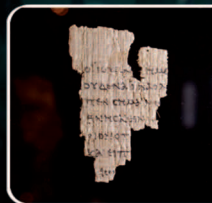
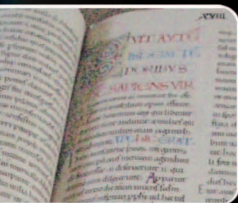


JOHN DICKSON



THE CHRIST FILES

HOW HISTORIANS KNOW WHAT
THEY KNOW ABOUT JESUS



Includes Discussion Guide for *The Christ Files* DVD

THE
CHRIST
FILES

HOW HISTORIANS KNOW
WHAT THEY KNOW ABOUT JESUS

JOHN DICKSON

 ZONDERVAN®

ZONDERVAN

The Christ Files

Copyright © 2005, 2010 by John Dickson

This title is also available as a Zondervan ebook. Visit www.zondervan.com/ebooks.

This title is also available in a Zondervan audio edition. Visit www.zondervan.fm.

Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, 3900 Sparks Drive SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49546

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Dickson, John P., 1967-

The Christ files : how historians know what they know about Jesus / John Dickson.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-310-32869-8 (softcover)

1. Jesus Christ—Historicity. I. Title.

BT303.2.D49 2010

232.9'08—dc22

2010037946

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from The Holy Bible, *New International Version*®, *NIV*®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide.

All photos are courtesy of the Centre for Public Christianity and were taken by Allan Dowthwaite, Paul Moss, Mal Hamilton, and John Dickson. For more information, see publicchristianity.org.

Any Internet addresses (websites, blogs, etc.) and telephone numbers in this book are offered as a resource. They are not intended in any way to be or imply an endorsement by Zondervan, nor does Zondervan vouch for the content of these sites and numbers for the life of this book.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Cover design: LUCAS Art & Design

Cover images: Allan Dowthwaite, Paul Moss, Mal Hamilton, and John Dickson

Interior design: Melissa Elenbaas

Printed in the United States of America

CONTENTS

Foreword 11

Introduction: The Da Vinci Code Factor? 15

CHAPTER 1 **THE GAME OF SCHOLARSHIP**
How to Read between the Headlines 19

CHAPTER 2 **SECRET GOSPELS**
Jesus in the Gnostic Writings 27

CHAPTER 3 **THE TROUBLEMAKER**
Jesus in Ancient Pagan Writings 35

CHAPTER 4 **DECEIVER AND MAGICIAN**
Jesus in Ancient Jewish Writings 41

CHAPTER 5 **BEHIND THE NEW TESTAMENT**
Earliest Christian Sources. 47

CHAPTER 6 **BEFORE THE GOSPELS**
Jesus in Oral Tradition 65

CHAPTER 7 **JESUS IN CONTEXT**
Background Sources for the Study of Jesus . . 77

Conclusion: Reading the Gospels Seriously 91

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR THE FOUR-SESSION VIDEO CURRICULUM

Introduction. 93

SESSION 1 Gnostics and Romans. 95

SESSION 2 Jews and Christians 99

SESSION 3	Lost Sources and Oral Traditions.	103
SESSION 4	Archaeologists and Artefacts	107
<i>Notes</i>		111

FOREWORD

"CONFESSING ONE IS AN ANCIENT HISTORIAN," IT HAS BEEN SAID, "is something of a conversation stopper at a party." Having taught ancient history at university for thirty-seven years (without saying how many conversations have been stopped), I am sure this book will put ancient history into the conversation-starter category for anyone at all interested in the historical evidence for the origins of the Christian faith.

John Dickson has many lives: husband, father, musician, pastor, teacher, to name a few. But to me and my colleagues he is a former and very successful PhD student who finished a high-quality PhD with minimum fuss and moreover published a book on the topic with a prestigious German publisher soon afterward. A lecturer's dream if you like. So many of us stop there, writing for other academics, spending most of our time chasing erudite footnotes and being cautious about expressing an opinion on anything controversial in case we provoke a hostile footnote ourselves.

