

What John Dickson gets wrong

(and what he gets right)

A critique of John Dickson's book:

Is Jesus History?

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Author of *On Christian Origins*

JOHN DICKSON IS AN AUSTRALIAN ANGLICAN WITH A PHD IN ANCIENT History.¹ He teaches Public Christianity at Ridley College, a theological seminary in Melbourne, Australia, whose stated mission is to equip men and women for "God's mission in a rapidly changing and increasingly complex world."²

Dickson has recently reorientated his life to concentrate more on evangelism. Eternity News website posted in 2018, that

Well-known Australian writer, speaker, minister and apologist John Dickson has announced his decision to step down from local church ministry to focus more fully on reaching the "doubting public outside the church". . .

The site further informs us that,

Dickson, who describes himself as "a public advocate of the Christian faith", has written 15 books, including the award-winning *Simply Christianity: Beyond Religion*. Two of his books – *The Christ Files* and *Life of Jesus* – were made into documentaries that aired on national television.³

Dickson's latest offering, bar one, is part of the *Questioning Faith* series of apologetic works published by The Good Book Company. He also writes books aimed at specifically evangelizing young people.⁴

Is Jesus History? has received endorsements from several Christian academics, including Alanna Nobbs, Professor Emerita of the Department of Ancient History, Macquarie University, Sydney. The well-known evangelist Ravi Zacharias, put in a good word for Dickson before his recent death and unsavory fall from grace. A reviewer on

¹ Accessed at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Dickson_\(author\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Dickson_(author))

² Accessed at <https://www.ridley.edu.au/about-us/ridley-vision-and-values/>

³ Accessed at <https://www.eternitynews.com.au/australia/john-dickson-steps-down-from-church-ministry/>

⁴ Accessed at https://www.koorong.com/product/a-sneaking-suspicion-5th-edition-john-dickson_9781922206848#product-tabs

Amazon is less impressed. "It was a huge disappointment and I wish I could get my money back!" she says.

The main problem with Dickson, and this is a fault which seems to afflict most if not all Christian apologists, is that he relies too much on arguments from authority.⁵ The arguments he does make which are neither *ad populum*⁶ nor *ad verecundiam*⁷ are usually flimsy and superficial and as the church critic Hierocles observed 1700 years ago, reeking of a "reckless and easy credulity."⁸

"Feeling the actual presence of Jesus"

Dickson likes experts — especially ones as famous as the physicist Albert Einstein who apparently once said "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." Einstein, who it must be noted had never studied ancient religions or history, was confident that Jesus was a historical figure.

One can imagine an ancient version of Dickson, robed and standing on a street corner in Athens in the year 122 quoting the famous writer Plutarch upon the virtues of worshipping Isis. "You can feel the very presence of the goddess" would be the argument that this purveyor of ancient wisdom would cry, "... and furthermore, Archimedes said so."

⁵ See my review of Greg Sheridan's book *Christians: the urgent case for Jesus in our world*, who makes the same mistake.

⁶ Appeal to popularity

⁷ Appeal to authority

⁸ Eusebius, *Philostratus*, 4. Eusebius in answer to Apollonius of Tyana comparison with Jesus.

The virtue of "faith"

Dickson makes some not so controversial remarks about history as a discipline in his first chapter. The second is titled "*Faith in history*", and this is where he wanders off the beaten track searching for a reasonable epistemology. He begins with some examples from a typical day as a church minister. His daughter phones him, the subject is somewhat surprising but still mundane, and he believes her (why wouldn't he?) and a colleague calls him informing him of the death of a daughter of a parishioner. He opines,

. . . I shudder to think how the day might have panned out had I not accepted things on faith—had I instead demanded to see observable evidence before believing anyone!⁹

The argument now shifts to faith in *testimony*. Here Dickson tries a sleight of hand, and another logical fallacy — composition/division. The mistake is to assume what's true about one part of something, that is *a certain kind of testimony*, should be applied to all, or other, parts of it. It is true that we should place our trust in a phone call from our daughter. But does this entail that we should therefore believe without question what any person close to us says about anything? I suspect not.

