

TRANSCRIPT

An Undeceptions podcast.

John Dickson:

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Jesus:

Let's get back to work. How many sections are we up to?

Matthew:

19.

Jesus:

It's a little incomplete, huh?

Matthew:

There is something about 20 that is more symmetrical. You could always shorten it to 18.

Jesus:

Brevity is usually preferred.

John Dickson:

That's a scene from the hugely popular, crowdfunded Jesus TV show called The Chosen. It follows the ministry of Jesus and explores what the lives of Jesus' disciples might have looked like. It imagines a backstory to some of the events in the gospels. Jonathan Roumie plays Jesus, and in this scene, he's speaking with the Disciple Matthew about an upcoming sermon he's preparing early in his ministry for what might be the largest crowd yet.

Jesus:

I share your concern about the opening line, but for different reasons, I think the sermon needs some introduction, an invitation into what, as you have rightly pointed out, will be a complex and at times challenging set of teachings.

Matthew:

What does you are salt of the earth even mean? I'm not good at metaphor.

Jesus:

Salt preserves meat from corruption. It slows its decay. I want my followers to be a people who hold back the evil of the world. Salt also enhances the flavour of things. I want my followers to renew the world and be part of its redemption.

Matthew:

Then why not just say that?

Jesus:

Come on, Matthew. Allow me a little poetry, huh?

John Dickson:

They're preparing the Sermon on the Mount, what could be considered the most powerful sermon ever delivered, and one of the most powerful speeches. Full stop. The sermon contains some of Jesus' greatest hits, love your enemy, turn the other cheek, light of the world, salt of the earth and so on. It was powerful and it still is powerful. If you've never read it in its entirety, it's in Matthew chapters five to seven. The Sermon on the Mount is the mountaintop experience of the sermon.

John Dickson:

Well, this is our Q&A episode where I get to deliver a bunch of mini sermons in response to your questions. We just love hearing from you, so please keep sending in the questions. We're all over the place for this episode, which is the tradition we've set. There are questions like what's the point of a sermon anyway, and how have sermons changed through history? Or how would Dickson spend \$10 million in the quest for historical evidence for the Bible?

John Dickson:

There's another one about being woke. That's fun. Another about tattoos and a really tough one about abortion, and a bunch more. I'm not Jesus, so no promises to give you a Sermon on the Mount experience. But for the next hour, I'm going to try an answer as many of your questions as I can. I'm John Dickson, and this is Undeceptions.

John Dickson:

Undeceptions is brought to you by Zondervan's new book, *Typology: Understanding the Bible's Promise-Shaped Patterns* by James M. Hamilton Jr.. Each episode, we explore some aspect of life, faith, history, culture, or ethics that's either much misunderstood or mostly forgotten, and we are the help of people who know what they're talking about, except for the Q&A episode. We'll be trying to deceive ourselves and let the truth out. Okay, I'm going to hand over to Producer Kaley and Director Mark to take us through the questions.

Kaley Payne:

This one was sent in by Clint, but is read by Director Mark.

Mark:

Hi, guys. A recent article from the ABC on the history of indexes made an interesting statement about a change in the practice of preaching in the 13th century. My question is, did the Mendicant orders really represent such a seismic shift in what we understand as a sermon today? What was the actual progression from early church sermons to 21st century preaching? Can't wait to hear what you dig up.

John Dickson:

Yeah, I read that article. It's pretty good on the invention of the index. We all need a good indexing system and we have a monk and a bishop to thank for it. That's cool. As for that passing line in the article about sermons, I'm not so sure the 13th century Mendicant orders were anything but a revival of a long tradition. They didn't really change much. The Mendicants, by the way, are those orders that take a vow of poverty, and it's true that they were really into preaching sermons, especially the Dominicans, but also the Franciscans.

John Dickson:

It's a myth that Francis of Assisi said, "Preach the gospel always. If necessary, used words." No, he was a really active preacher. Anyway, sermons go back to the beginning. The New Testament has sermons. They're actually called a word of exhortation in the New Testament. In Acts 13 when the scripture is read in a synagogue, Paul is invited to give what's called a word of exhortation. In the Book of Hebrews, the book itself is called by the writer a word of exhalation. This probably refers to a kind of sermon. That's how most scholars see the Book of Hebrews.

John Dickson:

A word of exhortation seems to be an inspiring talk based on Bible readings, and we find the same thing in our earliest reference to a sermon after the New Testament. This is Justin Martyr who's writing around 140, 150 AS, somewhere around there, and right at the end of one of his what's called an apology, he writes, "And on the day called Sunday, all who live in the cities and in the country gather together to one place and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time permits, then the president offers a word of admonition and exhalation to the imitation of these good things just heard."

John Dickson:

The cool thing is we have examples of actual sermons from this really ancient period. We have the full text of sermons. There's Melito of Sardis who dies around 180. We have his complete Easter sermon. It's very cool. Gregory of Nyssa in the fourth century has a whole sermon on Ecclesiastes, actually a whole

bunch of sermons, and one of them is against slavery. Basil the Great, in the same period, has tons of sermons on the gospels, especially where he talks about the poor.