This book rests on a sound basis of scholarship (both English and non-English speaking, as is entirely necessary in this field), and nothing in it has been written without due concern for the weight of scholarly argument behind the scenes. It is also written with a conviction that comes from a historian's judgment. John presents his material fairly, noting where disagreement occurs and letting us see how he has come to make up his mind as he has. He invites us to look closely at the historical claims of Christianity while being careful to draw the line between what a historian can argue and where a more personal faith comes into play. The critical point is that his scholarship, though real, is also accessible. The reader will find it hard to escape Dickson's conclusion that the Gospels, the main sources of our knowledge of Jesus, deserve to be read seriously.

Professor Alanna Nobbs
Head of the Department of Ancient History
President of the Society for the Study of Early Christianity
Macquarie University, Australia



Mediterranean Sea

GALILEE

Capernaum

Nazareth

Sea of Galilee

Caesarea
Maritima

SAMARIA

Jordan R.

Sebaste

Sychar

Joppa

Ephraim

Bethel

Jericho

Jerusalem

Bethany

Bethlehem

*Dead
Sea*

PEREA

JUDEA

0 10 km.
0 10 miles

Ancient Palestine

INTRODUCTION

The Da Vinci Code Factor?

ONE OF THE MOST ENJOYABLE PARTS OF MY WORK OVER THE LAST fifteen years has been running a course for “sceptics” and “enquirers” on the history and practice of Christianity. It is a low-key affair with wine, nibbles and plenty of time for Q&A. Usually, the first of the evening sessions is a quiet affair with most guests testing the waters, trying to gauge whether they know less about the topic than everyone else in the room. So, typically, I just keep on talking, happy to wait until later weeks to hear people’s burning questions.

Everything changed about five years ago. I can even remember the specific time and place. I had just explained to the group of about twenty workers, students, mums and dads that Christianity revolves around the person of Christ as described in the documents of the New Testament, the Christian counterpart to the Old Testament or what Jews call the Tanakh. Immediately, two or three in the group started to fire their questions, barely allowing a few sentences of reply before shooting off more:

“But who wrote the New Testament?”

“How soon after Christ was it written?”

“How do you know the story hasn’t changed over the years?”

“Who decided which bits got into the New Testament and which bits didn’t?”

“Did anyone else in Jesus’ day write about him?”

“Why didn’t he write the message down himself?”

I’m sure you get the picture.

I had been running courses like this for years and never had I had so many history-style questions on one night, let alone in the very first session. I wondered to myself whether I was experiencing a “Da Vinci Code factor,” a renewed interest in and scepticism toward the historical basis of Christianity generated, in part, by Dan Brown’s phenomenally successful 2003 novel (and subsequent film).

On reflection, I suspect *The Da Vinci Code* itself was part of a wider fascination with historical roots. Fifteen years ago we hardly ever saw TV shows exploring the “real story” of, say, the ancient Israelites, Alexander the Great, the life of Christ, the Roman emperors, the rise of Christianity, the Crusades and so on. In the last few years, it seems the major broadcasters have aired documentary exposés on these themes virtually on a monthly basis. Scepticism and intrigue concerning the past are alive and well.

Interestingly, Christianity has always invited the kinds of doubts mentioned above. There is a simple reason for this: Christianity claims to be based on history. Unlike the Hindu Upanishads which focus on the believer’s merger with the life force Brahman, or the Buddhist Tripitaka which emphasises the extinguishment of self and suffering, or the Islamic Quran that centres on the nature and practice of submission to God, the New Testament revolves around a series of *events* said to have occurred in Palestine between 5 BC and AD 30. This makes Christianity particularly open—some would say *vulnerable*—to the kinds of questions just listed. The logic is simple: if you claim that something spectacular took place in history, intelligent people are going to ask you historical questions. On the whole, Christianity has welcomed this. It is as if the Christian faith places its head on the chopping block of public scrutiny and invites us all to take a swing.

In saying that Christianity is “historical” I do not mean provable. It is certainly not my intention in this small book to convince readers that Jesus actually healed the sick, rose from the dead and so on. My aim is simpler. I want to underline for readers what is already a given in the academic study of the subject: Christianity is based on claims that can be examined *historically*.

The subtitle of this book says it all. I want to explore with readers how historians know what they know about the man we know as Jesus Christ, whose contemporaries knew him as Yeshua ben Yosef (Jesus son of Joseph). The emphasis here is not so much on *what* historians know about Jesus—though, there will be a bit of that throughout. I want to explain *how* historians arrive at their conclusions: What sources do they use? What methods do they employ? What levels of reliability do they assign to the various data in front of them?

