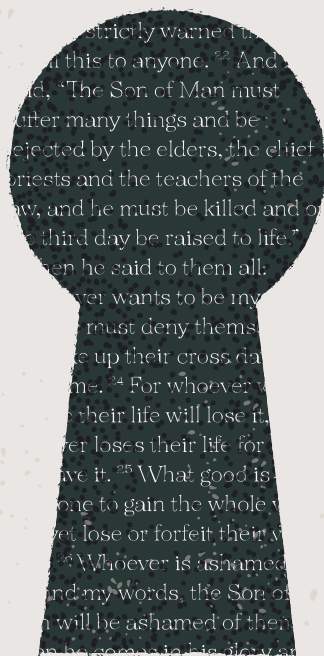


Simply Christianity

GUEST'S MANUAL



JOHN DICKSON

Simply Christianity

GUEST'S MANUAL



JOHN DICKSON

 **matthiasmedia**
SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

Simply Christianity: Guest's Manual

Third edition

© John Dickson 2018

First edition 1998

Second edition 2003

All rights reserved. Except as may be permitted by the Copyright Act, no part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means without prior permission from the publisher. Please direct all copyright enquiries and permission requests to the publisher.

Matthias Media

(St Matthias Press Ltd ACN 067 558 365)

Email: info@matthiasmedia.com.au

Internet: www.matthiasmedia.com.au

Please visit our website for current postal and telephone contact information.

Matthias Media (USA)

Email: sales@matthiasmedia.com

Internet: www.matthiasmedia.com

Please visit our website for current postal and telephone contact information.

Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

The text of Luke was translated from the USB4 Greek New Testament by Tony Payne and John Dickson, with editorial assistance from Greg Clarke and Kirsten Birkett. © Matthias Media and John Dickson 2001.

ISBN 978 1 925424 67 6

Cover design by Judy Lai.

Typesetting by Lankshear Design.

Guest's Manual

Contents

Introduction	4
Session 1	
Jesus, now and then	5
Extra information for session 1	7
Session 2	
In the presence of greatness (the Gospel of Luke, chapters 1-9)	15
Extra information for session 2	17
Session 3	
Search and rescue (the Gospel of Luke, chapters 10-19)	27
Extra information for session 3	29
Session 4	
Jesus' death (the Gospel of Luke, chapters 20-23)	31
Extra information for session 4	33
Session 5	
Jesus, here and now (the Gospel of Luke, chapter 24)	35
Extra information for session 5	37
The Gospel of Luke	47

Introduction

You may have heard the slightly-less-than-true story about an aeroplane that lost power to all its engines. As it plummeted to earth, the pilot announced to the nervous passengers, “I’m sorry but there are four of us and only three parachutes. I’m the pilot, it’s my plane, so I’m taking the first one”. He promptly strapped on one of the parachutes and jumped out.

Remaining on the aircraft were a great scientist, a minister of religion and a backpacker. The scientist immediately insisted, “I am one of the greatest minds in the country and I would be sorely missed. I have to take one of the parachutes”. He put it on and jumped out.

The minister turned to the backpacker and began to say, “Listen my son. I’ve lived a long and happy life—why don’t you take the last one?”

The young man interrupted the minister saying, “It’s OK, there’s no need. You see, that ‘brilliant’ scientist just jumped out with my backpack on!”

It is easy to assume that you have the ‘real thing’ when, in fact, you have only a poor substitute. Of course, jumping out of an aircraft with only a backpack strapped on is a particularly dramatic example. But the same can be true in other areas of life.

In a vaguely Christianized culture like ours it is all too easy to assume that our acceptance or rejection (or perhaps simply avoidance) of the Christian faith is based on a reasonable working knowledge of the topic. I for one grew up supposing that the few bits and pieces I’d accidentally picked up at school, through friends and in the media were enough to arrive at the opinion that Christianity was nice for other people. I decided this without once having gone inside a church or read anything of the Bible, let alone attended a course such as this one.