John Dickson:

Augustine has sermons. We've got nativity sermons, Easter sermons, and we have literally hundreds of sermons from the greatest ancient preacher of all, John Chrysostom. The great thing about his collection of sermons, Mark, just in case you're interested, is that they function as commentaries today. When I'm preparing a sermon, I'll often turn to Chrysostom and see what he said, and he often gives insight that some of those other nerds on the bookshelf miss.

John Dickson:

But let me slip in here something I find really interesting, a distinction you find in the early church, but not so much anymore. Sermons happened in church where they were mostly based on Bible readings, but the teaching of the faith, the actual content of the faith was done outside the church service, and this was called catechesis instruction in the faith, and we have loads of evidence for this. As early as the year 200, we have Hippolytus.

John Dickson:

He lists the three-year program of lessons that you do outside of the church service to learn the Christian faith. In Jerusalem, we have evidence of an intensive program of three hours a day, six days a week for the seven weeks of Lent, where you learn what the Christian faith is about. We have the actual material taught in these classes. It comes from Cyril of Jerusalem in the 300s, AD, right? That's incredible. He gives an overview of the Bible climaxing in the gospels, of course, and then it's basically lectures on the creed.

John Dickson:

You get the Trinity, creation, sin, redemption and so on. In the preliminary lecture, Cyril makes a clear distinction between what you learn in these classes, which basically constitutes a systematic account of the Christian faith, and what you are then going to hear week by week in sermons in church, which are more occasional themes found in Bible passages. It's fascinating stuff. Well, for me, and Mark?

Mark:

And me.

John Dickson:

Okay, but not Kaley.

Kaley Payne:

Not so much for me.

John Dickson:

Not Kaley. Anyway, the point is east and west, Catholic Orthodox, Protestant, sermons have always been an important thing, even if they weren't the main vehicle of teaching the Christian faith.

Kaley Payne:

This question is from Matt, who is from Switzerland. Hey, Matt. It's about a guy from history who himself made a few big changes to the nature of preaching. Thanks, Director Mark.

Mark:

There is apparently evidence that Origen of Alexandria taught reincarnation. Did electricians believe in reincarnation?

John Dickson:

Yeah. This is an idea you often hear, especially in new age circles, that the early Christians believed in reincarnation, and this was distorted years later into the current belief of resurrection of the body and the kingdom come. The simple answer is no. There is zero evidence the early Christians believed in anything other than the bodily resurrection and the life everlasting. For one thing, Christianity grew out of Judaism, which explicitly rejected reincarnation in favour of bodily resurrection.

John Dickson:

It was certain pagan philosophies influenced by other near-Eastern traditions that believed in what's technically called trans migration of the soul or reincarnation. Even Jews thoroughly steeped in Greek thought like Philo of Alexandria did not accept reincarnation. Why do people say that Origen of Alexandria taught reincarnation? Origen, by the way, was an amazing intellect. He was a philosopher and commentator on the Bible.

John Dickson:

He did say that he thought our souls or spirits were created in heaven before being placed in our bodies here on earth. But that's as close as he comes to saying anything about this point. People equate that with reincarnation, but he didn't think those souls kept on coming back into new bodies after death. In fact, he explicitly rejected reincarnation in his commentary on Matthew written around the year 250. In Matthew chapter 11, there's that passage where Jesus says that John the Baptist was the ancient Elijah come again.

John Dickson:

Origen says this does not mean the soul of Elijah went into the body of John, but simply that the prophetic mantle or power of Elijah came back into Israel through John the Baptist. Then Origen actually says, I'm going to quote from his sermon, "The doctrine of trans migration," that's reincarnation, "is

foreign to the church of God and not handed down by the apostles nor anywhere set forth in the scriptures." Matt, Nope. There's no evidence of Christians believing in reincarnation, and there's plenty of evidence they believed in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.

Kaley Payne:

From the third century to the 21st century, here's a question from Riley.

Riley:

Hey, John. Riley here. I'm a minister in Parramatta, and I love the podcast. I love how it challenges me. It makes me think differently. Although, obviously I don't agree with everything on it at various times, it always stretches me. I love how you do it so well, so professionally and so beautifully. Thank you. My question is around the whole idea of wokeness and how that works in with the Christian framework. You hear a lot of talk about woke being bad. Some people think woke is good. What do you think about wokeness? If you could share on that, that would be awesome. Thank you.

John Dickson:

What do you mean you don't always agree with me? Outrageous. Actually, Riley. I was in Parramatta just the other day, so maybe we should catch up for a coffee sometime. Anyway, I'm really glad you like the podcast. If you've listened to a few episodes, you'll probably have a sense of what I'm going to say about wokeness. I think it's good and bad. There is usually a serious dose of truth in these kinds of social movements, right?

John Dickson:

Even ones that end up being directed against the church always have a grain of truth. This movement, if you strip it back, is seeking to advance equality, justice. They want fairness, and these are things that every Christian should agree with. I'm sure I've said before, I've certainly written about it at length, most Christians in the early centuries and through the medieval period would've looked pretty woke. Plenty of them preached and worked against slavery, and elite pagans thought they were crazy for doing so.

John Dickson:

Christian set up hospitals and charities for everyone. By the eighth century, they were advocating free schooling for boys and girls, rich and poor. To the degree that contemporary woke culture reminds us of this heritage, and perhaps even rouses the church from its own slumber on some of these issues. I reckon we can welcome woke culture. But, and I'm sure you saw a but coming, good things taken to excess can become bad things.