Of his chosen field, ancient history, Dickson says

I have direct knowledge only of some things—the languages, texts, names and archaeology of Roman Judaea and Galilee—but for most of the rest of Graeco-Roman

⁹ Dickson, p.15. I am led to suspect Dickson gets lots of prank phone calls. Maybe he should opt for a silent number!

history I gratefully rely on the *published findings (the testimony)* of other researchers.¹⁰ [my emphasis]

But are *published findings* the same as *testimony*? What exactly does Dickson mean by *testimony*? He doesn't say. He allows the ambiguity of the expression to weave its magic. Dickson falls prey to equivocation.

The testimony of eyewitnesses vs the testimony of others

In a footnote to chapter two Dickson commends the work of C. A. J. Coady.¹¹ Tony Coady is a prominent Australian philosopher who has had a distinguished career in academia and is the author of *Testimony: A Philosophical Study*. Let's examine Coady and see if he backs up the claims of Dickson.

The following passage is taken from Coady.

No wonder that David Hume, who is one of the few philosophers to discuss the topic seriously, says of testimony, 'there is no species of reasoning more common, more useful, and even necessary to human life, than that which is derived from the testimony of men and the *reports of eye-witnesses and spectators*'.¹² [my emphasis]

That's all well and good for conducting everyday *current* affairs but in those *ancient* documents, the gospels, we do NOT HAVE eyewitness accounts. The dedication at the beginning of Luke's gospel makes this

¹⁰ Dickson, p.17.

¹¹ Ibid, Note 4.

¹² Coady, 1995, p.7.

very admission.¹³ Regarding sources, whether claimed or inferred, Mark and Matthew are silent.

The gospel of John bucks the trend and claims (falsely) to be an eyewitness report.¹⁴ Professor Helen Bond of the University of Edinburgh says that *none of the gospels* were written by an eyewitness.¹⁵ Of John's gospel she writes,

John is anxious throughout his Gospel to show Jesus as the fulfilment of Jewish feasts and institutions . . . Clearly, this deeply theological interpretation could only have been penned once Christians began to see themselves as something distinct from (and in their view, superior to) their Jewish neighbours, . . .¹⁶

To quote a textbook commonly used in Biblical Studies courses,

In short, the reference to the destruction of Jerusalem and the conflict of the Johannine Christians with the Jewish synagogue, on the one hand, and P52 [a fragment found in Egypt] on the other hand, point to a date in the late first century. It seems probable that the Gospel of John is to be dated about 90 C.E.¹⁷

All the gospels are written from an ecclesiastical third person omniscient perspective, a point of view which countenances no doubt or historical analysis by the reader. These writings expect to be believed.

¹³ ". . . an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses . . . Luke 1:1-2. Dickson agrees. (p.62)

¹⁴ "This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true." John 21:24.

¹⁵ Bond, 2012, p. 50.

¹⁶ Ibid, p.132.

¹⁷ Duling, 1994, p.409.

Oral tradition versus written records

Dickson claims that the ancients used and valued their memories more than we do, and so the hiatus between the institution of the religion (around AD30 according to Dickson) and the writing of the first gospel (about AD70) is not the problem it at first appears to be. After forty years claims Dickson, the ancients would still have been able to recall accurately the acts and words of Jesus. (He says he still can remember the lyrics to 78 of his favorite band's songs from the eighties.¹⁸) But why did the believers wait forty years before they put down anything on papyrus? The claim that they did but that these ancient texts have now been lost is suspiciously reminiscent of Joseph Smith's golden plates.¹⁹

There are three separate and contradictory accounts of the conversion of Paul recorded in the same book, the book of Acts. Dickson cannot escape the obvious conclusion that in major details they do not agree. He timidly admits: "As scholars observe, all three versions of the story differ slightly [sic]. This is interesting."²⁰ Dickson's explanation is that the author whom he thinks is Luke is operating from memory or "oral tradition." One wonders why the author didn't bother to check what he had written a few pages previously and/or how he could have three separate memories of the same event! Luke's sloppy scholarship is OK with Dickson who claims that much like a bad joke, the narrative at each retelling depends on the situation.²¹

¹⁸ Dickson, p.91.

