

This is a clear, down to earth and readable historical justification for having faith in the Jesus of history. It is up to date with the latest scholarship but doesn't blind the reader with unnecessary argument. I highly recommend it.

**Alanna Nobbs**, Professor Emerita

Department of Ancient History, Macquarie University, Sydney

Even a brief encounter with the written works or videos of John Dickson hints of his serious scholarship, willingness to engage the toughest critics of Christianity, and winsome ability to communicate. But *Is Jesus History?* is worth more than a cursory glance—you might even find yourself dog-earing page after page filled with archaeological gems and historical insight. This is a book you will want to pass on to both your skeptical and believing friends. But keep a copy for yourself.

**Ravi Zacharias**

Author and Speaker

With characteristic clarity and excellence of scholarship John Dickson examines the historical evidences for Jesus. His accessible style and bang-up-to-date sources make this a must read for anyone who is serious about investigating Jesus.

**Dr Amy Orr-Ewing**

Director, The Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics

*Is Jesus History?* has a historian take us on a look at history as a discipline and compare what we know about Jesus with other ancient materials. It is a fascinating tour that also uncovers what ancient sources say about Jesus in the face of some who claim he never existed and we can know little about him. It is a tour well worth taking. It may well have you thinking very differently about events from long ago that still impact our world today.

**Darrell Bock**, Senior Research Professor

Dallas Theological Seminary, USA

*Is Jesus History?* is a provocative little book. John Dickson writes engagingly and personably—as you read, you can imagine having a coffee (or a pint) with him and laughing over the idiosyncrasies of the

field of biblical studies, even while appreciating the hard work scholars do. Indeed, this book reads with deep appreciation for scholars, and thus serves as a translation of the current state of conversations in the field that can complicate the average person's understanding of who Jesus of Nazareth might have been. His summaries of the various perplexing questions people have about Jesus are erudite and disarming, inviting people to reevaluate their assumptions and re-encounter the Jesus of history in the Jesus of the Bible.

**Mariam J. Kovalishyn**

Regent College, Vancouver

This is an eminently readable and relevant introduction that debunks many misconceptions about the gospel accounts of Jesus.

**Dr David Wenham**

Wycliffe Hall, Oxford

John Dickson combines top-notch scholarship with an accessible, conversational style as he explains the ancient evidence surrounding the historical Jesus. *Is Jesus History?* compares how we trust statements from our family, friends and news outlets with how we trust ancient testimonies of all sorts, including Aristotle's *The Art of Rhetoric*, Luke's Gospel, and Pliny the Younger's Letter 6 about the eruption of Mount Vesuvius. Dickson's even-handed approach towards the evidence invites readers to draw their own conclusions about the Jesus of history.

**Dr Lynn Cohick**

Provost and Dean, Denver Seminary

John Dickson is one of our most reliable guides today to the historical background of the life of Jesus. He blends the scholarship of an academic with the down-to-earth accessibility of the best of teachers. This book is full of insights; it may well surprise many to know how much the historical record actually shows us about the man who stands at the centre of the faith of over two billion people today.

**Sam Allberry**

Speaker and Author

# Is Jesus History?

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JOHN DICKSON

Is Jesus History?  
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Published by:  
The Good Book Company in partnership with  
The Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics and  
The Zacharias Institute



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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

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ISBN: 9781784983659 | Printed in India

Design by André Parker

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# Introduction: Christianity's unavoidable problem

Christianity has a problem.  
*Only one*, you might ask?

Unlike other religions, Christianity gambles its plausibility on *supposed* historical events. Christians don't just say otherworldly things like, "God loves you", "We all need forgiveness", and "Heaven is open to all". None of that sort of thing is the least bit confirmable, or falsifiable. We may mock such spiritual claims, but we cannot disconfirm them with counter-evidence.

But that's not really how Christians talk. Listen closely, and you'll often hear them say things like "Jesus lived in the Galilean village of Nazareth", or "He had a widespread reputation as a healer", or "He caused a scandal in the temple of Jerusalem around AD 30", or "He suffered execution under a Roman governor named Pontius Pilate", or even "His tomb outside the city wall was found empty a few days after his crucifixion, and his disciples saw him alive."