John Dickson:

When the quest for equality becomes an insistence that no one is allowed even to morally critique another, that becomes a problem. Take the LGBT issues. Christianity, at its best anyway, always insisted that we've got to treat with fairness and equality even those with whom we profoundly disagree. As a classical Christian, I can disagree that same sex marriage is either logical or good, and yet still treat the legally married gay couple with respect and friendship.

John Dickson:

The problem is woke culture sometimes doesn't allow this nuance. Some advocates insist that unless I'm celebrating gay marriage or whatever other issue they're advocating, I am bigoted and unfair and so on. Some would go as far as to say that my disagreement itself is a kind of violence. When woke culture takes us there, I reckon it's not just the enemy of Christianity, it's the enemy of grace and good sense.

John Dickson:

It's an incarnation of that self-righteous spirit of the Pharisee that lurks in all of us, including in the church, to varying degrees. One more thing. I'm using the word woke here because it was in your question, Riley. But I actually think it's better not to use that term because it's almost always used now as a pejorative, and you don't get far in interacting with others by using language that annoys them. Cheers.

Kaley Payne:

Nice one. Okay. Here's a question sent in by Brian.

Mark:

In your recent podcast, Knights of Christ, connected to your book, you made the point that part of the cultural negotiation in Europe was to approve of the warrior culture in Europe. This, over the centuries, led to the crusades and other disasters. Cultural negotiation is very often just flicked off in some Christian discussions as our strength, but your book raises big questions over that process and for how long we let it run.

Mark:

Small steps at the beginning lead to big divergences 100 or more years later if there's no corrective action. What about now? What are the big cultural negotiations we've already let slide and need to act? Those are the easier ones I suspect to spot, but what are the little ones that will turn big and bite us? It just makes me wonder how to understand the present and not contribute to future mistakes.

John Dickson:

Hey, great question, Brian. Thanks. Yes, there is no doubt that cultural flexibility is one of Christianity's great strengths. Christianity can go into any culture and accommodate itself to local dress, custom food,

language and so on, while communicating the gospel. This happened from the beginning, of course. It was the Apostle Paul who said, "I've become all things to all people, so that by all possible means, I might save some." That's from 1 Corinthians chapter nine.

John Dickson:

The problem, of course, is when this cultural flexibility begins to adjust the message itself. Missionary accommodation can very quickly become moral compromise. It's pretty easy to see this, well, for us anyway, in connection with the church of late antiquity with its compromises to Roman culture, or the church of the middle ages with its compromises to the European warrior tradition that ended up giving us the crusades. It's much harder to see our own flaws.

John Dickson:

We see with 2020 vision the sins of the past, but we don't have much clarity when it comes to our own accommodating and compromising with culture. Now, you've asked me specifically to give some examples from today, but my first reaction is just to say, at one level, we're talking about a blind spot, right? It's unlikely I'm able to see it anymore clearly than you. I would just point out that a good starting point has to be the recognition that I'm just like the people of the past and probably have blind spots.

John Dickson:

Being aware of that possibility is the first step in having any insight into our contemporary compromises. All right, here are my speculations. I'm not a prophet, so just take these as wild guesses. I reckon it's possible that later Christians, say 100, 200 years down the track, will look back on our obsession with making church services relevant and entertaining instead of filled with scripture, prayers, creeds, and Bible preaching, and I'll think of it as a compromise, and only a very recent one.

John Dickson:

We've only been doing this for about 50 years. Personally. I think church should be understandable to visitors. Don't get me wrong, but I think trying to make church attractive to visitors is often a mistake. We're buying into the marketing culture that really came alive 50, 60 years ago. Okay, I've got a more serious example. I reckon it's possible later generations will view 21st century Western Christians and churches as materialistic beyond belief.

John Dickson:

This is perhaps the most striking thing for me about studying the ancient and medieval church, just how conscious they were of following the Lord's commands about not pursuing wealth and instead caring for the poor. You could probably argue that some churches in history took that too far, almost suggesting that poverty was a virtue and charity was a good deed that wins God's favour and so on. That is a problem. Okay, I get that.

John Dickson:

But the opposite problem is a real problem. Individual Christians can today spend tons of disposable income on coffees, take away meals, Netflix and so on, and yet don't spend anything like that kind of money on the poor. That is a problem. It's a problem when our church budget is 95% staffing, buildings, music, technology, and a tiny percentage is given to relieving the practical needs of those in the community.

John Dickson:

Speaking as an Anglican, I've always been confronted by the fact that the clear assumption in the Book of Common Prayer is that the weekly collection you'd take up in church during a hymn was principally for "arms for the poor." It wasn't for ministry, not for buildings or tech, but for the poor. Anyway, as I say, I'm not a prophet, maybe I'm blind to the real blind spots, but thanks for your question.

Speaker 7:

That servant which knew his lord's will, which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, prepared not himself, neither did according to his will shall be beaten with many stripes. Did you hear that? Stripes. That (beep) don't obey his lord, that's his master, do you see? That (beep) shall be beaten with many stripes. Now many signifies a great many. 40, 100, 150 lashes. That's scripture.