¹⁹ Ibid, p.124.

²⁰ Ibid, p.85.

²¹ Ibid, p.86.

Where and when were the stories written

Dickson sets up a strawman, the problem as he sees it, in having the gospel story set in Israel where Aramaic was commonly spoken by the locals but recorded in Greek. He knocks down the strawman by presenting as archaeological evidence the ancient inscriptions found in Judea and surrounds which indicate the use of Greek.

Says Dickson,

It is now clear from literary and especially archaeological evidence that the Aramaic stories and teachings of Jesus were *probably* being recast into Greek by eyewitnesses in Jerusalem within months of their first communication.²²
[my emphasis]

Does this really follow?

Where were the gospels written? There is no clear consensus.²³ People in the first century were mobile. They were not confined to their villages. Many lived in cosmopolitan cities like Damascus or Antioch or Caesarea. They travelled, as we do today, for trade, to conduct personal business, and for official purposes. Josephus counts thousands of foreigners who went up to Jerusalem to celebrate the annual religious feasts.²⁴ It was, despite certain dangers, relatively safe to do so. Paul went from Jerusalem to Macedonia and beyond.²⁵ A ship could reach Alexandria from Rome in three weeks. There is no need to place the origin of the gospel story in Judea. It could well have been written in Rome or for that matter anywhere in the empire as *koine*

²² Ibid, p.103.

²³ Duling, 1994, p.299.

²⁴ Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, Book 6.2.4.

²⁵ "...by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum [modern Albania, Croatia] I [Paul] have fully proclaimed the good news of Christ." Romana 15:19.

(or common) Greek had been the lingua franca since the time of Alexander the Great. And any ex-pat would have known Aramaic, and quite possibly a little Hebrew.²⁶

That sacred writings appeared soon after the religion became fashionable, I do not dispute. This phenomenon is observed regularly with text-based religions — Mormonism for example. The question then arises, "When was the religion instituted?" Was it around AD30 as Dickson supposes or about forty years later as much of the evidence (or lack thereof) suggests?²⁷

The synoptic problem

Matthew, Luke and Mark share much common material. Who copied whom? How independent were the writers? This, in essence, is the synoptic (Greek: *seen together*) problem.

To quote Coady again,

As Marc Bloch [the famous French historian] puts it: 'criticism oscillates between two extremes: the similarity which vindicates and that which discredits.' Bloch gives the example of the battle of Waterloo and says that while we would expect independent witnesses to agree on the great fact of Napoleon's defeat we would doubt their independence if they agreed exactly in their descriptions

²⁶ Mark "contains a number of 'Latinisms,' or words derived from Latin, the language of native Romans (for example, 4:21; 5:9, 15), and Aramaic language terms and phrases are explained (5:41; 7:34; 10:46; 14:36; 15:34). ... Mark also reckons time in the Roman style (6:48; 13:35). ...Jewish customs are interpreted (7:3-4; 10:12), sometimes inaccurately (14:1). ...the gospel is imprecise about Palestinian geography (for example, 5:1;6:45, 53; 7:31). These considerations might suggest composition by someone at Rome, ..." Duling, 1994, p.298.

²⁷ This is the central thesis of my book, *On Christian Origins*.

of battle details and even closely in the language they used.²⁸

Extrapolating the judgment of Bloch to the case of the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Luke and Mark) we see not three witnesses but one. The identical or near identical language used in large swathes by the three gives the game away. But Dickson steers clear of the subject.