This course is written in the belief that it is just possible, based on this author’s experience at least, that the version of Christianity some of us have accepted, rejected or avoided, is not the ‘real thing’ after all, but an imperfect substitute. The goal of the course, then, is to provide you with a clear, albeit brief, explanation of real or ‘normal’ Christianity.

You can then decide whether or not the Christian parachute, as it were, is worth strapping on to the back!

I’m very glad you’ve chosen to do *Simply Christianity*, and wish you all the best as you search for the contemporary significance of this ancient faith.



John Dickson (PhD, Macquarie University) is an author, speaker, historian, and media presenter. He is author of over 20 books, presenter for three television documentaries, and the host of Australia’s no.1 religion podcast, *Undeceptions*. He is the Distinguished Fellow in Public Christianity at Ridley College, Melbourne, and a Visiting Academic in the Faculty of Classics at the University of Oxford (2016-2022). Visit www.matthiasmedia.com for information about other books by John Dickson.

Simply Christianity

Session

1

Jesus, now and then

1. 'Christ'-ianity

As the word suggests, 'Christianity' is all about a person, Jesus Christ. In fact, Christianity could be defined simply as 'responding appropriately to Jesus Christ'.

2. Information about Jesus

a) Non-Christian documents about Jesus

What they tell us about Jesus:

- when he lived
- where he lived
- that he was Jewish
- that he assumed the role of a public teacher
- that he attracted great crowds
- that he engaged in activities thought to be supernatural
- that he was executed; when and by whom
- that he had a brother called James, who was subsequently executed
- that he was widely known by the prestigious Jewish title, 'the Christ'

b) The biographies of Jesus' life

- The Gospel of Matthew is famous for its lengthy record of Jesus' great ethical teachings.
- The Gospel of Mark is famous for its short, punchy style.
- The Gospel of Luke is famous for its emphasis on Jesus' friendship with 'non-religious' people.
- The Gospel of John is famous for its profound insight into the nature of Jesus.

Over the next five sessions, we will look at the Gospel of Luke.

3. Who was Luke?

- medical doctor, historian and intrepid traveller
- not an eyewitness to Jesus but a reporter of eyewitness accounts
- research began in the 50s AD; probably completed work some time between 70-80 AD
- highly educated Greek man

Luke's aim was to present the most accurate and relevant material on Jesus (read Luke 1:1-4).

4. The big idea

Christianity at its heart is not about rules or rituals but about a person, Jesus Christ—a person we can get to know through reading the Gospel of Luke.

5. At home

For the next session please read Luke 1-9 (or, if you run short of time, 4:14-5:39 and 7:36-9:22) and ask yourself: According to Luke, who is Jesus and what has he come to do? Note down anything you don't understand, or would like to discuss. We'll have a time for discussion in the next session.

Extra information for session one

Is the New Testament trustworthy?

1. Non-Christian writings about Jesus

Some years ago, just before Christmas day, a TV documentary series on the life of Christ was screened. Far from promoting the ‘Christ’ part of *Christmas*, the show claimed to cast ‘serious doubts’ over the reliability of our knowledge about Jesus of Nazareth. One of the people interviewed on the program, a professor from a large German university, even stated that “Jesus probably never existed at all”. The man sounded smart—German accents tend to do that—and he was a professor after all, so I was left with some questions: Is the Christian faith built on an invention or a myth? What and how do we know about Christ? Indeed, did he exist at all?

Only much later did I learn that the sceptical professor in the documentary was actually a professor of modern German literature. He was not a historian at all. He had a fancy title and was no doubt a highly intelligent man, but he was about as ‘expert’ on the question of the life of Christ as a professor of music would be on the existence of black holes. It turns out that the producers of the TV program had searched long and hard for a historian who would go on camera and deny the reality of Jesus’ existence. When they couldn’t find one they resorted to an ‘expert’ from another field, without letting the audience in on the secret. Since then I have discovered that finding a professional historian who denies the first-century existence of Jesus Christ is about as difficult as finding a professional scientist who rejects the existence of DNA.