John Dickson:

That's a scene from the magnificent movie, 12 Years a Slave with Michael Fassbender playing a Southern plantation owner, Edwin Epps. Epps takes that verse of scripture from the Book of Luke, literally, and has his slaves who pick the least cotton every day beaten. Now, you can tell at 100 yards that's not what Jesus intended, but there you go. The Bible has been used in all sorts of ways through the centuries, and that really troubles Peter. I'm going to get Director Mark to read us Peter's question.

Mark:

I am bothered by different interpretations of the Bible throughout history, and now between different denominations and even within the same denomination. I'm not talking about styles and preferences, and also not about fundamental beliefs, but things in between such as complementarian versus egalitarian, Calvinism versus Arminianism.

Mark:

In the past, race segregation and slavery were thought to be biblical, and these different interpretations whereby biblical scholars, mature believers, and those genuinely and diligently studying the Bible. How should a Christian respond and react to this fact? How can one be certain that what is widely accepted by mainstream Christianity now will not be shown to be incorrect by the next generation?

John Dickson:

Peter, there's a really profound question in the middle there, but there are also a couple of things I might disagree with. Some of these issues are really just temporary departures from normative Christianity. For example, as shameful as race segregation and slavery were, these were not held by most Christians through most of Christian history. If you were transported back to say a church in Hippo Regius where Augustine was Bishop in the fifth century, you'd find a very mixed race congregation, and one that was actively involved in freeing slaves. Not all Christian differences are of equal weight.

John Dickson:

Some, as I say, were terrible compromises. But you still raise a really good question. How should we think about those strongly held doctrinal differences like Calvinism versus Arminianism, the role of women in church leadership, baptizing babies, and a lot more? I have just three thoughts for you. Make of them what you will. First, the fact that these differences are held by sincere and thoughtful Christians should inspire a degree of humility in us.

John Dickson:

We should, of course, try and arrive at our own convictions based on the evidence of scripture, but we should also hold our convictions on contentious things with humility, gentleness. Related to that, secondly, we should engage with grace toward those we disagree with. By all means have the discussions, have the debates about women's ministry, about Calvinism and so on, but let's do it in a spirit of charity and friendship. My third thought is the most important one, focus your faith and your passions on the core Christian beliefs held by all Christians. There really is a core. All Christians agree with the Nicene Creed, okay?

John Dickson:

That is the universal creed accepted by Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants, and it's a pretty comprehensive list dealing with the creation of the world, the Trinity, the full divinity of Jesus, the humanity and sacrifice of Jesus for our sins, His bodily resurrection, His second coming to judge the world, the gift of the Holy Spirit in inspiring the scriptures and animating the life of the church, as well as the final resurrection of the body in the world to come. These other things all Christians accept as true and have done through all generations. Let's focus on them.

Kaley Payne:

Okay. We'll give John some time to catch his breath and be back after this short break.

John Dickson:

This episode of Undeceptions is sponsored by Zondervan's new book, *Typology: Understanding the Bible's Promise-Shaped Patterns* by James M. Hamilton Jr.. I know it's a weird title, but it's a profound

idea. You know there's a kid's Bible called The Jesus Storybook Bible? Every story whispers His name? The fun thing about it is that it shows how every Bible story points somehow to Jesus. Now, this isn't just a nice kid friendly idea.

John Dickson:

There are serious questions why this is so, and also how it can be possible. Are we supposed to believe that truly every story in the Old Testament can be related to Jesus Christ, a figure that doesn't appear in biblical stories until hundreds or even thousands of years after those Old Testament texts were written? Well, James M. Hamilton Jr. has written a whole book explaining how this could be so. He's an expert on what we call typology, the hints in the Old Testament that are fulfilled in the New.

John Dickson:

His argument is that the original authors themselves dropped clues at every point that their story or history or poem is a signpost to something yet to come. Whether the creation story, the narratives of Abraham, Moses, and Joshua, as well, of course, as the stuff in the prophets, all of this points forward to Christ. This is not a book offering cheap or simplistic arguments. It's a full scale case by an expert that shows how, from beginning to end, the Bible is one compelling story.

John Dickson:

Somehow. Well, I think I know how. Multiple authors across multiple centuries and cultures have created a unity that stuns the believer and I think should intrigue the doubter. You can grab *Typology: Understanding the Bible's Promise-Shaped Patterns* by James M. Hamilton Jr. today on Amazon, or just head to zondervan.com for more.

John Dickson:

In Tanzania, people living with a disability suffer discrimination and social isolation. They also have trouble finding employment and education opportunities. Nearly half of people living with a disability in Tanzania can't read or write. In some cases, they're even denied medical care or access to services that offer food and shelter. Anglican Aid is changing this by supporting the Karagwe Disability Program in the Kagera region of Tanzania.

John Dickson:

The program offers dedicated medical care and rehabilitation to people living with disabilities, as well as giving them access to education and a pathway to employment. It's fantastic. You can help Anglican Aid, support the life-changing work of the Karagwe Disability Program by visiting anglicanaid.org.au. That's anglicanaid.org.au. Thanks so much.

John Dickson:

My journey to get a tattoo was really 15 years long, but this is a Coptic cross, and I've always wanted a Coptic cross ever since my guide in Cairo years ago for the filming of the cross files showed me the way Christians in Egypt have a cross tattooed from infancy, and-

Kaley Payne:

We're listening to a clip from a video series that John was featured in a few years back. It's called Ink Plots from our friends at Eternity News and Australian Christian News Service. We'll put a link to the full video in the show notes.