Sources

Dickson asserts,

It is well known that the Gospel-writers employed earlier sources within their works.²⁹

Perhaps in the circles that Dickson inhabits but the eminent Classical scholar Powell is of another opinion. He says,

- Matthew, in virtually the form in which we possess it, was used by the writers of the two other [synoptic] gospels, and
- They had no other source or sources.³⁰

And this makes sense historically because Matthew is recognized as the Jewish-Christian gospel and as Paul indicates in Galatians, Jewish Christianity preceded the Gentile version, which was championed by (invented by?) Paul himself.

John's version of the story, in many respects totally at odds with the other three as already indicated, is recognized by eminent scholars as

²⁸ Coady, 1995, p.214.

²⁹ Ibid, p.62.

³⁰ Powell, 1994, p.xi.

being late and "controversial."³¹ Indeed Jerome, the 4th century author of the Latin Vulgate, is on record:

John . . . most recently of all the evangelists wrote a Gospel, *at the request of the bishops of Asia*, against Cerinthus and other heretics and especially against the then growing dogma of the Ebionites [Jewish Christians], who assert that Christ did not exist before Mary.³² [my emphasis]

Writing a gospel wasn't it seems that much of a big deal. You just needed the support of the local bishop.

Dating Paul

Christians make many mistakes about the life of Paul, and they largely stem from an unhealthy reliance on that flimsy treatise on early church history known as *the Acts of the Apostles*. We have already seen how the writer (whether Luke or someone else — no one knows), has a cavalier attitude to historical detail. This coupled with the book's reports of fictitious miracles, visions and angelic appearances should be enough to ward off any fair-minded historian, but not Dickson. He quotes from the tarnished document more than twelve times to support his position.

The present author believes Paul was a real historical person who lived in the first century and that he was instrumental in defining the new faith and taking it to a much wider audience, that is the non-Jews of

³¹ The synoptics "relation to the Fourth Gospel, John, remains controversial; whatever John's sources, he tells a very different story from those of the first three evangelists." Note 3, Fredriksen, N.D.

³² *De Viris Illustribus*, John (9)

the empire. But he doesn't agree that the dates given by Dickson³³ represent what really happened in the first century.

Jerome supports such a claim where he says distinctly:

Paul, formerly called Saul, an apostle outside the number of the twelve apostles, was of the tribe of Benjamin and the town of Giscalis in Judea. When this was taken by the Romans he removed with his parents to Tarsus in Cilicia.³⁴

Gischala was taken by the Romans under Titus in the year 67. It was the last town in Galilee to be taken by the Romans. We can interpret this to mean that Paul was still a young man when he moved to Tarsus to escape the Romans. This timeline is completely at odds with the Acts version of events, and what Dickson would have us believe.³⁵

The church historian Eusebius

What does Dickson say about Paul? We have him lauding the tradition first reported by Eusebius that Paul met his end by being beheaded.³⁶

In a note, Dickson confesses:

The historical source for the martyrdom of Paul, by beheading, is Eusebius, . . . There is little reason to doubt the account.³⁷

In fact, there is every reason to doubt the account, because Eusebius was neither impartial nor reliable.

³³ Dickson, p.115.

³⁴ *De Viris Illustribus*, Paul.

³⁵ George, 2020, p.225.

³⁶ Dickson, p. 87.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p.131.

Eusebius Pamphili (c.260-340) was the author of several works in Christian exegesis. However, he is best known for writing in ten books his Ecclesiastical (Church) History which spanned the alleged time of Christ to his own day. He is the sole source for much information about the early church. He lived during the reign of Constantine and was active in eulogising the emperor and presenting him as the saviour of Christianity after the severe persecution instituted by the emperor Diocletian. The account that Eusebius gives of the ecclesiastical events in the first century follow the accounts given in the gospels with parts of the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus quoted as background material as occasion demanded. As such Eusebius, with his avowed bias and selective use of sources, is not a totally reliable guide in our quest to discover the origins of Christianity. He records events which we know to be unsubstantiated and even fanciful. Examples are the suicide of Pilate, letters of Pilate to Tiberius and Tiberius himself adopting the role of public defender of the Christian faith.