So then, historically speaking, how and what do we really know about the man Jesus Christ? Many, many books have been written on this topic so the following pages are offered only as a summary of some of the relevant points.

Our knowledge of the life of Jesus Christ derives mostly from ancient documents of two types: those written by non-Christians in the period shortly after Christ and those written by Christians. Of course, there are many more Christian texts than non-Christian ones, but this is to be expected, since obviously Christians were highly motivated to preserve the facts about their leader. To offer a modern parallel, I imagine more financial documents have been produced by economists this century than by rock musicians, and certainly more lyrics have been written by pop artists than by financiers!

Nevertheless, the few documents we have from non-Christian sources in the ancient period provide some interesting pieces of information about the life of Jesus. In fact, it may surprise you to know that the broad outline of Christ’s life can be known from these references,

without even turning to the Christian documents. Let me quote just four of the six references from antiquity.

Flavius Josephus, a Jewish historian writing around 80 AD, mentions Jesus on two separate occasions in his books. In his multi-volume work *The Antiquities of the Jews* (book 18, chapter 3) he writes about Jesus in the following way:

Now about this time there lived a wise man called Jesus... Indeed, he was a man who performed startling feats. He was a teacher of the people... and he drew in many from among both the Jews and the Greeks. And those who were devoted to him from the start did not cease their devotion even after Governor Pilate, on the basis of charges laid against him by our leaders, condemned him to a cross. And the group of 'Christians', named after him, has still not disappeared to this day.[†]

A little later in the work (book 20, chapter 9), Josephus recounts the execution of one of Jesus' brothers (yes, Jesus had several younger brothers and sisters), and in so doing, again makes passing reference to Jesus:

But this younger Ananus, who, as we have told you already, took the high priesthood, was a bold man in his temper, and very insolent... he assembled the Sanhedrin of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus whom they call the Christ, whose name was James, and some others, and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned to death...

This text is fascinating for historians of early Christianity. The New Testament (the second half of the Bible) recounts a little about Jesus' brother, James. We know, for instance, that although he started out a sceptic about his famous brother's career, he ended up being one of the key early Christian leaders, claiming even to be an eyewitness to Jesus' resurrection. Our biblical information about James, however, cuts off with him still alive and well in Jerusalem, actively proclaiming the significance of Jesus. What Josephus writes completes the picture. Obviously, James' efforts to promote the message about his brother ran foul of the authorities and, just like his brother 25 years before, James found himself paying the supreme price of his own life.

Cornelius Tacitus is regarded as ancient Rome's greatest historian. His *Annals of Imperial Rome*, written shortly after Josephus (in 115 AD), are the basis of much of our most accurate information about Emperors Tiberius, Claudius, Nero, and many of the other famous figures of the period. In recounting the persecutions against the early Christians, Tacitus records the following about Jesus:

† Note on Josephus: Because of its obvious importance for our historical knowledge of Jesus, this passage is the subject of wide scholarly discussion. If you're keen to pursue further the content and significance of this quotation, and you have access to a major library, read CA Evans, *Noncanonical Writings and New Testament Interpretation*, Hendrickson Publishers, 1992, pp. 86-96. The real glutton for punishment can read GH Twelftree, 'Jesus in Jewish Traditions', in *Gospel Perspectives: Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels*, vol. 5, JSOT Press, 1981, pp. 289-341.

Christians derived their name from a man called Christ, who, during the reign of Emperor Tiberius had been executed by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate. The deadly superstition, thus checked for the moment, broke out afresh not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but also in the City of Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world meet and become popular.

Annals of Imperial Rome 25.44

As you can tell from his comments, Tacitus was not exactly a fan of Christ or of the early Christians. Yet as a matter of historical accuracy Tacitus feels it necessary to include a reference to Jesus and confirm some details about his execution—where, when and by whom. Though Tacitus provides no new information about Christ, it does confirm from the Roman side some of the details we already knew. It also shows that the events of Jesus' life had a significant enough impact around the Mediterranean to gain the attention (and disdain) of an elite Roman intellectual on the other side of the Empire. That a wandering Jewish peasant-teacher from Palestine rated a mention at all in Tacitus' *Annals of Imperial Rome* is surprising.