Statements like these are not completely immune from historical scrutiny. They touch times and places we know quite a

bit about. They intersect with other figures (like Pilate) about whom we have reasonably good information. The alleged events all take place in a cultural and political melting pot—Roman Galilee and Judaea—for which we have thousands of archaeological remains and hundreds of thousands of words of ancient inscriptions and written records.

When people proclaim an intangible thing like “the universal love of God”, they are safe from scrutiny. But as soon as they say that their guy was crucified by the fifth governor of Judaea, they are stepping onto public turf—and someone is bound to want to challenge the claim. And *challenge* they do!

### ATTACKING THE CLAIMS

For a few years now some of the best-selling books have been full-scale attacks on Christian claims by the world’s most brilliant atheists: Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Michel Onfray, Lawrence Krauss, and so on. Hitchens, who sadly died a few years ago, speaks of the “highly questionable existence of Jesus” and the “huge amount of fabrication” in the stories written about him in the Gospels, the biographies of Jesus now found in the New Testament, the second part of the Christian Bible. He goes on:

*Either the Gospels are in some sense literal truth, or the whole thing is essentially a fraud and perhaps an immoral one at that. Well, it can be stated with certainty, and on their own evidence, that the Gospels are most certainly not literal truth. That means that many of the “sayings” and teachings of Jesus are hearsay upon hearsay upon hearsay, which helps explain their garbled and contradictory nature.<sup>1</sup>*

1 Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. (Twelve, 2007), p 114-121.



It's very strong stuff, and many similar-sounding statements can be found throughout the popular atheist literature of the last decade or two. And it is such good writing—at least Hitchens' prose is fabulous—that it is easy to get swept up into thinking that these public naysayers must have a strong body of expert opinion behind them.

### **FALSE IMPRESSIONS**

The impression these writers leave us with, whether intended or not, is that specialists in the field of history also talk of the “highly questionable existence of Jesus” or the “huge amount of fabrication” in the Gospels. But this impression is dramatically false. Anyone who dips into the academic literature about the figure of Jesus will quickly discover that trained scholars, regardless of their religious or irreligious conviction, reckon we know quite a bit about the influential teacher from Nazareth.

An entire industry of “double-checking” the claims about Jesus of Nazareth has developed over the last 250 years. The study of the “historical Jesus” is a vast secular discipline today, found in major universities all around the world, including the two with which I have been most closely associated—Macquarie University and Sydney University, in Australia.

While there are certainly plenty of active Christians involved in this sub-discipline of ancient history, there are also a great many half-Christians, ex-Christians and Jewish scholars (lots of Jewish scholars), as well as self-confessed agnostics and atheists. This makes it very difficult for anyone writing and working in this field to get away with publishing theology under the guise of history, or privileging the biblical documents over non-biblical ones, or

pretending we can “prove” most of what the New Testament says about Jesus.

The process of peer review—where scholars publish their work in professional journals only after it has been double-checked by two or more independent (and anonymous) scholars of rank—might not be foolproof but it certainly filters out any works of propaganda. It also reduces the risk of fraudulent claims, and it keeps scholars constantly mindful of the *rules* of the history game.

### VESTED INTERESTS

At the same time, outside the universities and on the street this topic is filled with such emotion and vested interests that some folks won't accept *any* claim that points even vaguely in the direction of the historicity of Jesus. The other day I posted on social media a famous statement about Jesus from the great Albert Einstein, and it triggered quite a reaction from my sceptical friends and followers.

The great physicist was interviewed in 1929 by the journalist George Viereck and, among many other things, he was asked about some religious matters. It is well known that Einstein despised “revealed religion” as infantile; he did not even like the idea of a personal God. His religious outlook was little more than a vague hunch that behind the laws of nature there must be some “infinitely superior spirit and reasoning power”. Fair enough.