One thing should become clear—and I will be happy if readers come away with only this. Professional historians, regardless of their religious persuasion, treat the New Testament and its portrait of Christ far more seriously than the general public realises. There are literally thousands of scholars around the world who devote their time to analysing early Christianity. Some of them hold chairs in the most prestigious universities in the world. And they constantly publish their findings in the more than 100 academic journals dedicated to this subject.

One reason for the size of this scholarly enterprise—apart from the fact that Christianity has been around for a while—is that the data at the historian's disposal is greater than most of us realise. Christianity arrived on the scene at a time of great literary activity. Philosophers were writing weighty tomes on the meaning of life. Poets and playwrights were composing material to make people laugh and cry. Emperors were crafting royal propaganda to ensure they were well remembered. And historians were recording for posterity all that they could discover about the startling events surrounding the rise of the Roman empire. Even though we possess only a tiny proportion of the texts we know were composed at the time, the non-biblical writings from this period (100 BC–AD 200) fill many shelves in your local university library.

One lucky outcome of this flurry of literary output is that a small-town Jewish teacher, named Yeshua, anglicised as Jesus, happened to rate a mention in several of the writings of the period. This is not as predictable as you might imagine. Although today we recognise Jesus as the founder of the world's largest religion,¹ back in the first century he was hardly known outside the tiny strip of Roman-ruled land called Palestine. It is a happy accident of history that Jesus rated a mention outside the texts of the New Testament.

The New Testament itself was part of this ancient literary boon. At one level, the second part of the Christian Bible is little more than a set of biographies about a Jewish teacher and a collection of personal correspondence penned by those who followed him. In hindsight, however, the twenty-seven texts that make up the New Testament have quite a lot to answer for. Their influence on Western literature and philosophy, law and politics, not to mention the personal religious experience of millions, is significant to say the least. We are going to assess these documents

in the following pages, not so much to discover their religious meaning but to work out their usefulness as historical sources for the life of Christ.

The modern study of Christ does not stop with the New Testament and the handful of non-Christian references to him. Historians sift through a vast range of additional ancient material, which, while not mentioning Jesus, tells them quite a bit about the culture he lived in and, therefore, about him.

Probably the best known of these “background” sources is the so-called Dead Sea Scrolls, a collection of Jewish writings from the period just before Jesus. What they tell us about Christ’s near contemporaries—ancient Jews living in Palestine—sheds some light (and some heat) on a few of the things he taught. Many, many other texts (and some archaeological findings) likewise expand our understanding of Jesus and early Christianity. We will be exploring some of these in the following pages.

But first, a brief word about the intriguing game of “Jesus scholarship,” the historical analysis of Christ’s life.

JESUS IN THE HEADLINES

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 presented by the church.

Some scholarly works are modest, trying only to clarify details, such as the extent of the Roman presence in Galilee (Jesus’ home district), or the connections between Jesus and other first-century teachers, or the procedures of ancient crucifixion.

Other works are more ambitious, attempting to offer a comprehensive portrait of Christ based on the latest data and methods. Many of these are brilliant and move the scholarly discussion forward. Unfortunately, very few of them ever get read outside of academia.

Libraries of the world house tens of thousands of scholarly books and articles on the historical Jesus.

*The Long Room
at Trinity College
Old Library,
Dublin*



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

It is a sad fact of scholarship (in many academic fields) that the most impressive work is too subtle, cautious and sophisticated—in other words, boring—to be considered newsworthy by the regular media outlets. The headline “Jesus overturned first-century dining rules” is hardly going to excite a newspaper editor, even though it is based on solid data. The headline “Jesus was gay” (Brisbane’s *Courier Mail*, 29 August 2003) will cause a small media storm, even if it is based on the musings of an astrologer, PhD student and gay activist.