Lastly, another small piece of information deriving from the second century comes from a Jewish religious document called the Talmud. Although Jesus himself had been a popular Jewish teacher a century or so before, as time passed a number of very unflattering opinions were being formed about him:

Jesus of Nazareth was hung up on the day of preparation for the Passover... because he practiced sorcery and he led Israel astray.

Baraita Sanhedrin 43a

It is difficult to know exactly what to make of this statement, since it is clearly a piece of official anti-Christian propaganda from a century or more after Jesus. Nevertheless, it does confirm that Jewish people of the second century thought Jesus to have been a real figure who had had a dramatic effect on many of their Palestinian Jewish forebears ('he led Israel astray'). It also provides historians with another piece of corroborating evidence to support the wide-ranging claim that Jesus had performed unusual (miraculous?) feats. For it is curious that the statement makes no attempt to deny the rumoured exploits of Jesus. Instead, conceding that Jesus had inexplicable abilities, the document tries to explain them away as 'sorcery', something Jewish people were forbidden to be involved with.

If we piece together all the information contained in the above references it is fascinating that just about the whole story of Jesus can be uncovered, without even opening a Bible. We learn:

- when he lived
- where he lived
- that he was an influential teacher
- that he engaged in activities thought to be supernatural

- that he was executed; when and by whom
- that he had a brother called James, who was also executed
- that he was widely known by the prestigious title, ‘the Christ’.

This is a lot of material to glean from documents composed by people who were anything but supporters of the Christian faith.

None of these texts actually ‘proves’ Christianity. Statements made by non-Christians are no more trustworthy than those by Christians. From the historian’s point of view, we must look at non-Christian accounts with the same healthy suspicion we apply to biblical documents. Nevertheless, the interesting thing is that whatever the sources, biases and (mis)information lying behind each of these documents, taken as a whole, they substantially corroborate the picture of Jesus presented in the earliest Christian literature. This is rather good news for anyone interested in enquiring into the Bible’s version of the events surrounding Jesus’ life. Indeed, one of Australia’s most eminent ancient historians, Emeritus Professor EA Judge of Macquarie University, Sydney, has commented:

An ancient historian has no problem seeing the phenomenon of Jesus as an historical one. His many surprising aspects only help anchor him in history. Myth or legend would have created a more predictable figure. The writings that sprang up about Jesus also reveal to us a movement of thought and an experience of life so unusual that something much more substantial than the imagination is needed to explain it.

Quoted in Paul Barnett, *The Truth about Jesus*, Aquila, 1994

2. The historical reliability of the New Testament documents

The 27 books of the New Testament were written between 40 and 100 AD. Few serious historians doubt this, nor is there much argument that what we read in our modern New Testaments is the same as what was originally written (except for some very minor variations). There are several reasons for this confidence.

A. The sheer number of early manuscripts

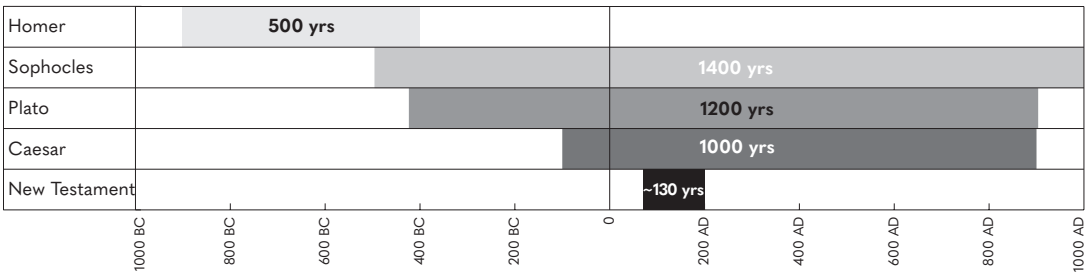
Although there are no copies of the original manuscripts in existence, we now have more than 24,000 early manuscript copies or portions of the New Testament. Around 5,300 of these are in Greek, and the remainder are early translations into other languages (such as Latin). By analysing this vast amount of manuscript evidence, it is possible to establish with a great deal of certainty a version of the text very close to the original.