But the thing that annoyed my atheist friends was Einstein's admiration for the historical figure (yes, *historical* figure) found in the New Testament Gospels. Here's a portion of the interview:

**Viereck:** *“To what extent are you influenced by Christianity?”*

**Einstein:** *“As a child, I received instruction both in the Bible and in the Talmud. I am a Jew, but I am enthralled by the luminous figure of the Nazarene.”*

**Viereck:** *“You accept the historical existence of Jesus?”*

**Einstein:** *“Unquestionably! No one can read the Gospels without feeling the actual presence of Jesus. His personality pulsates in every word. No myth is filled with such life. How different, for instance, is the impression which we receive from an account of legendary heroes of antiquity like Theseus. Theseus and other heroes of his type lack the authentic vitality of Jesus.”<sup>2</sup>*

Einstein’s admiration for Jesus and his confidence that Jesus was a historical figure offer a nice contrast to the more recent dogmatism of the best-selling atheists, which is perhaps why my sceptical social-media friends were so resistant to accepting that the great physicist could ever have stated such glowing words about the founder of Christianity.

I literally had folks suggesting Viereck’s interview itself was a fraud, even though—as I pointed out—it was published in one of 20th-century America’s most widely read magazines.

I had to dig it out of the archives and post screenshots of the relevant pages of the interview before some would believe that Einstein said such a thing. Even then, I’m not sure other folk would accept it. Such is the power of preference to shape what we believe! More about that problem later.

This book is partly a spirited defence of the whole subject of history, as well as being (hopefully) a fair-minded

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2 “What Life Means to Einstein”, *Saturday Evening Post*, October 26, 1929.

account of one particular historical life. I am asking, “Is Jesus History?” but also “Why and how does history as a discipline work?”

We will explore ancient writings as well as modern methods. We will examine the role of “faith” or “trust” in all academic endeavours, including science. And we will briefly outline *what* we can confidently say about historical figures like Emperor Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, the High Priest Caiaphas, and, of course, Jesus of Nazareth, all of whom overlapped for a brief period of their careers in the late 20s and early 30s of what we call the *first* century.

# History and reality

For the last decade or so I have worn a silver *denarius* on a chain around my neck. This Roman coin was roughly equivalent to a day's wages in the first century—though it is worth a bit more today. Mine has the image of Emperor Tiberius on the front (the obverse) and his mother Livia on the back (the reverse). That tells us it was struck sometime between AD 14 and 37 (in the mint of Lyon, as it turns out), since the dates of Tiberius' reign are firmly established.

I wear this piece of Roman history partly for sentimental reasons. It is the coin Jesus of Nazareth famously pointed to—the denomination, not *the* very coin—when he was cornered over whether Jews in Judaea should pay taxes to Rome. “Whose image and inscription is this?” he asked as he indicated the *denarius*. “Caesar’s,” they all answered. “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s,” he responded, “and to God what is God’s!” It is a very clever reply, with all sorts of fascinating implications about the separation of church and state. My ancient pendant has led to some fun conversations over the years, usually after someone asks me, “What’s that around your neck? A Saint Christopher or something?”

## A BRIDGE BACK IN TIME

But I also wear the coin for more intellectual reasons. It is a powerful reminder to me that the ancient past is as real and solid—or *was once* as real and solid—as this lump of metal around my neck.

I often take it in my fingers and let my imagination run wild. Perhaps a worker was handed this after a brutal twelve-hour shift in the ash mines of Naples. Maybe a senator tossed it to his musicians after a particularly pleasing performance of the “Song of Sicilus” (a hit in the day, with the key line “Enjoy life while you’ve got it”). What groceries did my coin buy? How many goblets of wine were drunk at its expense, in how many different cities? What sordid dealings did it pay for? Was it ever stolen? And who was the poor mug that eventually lost it in the dirt—from which it would be recovered almost twenty centuries later?

Our speculations could abound, of course, but my point is more substantial: the work, lives, loves, music, food, scandals and accidents of the first century were once just as real as the coin around my neck, and just as tangible as anything we smell, taste, touch, hear and see today.

My coin is a kind of bridge back in time. The inscriptions on it are vivid evidence of how Romans viewed their emperors: the Latin words around the edge read *divi Augusti filius*, son of the god Augustus (Tiberius’ adoptive father).