Even the major broadsheets can be seduced by the sensational over the scholarly. The *Sydney Morning Herald* of 2 April 2005 published the headline “Gospel according to Judas will finally be heard.” In the article, which was lifted from *Agence France-Presse*, we were told how a “Gospel” attributed to Judas Iscariot, the betrayer of Jesus, was set to overturn traditional ideas about Jesus and Christianity. Most *Herald* readers, who tend to be a rather educated bunch, would have had no idea that the only authority quoted in the story, one Mario Roberty, was a lawyer and antiquities dealer, not a historian. Nor could they have known that no historian in any university in the world would dream of attributing this mid-second-century writing to the historical Judas (who lived and died a century before the “Gospel of Judas” was written).

I will say more later about the origin of the New Testament Gospels and the recent “discovery” of hidden Gospels. At this point I’ll simply note that mainstream scholarship on the Gospels is almost never reported in the Australian media. The British and US media, so far as I can tell, are only slightly better on this score.

BETWEEN THE MARGINS OF SCHOLARSHIP

All of this highlights something that is well worth knowing about the scholarly game. In any field of academia, and especially in New Testament studies it seems, scholarship tends to fall into

three broad camps, or three points along a continuum: *sceptical*, *mainstream* and *apologetic*.

Somewhere out on the left-hand margin is what you might call *sceptical* scholarship. Experts here ply the scholarly craft of naysaying and hyperscepticism. They relish offering new theories that call into question the results of broader scholarship. Most of them have PhDs from reputable universities, but few of them publish their work in the usual academic forums. They prefer to write directly for the public. Some well-known sceptical scholars include Barbara Thiering (*Jesus the Man*, Doubleday, 1992), Bishop John Shelby Spong (*Jesus for the Non-Religious*, Harper Collins, 2007), and George A. Wells (*The Jesus Legend*, Open Quest, 1996). Wells is perhaps the only modern scholar—a professor of German language, however, not a historian—to argue Jesus never existed. Two far more serious scholars who are nonetheless renowned in academic circles for an overreaching kind of scepticism include Robert Funk (*The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*, Macmillan, 1993) and Gerd Lüdemann (*Jesus After Two Thousand Years: What He Really Said and Did*, SCM, 2000).

On the other margin (the right fringe if you like) is what you might call *apologetic* scholarship. Experts here are already convinced about the truths of Christianity and spend their time defending traditional belief from those who attack it (especially the sceptical scholars). Like the sceptical scholars, most apologetic scholars (sometimes called simply Christian “apologists” from the Greek word for “answer” or “defence”) have very good credentials, but they tend to bypass the normal process of academic review and publish directly to the public. They often perform an invaluable service to the Christian community, providing rigorous answers to the claims of sceptics. Some of the important names here include Josh McDowell (*More Than a Carpenter*, Tyndale, 1987), Gary Habermas (*The Historical Jesus*, College Press, 1996), and Lee Strobel (*The Case for the Real Jesus*, Zondervan, 2007).

Between these two margins is what you might call *mainstream* or *middle* scholarship. This is where the vast majority of professional scholars are to be found. Mainstream scholars rarely hit the headlines or the shelves of popular bookstores, but their work

appears regularly in the hundred or so major peer review journals dedicated to the subject area. “Peer review,” by the way, is a quality control mechanism used in most academic fields. It basically means that to get one’s research published in a reputable journal it must first be read and approved by at least two international scholars (not connected to the author). Once an article is deemed worthy of publication, it will appear in the relevant journal and form part of the ongoing scholarly conversation. It will then be cited and critiqued or endorsed in any future article or monograph (scholarly book) on the topic.

On the whole, mainstream scholars have little interest in debunking or defending Christianity; they are neither staunch sceptics nor devout apologists. Some are believers, others are not. The important thing to know is that 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. Some of the most important names/works in this large scholarly *middle* include the following.

IN THE US (AND CANADA):

- Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision* (Harper and Row, 1988)
- Raymond Brown, *The Death of the Messiah* [in two volumes] (Doubleday, 1994)
- James Charlesworth, *The Historical Jesus: An Essential Guide* (Abingdon, 2008)
- John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus* (HarperSan Francisco, 1991)
- Craig A. Evans and Bruce Chilton, editors of *Authenticating the Activities of Jesus* (Brill, 1999)
- Joseph Fitzmyer, *A Wandering Aramean* (Scholars Press, 1979)
- Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews* (Macmillan, 2000)
- Richard Horsley, *Archaeology, History and Society in Galilee* (Trinity, 1996)
- John Kloppenborg Verbin, *Excavating Q* (Fortress Press, 2000)