B. The closeness in time to the original

Not only do we have a great many manuscripts, but a number of them are quite close in time to the original. The earliest manuscript portions date from 125 AD; existing copies that contain much or all of the New Testament date from around 200 AD.

If this gap sounds like quite a period of time, it is worth making a comparison with other ancient documents, such as Homer’s *Iliad*, or the works of Plato, Caesar or Sophocles. These ancient works, the authenticity of which no modern scholar would question, do not even come close to the New Testament in either the number of manuscripts or closeness in time to the original—as the following graph shows.

	Homer	Sophocles	Plato	Caesar	New Testament
Number of copies found	643 copies	193 copies	7 copies	10 copies	24,000 copies
Time between writing and earliest surviving manuscripts	500 years	1400 years	1200 years	1000 years	Approx. 130 years



Sir Frederick Kenyon, former director and principal librarian of the British Museum, puts it like this:

The interval then between the dates of original composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the authenticity and general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established.

Frederick Kenyon, *The Bible and Archaeology*, Harper and Row, 1940, p. 288

3. Can we trust the Gospels?

It is one thing to establish that the Gospels have come down to us as they were written, but can we trust that what they record is true? Is it possible that they are fictional, or partly fictional? Just how much can we trust the material in Jesus’ biographies? The following short article by John Chapman addresses these questions.

Do you believe everything you read?

We are a strange mixture of gullibility and scepticism. If I say to you, “Do you believe everything you read in the newspaper?”, you would probably say, “No”. And I would agree. However, the fact is that we usually *do* believe it for no other reason than that it is printed in the paper! We may be more discriminating when it comes to television advertising. We know when the salesman says, “I wouldn’t do this commercial if it were not true”, that there’s a better than even chance he is lying. However, when the newsreader appears on the box, meticulously groomed, dispensing information probably of unknown origin, but in such a cultured authoritative voice, then we will probably think what *he* says is true.

What makes an historical record accurate anyway? I would want to ask these questions: Was the writer an eyewitness to the event? If not, from where did he get his information? Do we have any verifying histories available from other authors? Were they published in the lifetime of eyewitnesses? How soon after the event were they written? Have they been transmitted accurately? Does the historian have an ‘axe to grind’ or some biased motive? Do his other utterances ring true?

When I submit the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—to these tests, I am satisfied that they do give us a reliable history of Jesus.

Were the Gospel writers eyewitnesses?

The apostles were with Jesus during his entire ministry. Matthew’s and John’s Gospels are eyewitness accounts. There is good reason to think that Mark’s Gospel is really the apostle Peter’s account, recorded for him by Mark; Luke tells us that he himself is not an eyewitness but he also tells us he depends directly on eyewitnesses for his information.

It is clear to any reader of the four Gospels that Matthew, Mark and Luke bear a strong similarity, although each has his distinctive style and aim. It still remains a matter of debate amongst New Testament scholars but most argue that Matthew and Luke have used Mark as a source, and that they had access to some earlier documents that are now lost.

The Gospel of John, on the other hand, is quite independent. Apart from the death and resurrection of Jesus, he hardly duplicates any of the stories in the other Gospels. It seems as if he did not have access to the other Gospels at the time he wrote his. This means that we have at least two completely independent histories, which makes very valuable evidence. Often a document from antiquity stands alone with no other against which to check it. A good exercise would be to read Luke’s Gospel and then John’s. Then ask yourself, “Is the Jesus as portrayed in one, the same as in the other?” I am convinced he is, and it has given me much confidence in the Gospels as accurate, first hand, eyewitness accounts.