John Dickson:

From infancy, and I was just so compelled by this young man who is a faithful believer in Christ. He told me how parents would want to do this so that the child would never be able to deny that they're a Christian because it's tattooed on, which seems a bit full onto me. But as I've watched the Coptic Christians over the last 10 years suffer more and more in Egypt, I just felt an affinity with them and thought I want to get a Coptic cross.

John Dickson:

I actually said to Michael, my guide, "Hey, could I get a cross done here?" He was like, "Oh, I don't want you doing it in Cairo. I don't want to be responsible for killing you. You getting septicaemia or something." I went, "Oh, okay." Then I got on with my life, but never lost this sense that I want to do that, I want that mark of identification. I rang a Coptic priest and said what [inaudible 00:31:17]

Kaley Payne:

A couple of people have asked this question in the last year or so, including Andrew. Here it is. Tattoos, any thoughts on it? I know a few Christians condemn it based on its pagan roots. What do you think?

John Dickson:

Yeah, I have two tattoos, one on each wrist. On my right wrist is a Coptic cross reminding me of persecuted Christians, and on the left is the word cross, stauros, or actually stauron in the accusative, written exactly as it appears in the earliest manuscript of Luke 14:27, where Jesus said, "Take up your cross and follow me." I literally took an image of that manuscript of Luke's Gospel to my tattoo artist and said, "Exactly like this, please." It sparked a very cool conversation with her.

John Dickson:

I'm confident that the Old Testament law against cutting and marking the body was directed explicitly against the common pagan practice of body marking to rouse and implicate the gods. I do think we should be careful about how we mark our bodies permanently. But in principle, I think tattoos can honor

the Lord and you'll find amongst our Egyptian Coptic brothers and sisters, the Coptic cross tattooed on the wrist is a very ancient tradition, signalling devotion to Christ.

Speaker 8:

The rhetoric of martyrdom and persecution persists especially in the language of the religious and political right. Just as early Christians employed the martyrdom myth to exclude heretics. This very same myth is still used to silence dissent and galvanize a new generation of cultural warriors. We can see this in statements by Christian leaders, speeches by politicians and the rhetoric of media pundits who claim that they are being persecuted in the way that Christians have always been persecuted.

Speaker 8:

The idea that Christians are, by their very nature, persecuted is grounded in an inaccurate history of the early church. Christians were not relentlessly persecuted in the first few centuries, and they're not systematically and continually persecuted today.

Kaley Payne:

That's part of a promotional clip for Candida Moss's 2013 book, *The Myth of Persecution: How Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom*. It's the basis of a Twitter feud one of our listeners has been having, and for which they asked for John's help. They've asked to remain anonymous, but basically the question is, is the persecution of the early church a myth?

John Dickson:

I think this is partly a problem of our own making. Christians have, over the centuries and today, exaggerated the persecution of the church. We have at times developed this victim mentality, which helps us cope in a world that doesn't believe. I actually think it's a terrible way to cope. But a persecution complex does have a certain psychological benefit. There is this romantic notion that the early church experienced almost nonstop persecution until Constantine became a Christian and put an end to it all.

John Dickson:

It's in response to that exaggeration that some recent writers have tried to correct the myth by minimizing the evidence almost beyond recognition. The most notable example is the work of English scholar, Candida Moss, who we just heard from. Her 2013 book, *The Myth of Persecution: How the Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom* has been a really big seller.

John Dickson:

The title is a little bit clickbaity, especially the Christians invented the story of Martyrdom. Dr. Moss knows, as well as anyone, that while Christians weren't routinely persecuted by the Romans, we have pretty good evidence they were formally repressed on several occasions in the early period, and that

experience left an indelible mark on Christian consciousness. Let me leave aside the exaggerations on the one hand and the revisionism of Candida Moss on the other and talk you through the five clear occasions in the first three centuries when the church was persecuted.

John Dickson:

This might be worth just having in your back pocket. First, Nero blamed the fire of Rome on the Christians in AD 64, and our secular evidence from Tacitus, no less, says that Nero convicted, "vast numbers of Christians in Rome, who were then covered with wild beast skins and torn to death by dogs or fastened on crosses, and when daylight failed, were burned to serve as lamps by night." That was persecution. It was a single year in one city, so not widespread persecution.

John Dickson:

The second was 50 years later. We have a Roman letter from Pliny, the governor of Northern Turkey, to Emperor Trajan, and he explains in the letter that he's executing so many Christians he's worried it might not be the right thing, or perhaps he's not following the correct Roman procedure. He explicitly says, "A great many individuals of every age and class, both men and women are being brought to trial." That is persecution.

John Dickson:

He then adds, "I have asked them in person if they are Christians, and if they admit it, I repeat the question a second and third time, with a warning of the punishment awaiting them. If they persist, I order them to be led away for execution." That sounds like persecution. There's no avoiding this example. We have Trajan's letter back to Pliny. The emperor tells him to carry on killing Christians so long as Pliny doesn't go around pursuing anonymous tip-offs about the Christians. That would be unRoman.