- John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew* [in four volumes and counting] (Doubleday, 1991–present)
- Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (SCM, 1979)
- Ed Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (Penguin, 1993)

IN EUROPE:

- Birger Gerhardsson, *The Reliability of the Gospel Tradition* (Hendrickson, 2001)
- Martin Hengel, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ* (SCM, 2000)
- Rainer Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer* [trans. *Jesus as Teacher*] (Mohr Siebeck, 1981; not yet translated into English)
- Peter Stuhlmacher, *Jesus of Nazareth—Christ of Faith* (Hendrickson, 1993)
- Gerd Theissen (with Annette Merz), *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (Fortress Press, 1998)

IN THE UK:

- Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Eerdmans, 2006)
- Markus Bockmuehl, editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus* (Cambridge University Press, 2001)
- James Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Eerdmans, 2003)
- Sean Freyne, *Jesus, a Jewish Galilean* (T & T Clark, 2005)
- Pheme Perkins, *Jesus as Teacher* (Cambridge University Press, 1990)
- Graham Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus* (Oxford University Press, 2002)
- Christopher Tuckett, *Q and the History of Early Christianity* (T & T Clark, 1996)
- Geza Vermes, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (Fortress Press, 1993)
- N. T. (Tom) Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Fortress Press, 1996)

When appropriate, I will draw readers' attention to the work of these and other scholars. Not because I endorse everything written by these experts. I do not.¹ As will become apparent, I want to provide people with easy access to the major findings of mainstream scholars.

THE APPROACH OF THIS BOOK

Let me hasten to add that I have no delusions about where along this spectrum of scholarship the current book lies: frankly, nowhere. This is not an academic work and I do not for a moment want 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.

Nevertheless, readers may wish to know from which scholarly camp, or from which point on the spectrum, this book draws its inspiration and, more importantly, its information. My feelings about *sceptical* scholarship will be obvious already. I think the best that can be said for it is that it puts Jesus in the headlines every now and then—even if it is as the “gay” Messiah or the misunderstood husband of Mary Magdalene.

It may surprise some readers, particularly those in church circles, to learn that I feel only slightly better about *apologetic* forms of scholarship. While I share the spiritual perspective of many Christian apologists (I too wish to highlight the significance of Christ), on historical questions I feel less affinity. It seems to me that for all the benefits they bring (in critiquing sceptical scholars and building the confidence of Christians), apologetic scholars tend to overstate their historical case. They tend to exploit all of the *possible* arguments for a “biblical Jesus” and present them to the public as proof positive. Sceptical scholars develop the naysaying case in the same way. Hence, while I am sympathetic to the aims of Christian apologists, I have drawn almost nothing from them in the writing of this book, preferring instead to lean on the scholarly mainstream.

In what follows I intend to keep within the bounds not only of the historically *possible*, but also the truly *plausible*. Certainty, by the way, cannot really be achieved in the study of history. Virtually nothing about the past can be *proven* in the mathematical sense. Historical evidence allows us to talk about probabilities rather than certainties. In many ways, it is like legal evidence. “Beyond reasonable doubt” does not mean *certain*; it means that a particular conclusion is so well supported by the evidence that to doubt it, or to insist on an alternative explanation, is unreasonable. Many historical conclusions are of a similar nature. People will always be able to find alternative explanations of histori-

cal data (this is a preoccupation of sceptical scholarship), but the question will always be asked by mainstream experts: are the alternatives reasonable? Virtually any scholarly scenario concerning Jesus is possible; only a few would be regarded by most in the scholarly fraternity as plausible and probable.

At times my approach in this book will mean I have to be circumspect about things I actually believe to be true. For instance, when I mention Jesus' reported miracles, readers will notice that I make no attempt to prove Jesus did in fact heal the sick, restore sight to 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 generally do, say that Jesus did things which those around him believed to be miraculous.² 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). And that is beyond the scope of this small book.

The aim of *The Christ Files* is to provide readers with an introduction to the major sources of our knowledge of the man from Nazareth. I do not intend to give an account of what we find in those sources—that is for other books.³ I simply want to offer an explanation of the basic data and methodology upon which historians build their understanding of Jesus.

We begin our tour through the ancient sources with the *latest* set of documents telling us about Jesus.