34). It was intended as a stinging insult, since contact with sinners in his day was heavily regulated, especially by groups like the Pharisees and Essenes. But Jesus may have taken it as a compliment.

One of the striking things about his life is the way he welcomed sinners to his table, or even invited himself to the home of sinners. He had an amazing ability to hold ‘conviction’ and ‘compassion’ in perfect balance. Yes, he preached the judgment of God on sin, but then he sat down at the dinner table with those you might have thought were first in line for judgment. This habit caused quite some controversy, but for Jesus it was an expression of the welcome God wanted to extend to sinners in this period of amnesty before the kingdom fully comes. A series of parables such as we find in Luke 15 is designed to answer his critics on just this question.

What is the portrait you paint of Jesus as emperor?

John Dickson: Jesus as ‘emperor’ is not a dominant theme in the New Testament, but there are numerous connections between Christian claims about their Lord and Roman claims about Caesar.

The word ‘lord’ for one thing—*kurios*—was a key imperial epithet, as was ‘son of God.’ And in Luke’s infancy narrative (Luke 2) we find emperor Augustus flexing his muscles in a worldwide census as the true Lord is born in the town of David, to fulfil all the promises granted to David about an eternal kingdom. One ‘lord’ acts in brutal power to conquer the world, the other ‘Lord’ acts in humble service to save the world.

Seeing Jesus as ‘emperor’ might feel like a weird idea today but it has a practical power. It calls on us to rise above the culture of our day, to sit loosely to the claims of “empire,” and give priority to the values of Christ’s kingdom. In the New Testament this is called being “citizens of heaven” (Philippians 3:20). This expression recalls how important it was for ancient people to be “citizens” of the Roman empire. But it subverts the notion, asking believers to draw their sense of identity from God’s kingdom, to pin their hopes on Christ’s vision of the future, and to commit themselves to the *Pax Christi* (rather than the ‘peace of Rome’), Christ’s way of peace through the ethic of love.

What do you want this book to achieve in the lives of its readers?

John Dickson: For Christians, I hope *A Doubter’s Guide to Jesus* will help them read the Gospels with fresh eyes, and discover again the glorious, multifaceted nature of Jesus. We can’t put him in any one box. We mustn’t domesticate him. Taking in the range of portraits of Jesus—teacher, saviour, judge, friend, God, servant, and so on—will hopefully inspire believers to stand in awe of our Lord. But I also write these books very much for those who don’t yet believe in Christ. I hope such readers will find a calm, thoughtful, reliable account of Jesus’ life that answers a lot of their critical questions—about history or philosophy—and paints a picture of what it might mean to take Jesus seriously.

What is a favorite Bible passage of yours and why?

John Dickson: Perhaps my favorite passage is Romans 8:38-39, “I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

There’s much in the world that might obscure our view of the love of God—my own sin and foibles, the suffering I see among loved ones, the evil in the world, and so on. But if it’s true that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself in the death and resurrection of Jesus, this is an anchor that allows me to put one foot in front of the other each day, despite all that might diminish a sense of God’s love.

*A Doubter’s Guide to Jesus* is published by HarperCollins Christian Publishing, Inc., the parent company of Bible Gateway.

Bio: John Dickson (PhD, Ancient History) is the author of more than a dozen books, Rector of St Andrew’s Roseville, and a busy public speaker. He has hosted three TV documentaries and is a regular media commentator. In 2007 he founded the Centre for Public Christianity. He has held lecturing and research positions at both Macquarie University (Sydney) and the University of Sydney, where he teaches a course on the Historical Jesus. A Visiting Academic in the Faculty of Classics at Oxford University for 2017-18, he lives in Sydney with his wife and three children.