The portraiture is semi-realistic: each emperor looks completely different, and they are mostly pretty ugly to our way of thinking. Google “Emperor Nero *denarius*”, and you’ll see what I mean. Tiberius put his mum on the back of his coins, idealised as the goddess *Pax* (“Peace”). That seems sweet, but it’s complicated. He may have *owed* her, since rumours abounded that she had “removed” a couple of potential rivals. More concretely, her presence on such a widely-used coin underlines what ancient writings all affirm: this woman was a serious player in the politics of Rome, from the moment she divorced her first husband to marry Augustus in 39 BC through to her death in AD 29. These things we can say with a high degree of confidence.

History is real. It isn’t Middle Earth or “a galaxy far, far away”. It is part of the story of this same planet that we inhabit today. And all of us are biologically linked to people who lived in the same period (and perhaps the same place) that we are exploring in this book. Each of us has a great, great (x around 40) grandmother who lived, worked, hoped, ached, and laughed at the very time (late ‘20s of the first century) when Livia died, Tiberius ruled, Pontius Pilate harassed the residents of Judea, Jesus taught crowds in Galilee, and the prolific Roman author Pliny the Elder (AD 23-79) was starting primary school.

#### **WHAT 1% OF EVIDENCE CAN TELL US**

History is not just real; it is also *knowable*. Not *fully* knowable, of course. Probably less than 1% of ancient remains *remain* today. But 1% is enough to provide precious insight into the real lives of first-century men and women. Try this thought experiment...

Imagine people two thousand years from now digging up London and discovering 1% of the *Daily Mails*, 1% of the city's statues and inscriptions, 1% of Marks & Spencer's receipts, 1% of the Parliamentary documents from Westminster, and 1% of the lost letters in the Royal Mail's National Returns Centre. While much of ordinary life from London 2019 would remain invisible to future historians, a great many other things could easily and reliably be known.

We would know the names of quite a few of the leaders of Great Britain, and around the world, too. We would know something of what people valued and memorialised. We would have some insight into the food people ate, how much things cost, and how Londoners generally spent their money. And from just a small selection of government legislation and private correspondence we would gain a pretty accurate picture of at least *some* aspects of life in 2019.

In addition to these broad-brush impressions of 21st-century London, historians of AD 4019 would have highly detailed portraits of particular individuals, some famous, some obscure. Much would be reliably said about the Prime Minister or the Queen, of course, but it would only take the chance discovery of a bundle of letters from a few individuals to be able to piece together a detailed, even intimate, account of the lives of ordinary men and women of the time.

### **INCOMPLETE BUT INTIMATE**

Ancient history is just like this. It is both frustratingly incomplete and remarkably intimate. While we have formal biographical accounts of Tiberius, for example, as well as coins and inscriptions bearing his name and titles, we do not have even *one* piece of personal correspondence from the emperor. And, yet, from a slightly later period we have



121 letters of Pliny the Younger (nephew of the older Pliny) to various friends and colleagues, including a good number of replies from the emperor of his time (Trajan). These are a treasure trove of insights into one Roman aristocrat's thoughts, work, hunting trips, reading habits, holidaying, loves, hopes and fears.

To give an example closer to the home of the first Christians, we have solid *general* evidence that the most influential Jewish rabbi in Roman Judea was a scholar named Hillel. But sadly, we don't have a single letter from this man who was, by all accounts, an intellectual *tour de force* of the movement known as the Pharisees.

By contrast, we have close to 30,000 words of correspondence from a junior Pharisee (just a few decades after Hillel) named Saul of Tarsus. He is better known as the apostle Paul, the author of numerous letters now contained in the New Testament. These letters, while chiefly read today for their theological content, offer an enormous amount of random information about first-century language, rhetoric, religion, social history, travel and customs (Jewish, Greek and Roman), as well as the inner life of one Jewish-born, Greek-educated man responsible for taking the Christian message throughout Asia Minor (Turkey), Greece, and beyond.