John Dickson:

Third, we have an open letter from the theologian and preacher, Tertullian, to the governor of Carthage named Scapula. It dates to about the year 215. The letter is about four pages long, and basically, Tertullian tells the governor that his Christian community is going to put up with whatever officials throw at them. It's clear from the letter that some Christians have already been killed and that the governor has been rounding up Christians.

John Dickson:

This is excellent evidence. Tertullian says there are so many Christians in Carthage, the governor may end up causing more sadness in the city than he imagines. Three decades after Tertullian, there is a fourth brief but widespread persecution. During the short reign of Emperor Decius, that's AD 249 to 251. Just three years. We have documented executions of numerous prominent Christians in this period, including Bishop Alexander of Jerusalem, Bishop Babylas of Antioch, and even Bishop Fabian of Rome.

John Dickson:

That was a campaign of terror. Things were relatively quiet for the next 50 years, until the fifth clear period of persecution. This is called the Great Persecution from 303 to 312, and it was empire wide. It wasn't strictly enacted in the West, but it was severe and relentless in the Eastern part of the empire. Emperor Diocletian issued a series of decrees aimed at destroying Christianity.

John Dickson:

It began with a decree about destroying churches and burning scriptures, and then it moved on to sacking all Christians in public service and academia, which was quite a lot of people by then, and it climaxed in an order that everyone had to offer a sacrifice to the pagan gods. You were literally on a role and you had to turn up and do it, and anyone who didn't participate was to be tortured until they did, and if they still didn't, they were killed.

John Dickson:

Of course, in the year 312 Constantine the Great becomes emperor and the persecution is stopped, pretty much for good. There's a little persecution in the year 361, but we'll leave that to one side. Here's the thing, we shouldn't exaggerate the persecutions of the early church, but we can talk about these five periods of persecution with historical confidence.

Speaker 9:

He could do anything with your life. What would you like to do?

Speaker 10:

My father told me what it was like before the war. He said every man was free. (singing) I want my country back.

Speaker 11:

I pledge allegiance to the flag of the Axis Powers of America.

Kaley Payne:

That's the first part of the trailer for the Amazon Prime TV series, The Man in the High Castle. Have you watched this, Mark?

Mark:

Yeah, it's awesome.

Kaley Payne:

Yeah, it's super complicated, but the premise is so intriguing. What would've happened if the allies didn't win World War II, if the Axis Powers, Germany and Japan, had triumphed? It's that type of alternative history that has proven quite popular. There's a few of them around. Anyway, our next listener, Paul, may have seen it or read a book about alternative histories, because his question, off the back of our two-part episode in season four about the crusades, is this, what if the crusades just never happened?

John Dickson:

Huh! That's a pretty random open-ended question. I'm going to give you a random open-ended reply. Of course, it's impossible to provide anything but wild speculations. That's never stopped me before, so here we go. On the one hand, I suppose if the crusades never happened, there would be a whole lot less terrible Christian violence for me to apologize about, even lose a few chapters in my bullies and saints book, I guess.

John Dickson:

Even if the Eastern crusades had a certain justification, the crusaders pretty quickly perverted the course of justice in the way they conducted themselves. They practiced slaughter on Jewish communities, along the Rhine. They killed women and children in the massacre of Jerusalem. It would be great if Christians had never done these things. It would be one less dark spot on the history of the church. On the other hand, and just to continue my wild speculations, without the crusades, there may well be no Orthodox church in the world today.

John Dickson:

Constantinople and Greece, the center of Orthodox Christianity, would have fallen to Islamic armies and probably some other parts of Eastern Europe too. Maybe even Italy. After all, that's exactly what Muslim armies had been trying to do for the previous three centuries, and the crusades prevented that. I feel utterly conflicted about the crusades. The crusades didn't win back the formerly Christian lands taken by Muslims, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, North Africa, or Turkey, but they didn't lose Europe.

John Dickson:

Personally, I think that's a good thing. I just wish Christians had conducted this war without the ridiculous holy war theology, where crusaders were promised forgiveness of sins by participating in the conflict, and I wish Christians had conducted themselves in an honourable manner.

Kaley Payne:

Marion asks, "Thanks for your podcast, which I enjoy. I'm wondering why there seems to be such a huge difference between the Old and New Testaments in how they judge the importance of monogamy and

sexual faithfulness. In the Old Testament, God seemed to have no problem with Abraham marrying his half sister, and then allowing the Pharaoh to sleep with her to save himself."

Kaley Payne:

"Both Solomon and David seem to have hundreds of wives and concubines. Yet God was only angry at David for plotting murder to get one of them. There seemed to be no problem with how many others he slept with. I thought Jews were forbidden for taking non-Jews in marriage. Yet Solomon takes a Pharaoh's daughter as one of his wives. The biblical heroes and those most in God's favour don't seem to have been required to follow rules that came later."

John Dickson:

Marion, you make a good observation. The Old Testament is full of heroes who don't live up to the ideals taught in the wider Old Testament law. But the thing is, what's the meaning of that? I actually think it speaks to the honesty of the Old Testament narrative. The Old Testament is constantly saying that God's own people are sinful. That seems to be the point here. Many, many things are reported, but not necessarily condoned in the historical narratives.