As you read through Matthew and John you will see the eyewitness touches about them. Matthew 28:17 is a good example. “When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted”. The piece of information “but some doubted” is an interesting sidelight. It doesn’t

do anything for the story or for the ‘cause’. If anything it weakens the case for the resurrection. So why does Matthew insert it? Because he remembered it like that! Notice the eyewitness touch in John 6:10. It is the description of the feeding of the five thousand. “There was plenty of grass in that place, and the men sat down, about five thousand of them.” No doubt you would remember the lush green of a pleasant spring picnic and even comment on it, but would you bother to say so if you hadn’t been there?

Some years ago, a well-known author and television script writer, Tony Morphet, became a Christian. Before that, by his own choice, he had been an atheist. A set of circumstances occurred which resulted in his reading the New Testament. He said that he was impressed with the Gospels: “I had spent all my working life writing scripts which were either documentary or fiction. When I came to the Gospels, I recognized that they were not fiction. They were documentary.”[†]

Paul Barnett, former Lecturer in New Testament History at Macquarie University and the University of Sydney, states: “While the Gospels have many distinctive features, they are in broad terms recognizable examples of history writers of their period. It is unhelpful and untrue to regard them merely as religious or theological works. They are also unmistakably historical in character. As historical sources of this period, they are just as valuable to the general historian as Josephus. Except, unlike Josephus, they are focused on one person and for a brief period.”

Luke, on the other hand, tells us that he is not an eyewitness. The introduction to his Gospel shows historical method:

Since many have attempted to put together an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us (just as these things were passed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and guardians of the message), so it seemed good to me as well, having checked everything very carefully from the start, to write something orderly for you, Your Excellency, Theophilus. My aim is that you may know the reliability of the reports you have heard.

Luke 1:1-4

It is an interesting introduction written to his patron, Theophilus, of whom we know nothing. But its value lies in several areas. We know that at the time of writing this Gospel, there were many accounts of the sayings and actions of Jesus available. These accounts claimed to have been handed down from eyewitnesses. Luke is anxious that his patron should know “the certainty” about what he had heard. He wants him to be sure, so the most practical way to do that is to go back to square one himself. He has gone back to “eyewitnesses” so that “from the beginning” he might record an “orderly account”.

[†] Tony Morphet, *A Hole in my Ceiling*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1985.

That is the writer's stated aim. His historical method is sound and tells us the purpose of his book.

You may be interested to know that some of those other accounts have survived. The early church rejected them as accurate accounts either because they could not establish who the authors were or because they were proven to be forgeries.

But weren't they all biased?

It has often been said to me that the Gospel writers were all convinced Christians and so they must be biased in their approach. This is partly true. They were thoroughly convinced that Jesus is the unique Son of God. However, the prior question is: What caused them to be convinced? John tells us that he has become convinced about Jesus and he has recorded the reasons so that we can be convinced (John 20:31).

The Gospel writers, unlike many editorial writers, present their case and their personal interest and conviction right from the start and invite us to examine their conclusions. Sometimes they record incidents from the life of Jesus, sometimes they write editorial comments. It is easy to spot the difference. They make no effort to hide it. Most people don't go to the trouble to write a book unless they are really interested in the subject, and interest in the subject leads to greater attention to detail.

One of the characteristics which the Gospel writers claim for Jesus is that he was a person who told the truth and encouraged others to do so. Jesus claimed to be the embodiment of truth. He taught his disciples to love truth and to prize it highly. To be a disciple of Jesus means to do as Jesus did. Their interest in Jesus was likely to cause them to take greater care to check the facts than to make them up.

There is no doubt that they were convinced and completely absorbed by their subject. This is not the same as saying they must have been exaggerating because they were so convinced. If that were the case, it would mean we would never be able to get accurate information except from disinterested people. And disinterested people can often give us inaccurate accounts due to their lack of interest which causes them not to take care.

For further reading:

Paul Barnett, *The Truth about Jesus* (Aquila Press, 1994)

Paul Barnett, *Is the New Testament History?* (Paternoster, 1998)

Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (IVP, 1987)

Pages 10-14 of this extra information compiled by Tony Payne. Material by John Chapman taken from A Fresh Start (Matthias Media, 1997).