We find a further example of Eusebius's naive or duplicitous use of material in the fraudulent letters which he includes in his work—the supposed written correspondence between Jesus and the king of Edessa. No one regards these letters as genuine. They are most probably late third century forgeries written to enhance the claim of the city of Edessa to apostolic Christian provenance. However, Eusebius living at the same time as these forgeries were produced, declared that he obtained the record of the correspondence from ancient public registers which "we have literally translated from the Syriac language."³⁸ The inclusion of this material and Eusebius's bald warrant for their authenticity further calls into question his standing as a reliable unbiased historian.

³⁸ *Church History*, Book 1.13.

Eusebius is also the first to report the famous *Testimonium Flavianum*, a crude and obvious Christian interpolation inserted into the works of the Jewish historian Josephus to prove that Jesus and Christianity existed before the Jewish War of AD66-70.³⁹ Whether it was Eusebius himself who created and inserted the passage is a moot point. Dickson makes a desperate and, in my opinion, futile attempt to rescue the forgery by arbitrarily dividing it up into parts genuine, that is believable, and parts insupportable, that is unbelievable.⁴⁰ But there is no escaping the fact that it was Eusebius who promoted it.

Paul: the fantasy-prone personality

Everyone agrees that Paul came late on the early Christian scene. However, he is adamant that he received his instructions NOT from the leaders who had preceded him but directly from the risen Lord.⁴¹

In Galatians he says this directly.

- Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead. (1:1)
- For I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. (1:11-12)

³⁹ See Olson, 1999 for a broad discussion of this issue.

⁴⁰ Dickson, p.75ff. See Appendix for the passage in question.

⁴¹ The other admitted source of Paul's ideas was the Jewish Scriptures. Paul's letter to the Romans, for example, contains the phrase "as it is written ..." no less than 16 times. Clement of Alexandria says *Jesus was discovered* in the holy texts, "partly in parables, partly in enigmas, partly expressly and in so many words." *Stromata*, Book 6.15. The implication is that without the holy texts there would be no Jesus.

Dickson, in contradiction to the plain literal reading of Paul's letter, says Paul received his teachings from others.⁴²

Was Paul especially gifted to receive this revelation?⁴³ He himself says that he was "chosen". (Galatians 1:15) It seems clear to me that he had, in the parlance of modern psychologists, *a fantasy-prone personality*. He was not 'crazy'.

During the 1970s and early 80s, psychologists discovered that a small percentage of normal, healthy people are prone to extraordinarily vivid and involved fantasies. Even more remarkable: most of these people lead secret lives, and, in many instances, not even their siblings or closest friends were aware of their rich fantasy worlds.⁴⁴

The sociologist Bartholomew goes on to say that it was discovered that FPPs often 'see,' 'hear,' 'smell,' and 'feel' what is being described in conversations or on television. "Sixty-five percent had difficulties differentiating between their fantasy world and reality. As Wilson and Barber observe: 'They see sights equally well with their eyes opened or closed. Also, imagined aromas⁴⁵ are sensed, imagined sounds are heard, and imagined tactile sensations are felt as convincingly as those produced by actual stimuli...'"⁴⁶

⁴² Dickson, p.92.

⁴³ "It is necessary to boast; nothing is to be gained by it, but I will go on to *visions and revelations* of the Lord. I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows." (2 Corinthians 12:1-2) [my emphasis]

⁴⁴ Bartholomew & Hassall, 2016, p.260ff.