John Dickson:

Readers who read the entire Old Testament are meant to be able to make judgments about how Abraham behaved or David or Solomon and all of rest based on what we know is the total revealed law of God. In the case of marriage, it's clear from Genesis chapter two what the expected pattern is. A man shall leave his mother and father and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This appears so early in the Old Testament. It clearly is meant to function as a narrative key. It allows us to recognize all of the departure from the ideal that did occur amongst God's people.

John Dickson:

This includes Abraham's terrible behavior, the polygamy of David and Solomon, and tons more beside. We're not meant to read these narratives as morally equivalent to the explicit ideals and laws laid down elsewhere in the Old Testament. That's the key here. We're meant to read these narratives through the lens of God's revealed ideals, and then we're meant to wonder how on earth God put up with His own people. I've often said that if I could summarize the entire Old Testament in just one sentence, it would be this, where human sin increased, God's grace increased all the more.

Kaley Payne:

Here's a question from Miriam, who is responding to our episode on abortion from season four.

Miriam:

In Muslim cultures, if a woman is raped, she's considered an adulterous. The penalty for this, much like in ancient Israel, is death. If a woman is raped and becomes pregnant, she'll be killed. Should she abort the baby to save her own life, or should both be killed because of a man's sin? If the option is present, should the baby be carried to full term, and then the woman killed and the baby sent for adoption who knows where? I'd love to know your thoughts. Thank you.

John Dickson:

Wow. Miriam, that is a confronting question. I suppose you're road testing how consistently I hold my critique of abortion from ... Was it season four? We did that. I have a few thoughts and I'm not sure how satisfying they'll be, but here they are. First, I'm not 100% sure your scenario is accurate. Perhaps there are countries where a rape victim is legally considered an adulterous, but is this an Islamic legal principle? I'm not sure. I checked out Quran 24:33, and it lays down that anyone forced into sex isn't culpable for that sex.

John Dickson:

There is a hadith, a report about the life and teachings of Muhammad, that explicitly says Muhammad ordered the stoning of a male rapist and the freedom of the female victim. Anyway, leave that aside. Let me take your example as a hypothetical and a potent one, at that. As you perhaps know, from our episode on this topic. I believe any argument that can be made on behalf of killing a fetus in the womb can also be made on behalf of killing a newborn.

John Dickson:

To put it the other way around, if you can't kill a newborn, which wouldn't have any consciousness of what's happening, then neither can you kill the baby in the womb months earlier. Both acts destroy an entire unfolding human life. That's the point. The other thing we explored in that episode on abortion is that an action can be wrong or always wrong, but the blame worthiness or moral guilt attached to it might be lesser or greater depending on the circumstances.

John Dickson:

An abortion following a rape I think is different from an abortion where parents just don't want children at that time. Both abortions destroy an unfolding human life. They are both wrong, but the moral blame does seem to be different. To your hypothetical, I'd say that aborting a baby under those circumstances has exactly the same status as killing the newborn in those circumstances. Let me turn it around and ask you, would you think it's okay for the rape victim to take the child to term and then kill it for fear of being found out and killed herself?

John Dickson:

Maybe you would think that's okay. I wouldn't. I'd say that killing the newborn has exactly the same status as killing the fetus. Both destroy and unfolding human life. They are both immoral. That said, I'd reiterate that other point about moral culpability. It's always wrong to kill a newborn, but there may be less blameworthy circumstances in which a mother does that. It's always wrong to kill a baby in the womb, but there may be less blameworthy circumstances in which a mother does that.

John Dickson:

Your hypothetical would be as good a candidate as any I can imagine. The final thing to say is the same thing we ended that abortion episode with. No matter what we've done, literally, no matter what we've done, no matter how blameworthy it is, Christ died for our sins, and anyone who turns to Him and asks for His mercy will be forgiven.

Mark:

Here's a question from Matt. "In episode 24, LGBTI Christian, I heard you quote John 7:53 to 8:11 as if it was scripture, the same as the rest of the Bible. I've been confused about this text's scriptural authenticity for a while now. It seems like a plausible story, but added centuries later. I could come up with a plausible story about Jesus and add my story to the Bible also.

Mark:

As long as my story does not disagree with the rest of scripture, what makes my story any different to the woman caught in adultery story? Plenty of scholars have reason to believe that this passage is not original scripture. I'm a bit confused by your comment. I would love to hear your thoughts on this. Kind regards, Matt."

John Dickson:

Thanks, Matt. I love this question because I love this passage. A woman caught in the act of adultery is dragged before Jesus and Jesus issues those famous words to her accusers, "Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone." When they all leave one by one, Jesus turns to the woman and says, "I don't condemn you. Now leave your life of sin." It's a fantastic story. What's its status in the Bible?

John Dickson:

Well, if we grab a modern Bible, NIV, NSV, ESV or whatever, we notice it's marked off from the surrounding text by lines across the page, and the passage itself is usually in smaller print or even italics, or both. In the NIV, the editors have added these words. I quote, "The earliest manuscripts and many other ancient witnesses do not have John 7:53 to 8:11. A few manuscripts include these verses wholly or in part after John 7:36, John 21:25, Luke 21:38 or Luke 24:53."