We could multiply examples like this for the remainder of the book, but the point is probably clear enough. The historic past is a genuine place on the map of human experience—as real as the coin around my neck—and while much will never be known about ancient Rome or Jerusalem, more than enough documents and artefacts have survived from the period for us to offer firm judgements about many things from the first century, including things that are the focus of this book.

## HOW WE KNOW WHAT WE KNOW

Just as the Roman writers Tacitus and Suetonius left us good biographical material about Tiberius, at least four individuals wrote biographies of Jesus of Nazareth. Again, just as the numerous Latin letters of Pliny the Younger provide remarkable insight into the life and thought of a well-connected Roman and his friends, so also a handful of Greek letters penned by Saul-turned-Paul offer early detailed evidence of the beginnings of what would come to be called “Christianity”.

There is no difference between these two examples, in terms of historical method and judgement. The difference is simply that historical statements about Pliny come with no psychological or moral baggage. Who cares that Pliny, for example, recommended taking books when hunting in the forest in case you got bored? Historical judgements about the figure of Jesus, on the other hand, while just as easy to make as judgements about Pliny, come with all sorts of awkward baggage about God, the good life, heaven and hell, and all that!

The trick is to make our historical evaluation without letting our psychological or moral sensibilities either get in the way or carry us away. Just because we might not happen to believe in, say, “sin” or “God” does not mean we should doubt the evidence that Jesus spoke about sin and taught that God offers us forgiveness.

## A BOOK OF HISTORY

This is a book of history. It is an attempt to explain *how* we know about an ancient figure like Jesus or Paul, and also something of *what* we know. I use the word “know” deliberately. The conclusions of history, including the history of Jesus, are *known*. This is why history itself used to be called a “science”, from the Latin *scientia* or “knowledge”. It is a

straightforward fact that those specialising in this period, regardless of religious affiliation or none, agree overwhelmingly that we *know* a fair bit about Jesus. The conclusion of Duke University's E.P. Sanders in his classic book *The Historical Figure of Jesus* would be acceptable to most secular experts in the field today:

*There are no substantial doubts about the general course of Jesus' life: when and where he lived, approximately when and where he died, and the sort of thing that he did during his public activity.*<sup>3</sup>

Sanders is no friend of Christian apologetics or of theology dressed up as history. As one of the leaders of the *secular* approach to studying Jesus over the last 30 years, Sanders has no qualms about dismissing this or that bit of the New Testament. Yet, he rightly regards the Gospels and the letters of Paul as important *human* sources, crucial for a good understanding of the events in Roman Galilee and Judea in the 20s and 30s AD, the time when Tiberius reigned, when his mother Livia passed away, when Pliny (Elder) was learning to read, and when the coin around my neck was struck.

## In A Nutshell

Historical events were once as real as the experiences you are having today. Indeed, they are no different from the events of yesterday. Those events are no longer here—in a sense, nothing but the immediate present is “here”—but they are solid facts of the same world we inhabit. Historical investigation is

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3 E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (Penguin Books, 1993), p 11.

the science and art of discerning how much of those tangible events of the past can be *known* today.

## Readings

### **Jesus and the denarius, from the Gospel of Mark**

Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. They came to him and said, “Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity. You aren’t swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn’t we?” But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. “Why are you trying to trap me?” he asked. “Bring me a denarius and let me look at it.” They brought the coin, and he asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?” “Caesar’s,” they replied. Then Jesus said to them, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” And they were amazed at him.      MARK 12 v 13-17

### **The historical setting of the Gospel of Luke**

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of

Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. LUKE 3 v 1-3

**A letter of the Roman governor Pliny the Younger  
to his wife Calpurnia**

You cannot believe how much I miss you. I love you so much, and we are not used to separations. So I stay awake most of the night thinking of you, and by day I find my feet carrying me (a true word, carrying) to your room at the times I've usually visited you; then finding it empty I depart, as sick and sorrowful as a lover locked out. The only time I am free from this misery is when I am in court and wearing myself out with my friends' lawsuits. You can judge then what a life I am leading, when I find my rest in work and distraction in trouble and anxiety.

Pliny, *Letters*, 6