⁴⁵ "But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place *the fragrance* that comes from knowing him." 2 Corinthians 2:14.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Jesus on toast

We know that Dickson is fond of quoting 'experts'. One such expert is the *Cambridge History of Judaism*. The authors, says Dickson,

. . . do not tackle the resurrection (unsurprisingly), but they do acknowledge, as a matter of historical fact, that the first disciples of Jesus... *...were absolutely convinced* that Jesus of Nazareth had been raised and was Lord and that *numerous of them were certain that he had appeared to them.*⁴⁷ [my emphasis]

In a later chapter Dickson elaborates on this point:

Our evidence that people—men and women—*thought they saw Jesus alive* in the days after his crucifixion is very strong. Hardly anyone writing on the topic today doubts it. This is because our evidence is (1) widespread, (2) early, (3) unexpected, and (4) sincere.⁴⁸ [my emphasis]

I agree with the *Cambridge History of Judaism* and with Dickson's later statement. Some early Christians including Paul definitely *thought they saw Jesus alive*. But was this really so remarkable?

Appearances of Jesus, as recent as a few years ago, are just as 'widespread', 'unexpected' and 'sincere'. Images said to resemble Jesus have been reported "on a grilled cheese sandwich, a frozen fish stick, and a pancake."⁴⁹

One such appearance documented in detail by Bartholomew, is instructive.

⁴⁷ Dickson, p.27.

⁴⁸ Dickson, p.114.

⁴⁹ Bartholomew & Hassall, 2016, p.99.

In 1986, . . . Rita Ratchen was driving near a water tower in Fostoria, Ohio, and reported seeing the image of Jesus on a soybean-oil tank. When the story appeared in the media, scores of people went to the tank—many convinced that it was a miracle. In August 1986, United Press International reported that hundreds of people were visiting the tank after sunset, when the image was visible. Many believed it depicted the "image of a long-haired, bearded man, clothed in a white robe" standing next to the outline of a young child on the side of the thirty foot high tank. Officials representing the owners of the tank attributed the images "to a combination of shadows, light and steam vapors from the soybean processing plant." One of the believers, Deana Minard said, "I believe it is Him. You can't see facial features, but you can see the white robe. The farther back you go, the more clear it gets."⁵⁰

Paul versus the rest of the Bible

But what does Paul say about the 'post-resurrection' appearances of Jesus? Dickson quotes Paul from 1 Corinthians 15, and we should do the same.

I[Paul] want to remind you [Corinthians] of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and

⁵⁰ Ibid.

that he appeared to [1] Peter, and then to [2] the Twelve. After that, he appeared to [3] more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to [4] James, then to [5] all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to [6] me [Paul] also.⁵¹

But does this match what we find in the gospels? After all they pretend to report the same events. Let's take a look.

According to:

1. Matthew (Gospel of), the order of appearances was as follows:

[1] the two Mary's [2] the eleven

2. Luke

[1] two disciples, including Cleopas on the road OR Simon

[2] the disciples

3. Mark

[1] Mary Magdalene [2] two disciples on the road [3] the eleven

4. John

[1] Mary Magdalene [2] the disciples [3] Thomas

5. Acts

[1] only mentions the disciples (or "apostles" whom he had chosen)

Note the following:

1. Paul nowhere mentions any women

⁵¹ Dickson, p.115. 1 Corinthians 15 v 1-8.

2. Only Luke hints that Peter (Simon) could have been the first
3. Paul says, "the twelve" NOT "the eleven"
4. Matthew has two Mary's, Mark and John only one, and Luke none
5. Paul differentiates between "the apostles" and "the twelve"
6. Paul's "five hundred or more" does not get a mention anywhere else
7. The Mary Magdalene legend appears in the later gospels, but not the earlier ones

We are left with a hopelessly confused record of events. But out of the confusion this much is evident. Paul, who is more likely to be truthful in my opinion, does not agree with the official records of the church. He is unacquainted with 'the two on the road', or the defection of Judas changing the number "twelve" to "eleven." And the legend of Mary Magdalene is unknown to him.

Popular delusions — now and then

One of the most dramatic examples of modern delusions is the Marian apparitions at Medjugorje which began in 1981 when some Croatian-speaking children claimed that the Virgin Mary had appeared to them on a hill.⁵² But not everyone was convinced.

Surprisingly, one of the most vocal skeptics was Pavao Zanic, their own local bishop, who, according to one transcript of an interview, declared: "In my opinion Medjugorje is the greatest deceit and swindle in the

⁵² Avalos, 2007, Kindle Ed. loc 2443ff.

history of the Church," a statement that would be equivalent to the skepticism expressed by Jewish priests in the case of Jesus.⁵³

But what did the children see? Bartholomew explains how this works.

Powerful psychological processes, such as the autokinetic effect, are often instrumental in triggering social delusions. Stare at an object in the night sky or a terrestrial object in a darkened environment, and it can appear to move and be interpreted as a supernatural occurrence. We are also prone to interpreting information patterns that reflect our expectations: we tend to see what we expect to see. Hence, depending on our preexisting beliefs, one is susceptible to misidentifying a wake at Loch Ness as a prehistoric creature, an aerial light in the night as a flying saucer, or rustling in the woods as a chupacabra. The mind fills in the missing information.⁵⁴

The Jews in the first century who *thought they saw Jesus* were not exceptional. We need to be alert to the fact that belief in Jesus *preceded the appearances*.

Conclusions

The problem with the popular hypothesis of Christian origins championed by writers like Dickson is that, leaving aside certain religious documents, there is no good evidence that any of the stories about Jesus as related in the gospels really transpired. In fact, it is not

⁵³ Ibid, loc 2447.

⁵⁴ Bartholomew & Hassall, 2016, p.291.

until we get to the year 79⁵⁵ that we find unequivocal evidence for *the existence of Christians*; that is people who believed that there had been a divine prophet called Jesus.

The renowned Biblical scholar, Bart Ehrman admits that,

- ... there is no hard, physical evidence for Jesus.
- We ... also do not have any writings from Jesus.
- ... no Greek or Roman author from the first century mentions Jesus.
- We do not have ... a single reference to Jesus by anyone— pagan, Jew, or Christian— who was a contemporary eyewitness, who recorded things he said and did.
- The Dead Sea Scrolls ... do not mention or allude to Jesus⁵⁶

Successful religions of which Christianity is a prime example do not linger for forty years from their inception. They bolt from the starting blocks. Mormonism is an exemplar of this. The letter of Pliny the Younger to Trajan⁵⁷ is good evidence that the religion existed in the 90's when Domitian was emperor. This is the best and earliest documentary evidence for the existence of Christians.

By a rational appraisal of all the evidence and arguing from analogy and what we know about human psychology the conclusion that naturally flows is that Christianity kicked off towards the end of the century. It didn't exist when the church says it existed. Furthermore, Jesus as a cult leader becomes redundant to explanations around how the religion arose. The *appearances* were quite simply just that, appearances. Jesus is an invented literary character who, despite

⁵⁵ Some graffiti found on a wall at Pompeii. George, 2020, p.16ff.

⁵⁶ Ehrman, 2013, pp. 42, 43, 46, 56.

⁵⁷ George, 2020, p.17.

Dickson's protestations to the contrary, had no role in the formation of the religion and no real existence in history.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ The religion most probably arose from a reported rumor that the Messiah (a leader) had appeared in the east. No one witnessed the event. It was hidden and "secret." A similar phenomenon played out again in the 12th century. See George, 2020, pp.264, 283.

APPENDIX

The Testimonium Flavianum

After relating these things concerning John, he makes mention of our Saviour in the same work, in the following words: "And there lived at that time Jesus, a wise man, if indeed it be proper to call him a man. For he was a doer of wonderful works, and a teacher of such men as receive the truth in gladness. And he attached to himself many of the Jews, and many also of the Greeks. He was the Christ.

When Pilate, on the accusation of our principal men, condemned him to the cross, those who had loved him in the beginning did not cease loving him. For he appeared unto them again alive on the third day, the divine prophets having told these and countless other wonderful things concerning him. Moreover, the race of Christians, named after him, continues down to the present day."⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Eusebius, *Church History*, Book 1.11.

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