John Dickson:

This is one of two passages in the gospels where there's strong doubt this ever belonged to the original text. Here's the thing, we have well over 50 ancient manuscripts of the Gospel of John. Just pause and soak that up. Very few works from ancient history have 50 plus surviving manuscripts. Not Homer, not Plato, not Julius Caesar, not Josephus, not Tacitus, not Suetonius and so on. What this means is that with so many New Testament manuscripts, it's much easier to spot where the variations have crept in.

John Dickson:

A word here, a word there, a line here, a line there, and the story of the adulterous is a major variation that appears in about 15 of the 50 or so manuscripts. The majority of manuscripts, including the earliest ones, don't have this story, and where the story appears in manuscripts, it appears in different places. Most of them have it here at the beginning of John chapter eight. Sometimes it's at the end of John as a kind of appendix, and in a few manuscripts, it's even in Luke's Gospel.

John Dickson:

It's pretty clear, John didn't record this story. Let me quote from the chair of the committee that collates the ancient manuscripts and prepares the Greek text from which our modern translations are made. "The evidence for the non-Johannine origin of the pericope of the adulterous is overwhelming. The committee was unanimous that the pericope was originally no part of the fourth gospel." You might ask, "Why is it even there then? Why bother reading it in church, and why would Dickson talk about it so positively back in episode 24?" Was it?

John Dickson:

The answer is most scholars, including this nerdy committee, reckon this account is a genuine historical incident from the life of Jesus, preserved by oral tradition, along with probably many other stories now lost to us. It was written down pretty early, sometime in the second century. Here's the committee's judgment. I quote. "At the same time, the account has all the earmarks of historical veracity. It is obviously a piece of oral tradition which circulated in certain parts of the Western church and which was subsequently incorporated into various manuscripts at various places."

John Dickson:

In other words, what we have here is a real story about Jesus, which John didn't write, but which some leader in the early church decided shouldn't be lost to historical memory. Remember, John's Gospel ends with those lovely lines, "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them was written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have enough room for the books that would be written." It's John 21:25.

John Dickson:

Sadly, most of those other things are lost forever, and I'm grateful that one of those stories, and this is the only full story we've got like this, got preserved almost haphazardly in 15 or so ancient manuscripts. The passage doesn't have the status of God's word, so we couldn't use it to establish anything new, but it is a genuine episode from the life of Jesus. Importantly, it offers a perfect historical example of ideas we do find spread right across our sacred gospels.

John Dickson:

Jesus frequently criticized the self-righteous religious leaders. He often accused them of sin. He regularly showed grace and acceptance to sinners. He told them they were not condemned, and of course He told them to leave their life of sin. Given that all that theology is established from other formal parts of God's Word, I love that here, in this one story, we have a solid historical remembrance of a time Jesus brought all of these themes together in one moment of grace toward a woman caught in adultery.

John Dickson:

The story doesn't have the authority of the Word of God. Okay, that's clear. But Jesus really did do and say what's recorded in this account, and that is reason enough, for me anyway, to keep printing it in our Bibles in the way it currently is, and even for preachers and podcasters to refer to the account as a powerful historical illustration of the grace and genius of Jesus.

Mark:

Here's a question from Jacob. "I have a question that comes to mind every episode that deals with history, most recently, Paulus Apostolus. We draw conclusions from the body of historical evidence available to us, but how could that body of historical evidence best be expanded? To hopefully make the question clearer, if someone gave you \$10 million for the sole purpose of trying to add to the historical body of evidence relating to the New Testament, how would you spend it?"

John Dickson:

Okay. First things first. If you have \$10 million, I can put it to good use. I'd love to hear from you. Sadly though, I think you are being hypothetical. My reply is also hypothetical. Let's make it 100 million, okay? Because archaeology is super expensive, and \$10 million isn't going to go very far. Right. Thank you for your \$100 million. Here's how I'd spend it on archaeology. I'd put the first 20 million into a large scale excavation of the city of Sepphoris and Zippori, the capital of ancient Galilee, just five miles or so from Nazareth.

John Dickson:

Director Mark and I have been there a couple of times. Lovely spot. Shortly after Jesus, this became a center for Jewish learning, and there's a little bit of evidence that there were some Jewish Christian

teachers in the city. I take tour groups there to Sepphoris and give a lecture about all of this. I'd focus on the older Jewish section of the city. There's also a pagan part. I'd be searching for inscriptions and maybe even texts.

John Dickson:

Who knows? Perhaps we'd find something extraordinary like an Aramaic version of the Gospel of Matthew. With another 50 million, I'd focus on the old city of Jerusalem, where there's every likelihood we'd find inscriptions in Aramaic and Greek and possibly some texts. Our knowledge of first century Jerusalem is nothing like we'd really want it to be. Just improving our general knowledge of that time and place would be superb for understanding the first few decades of the church.

John Dickson:

Remember, Christianity's main city for the first 30 years was Jerusalem. Who knows what we'd find? With the remaining 30 million ... I've got 30 million left, don't I? I think? Yeah, okay. I'd spend 28 million down in Alexandria. This is the Northern Egyptian city that had the second largest population of Jews in the Roman world, after Jerusalem of course. By the second century, it was also becoming an intellectual center for Christianity and remained that way for the next 500 years until the Muslim invasion in 642.

John Dickson:

The Jews and Christians of Alexandria generally spoke Greek. Here, we'd probably find some very fun Greek texts and inscriptions, maybe even an early copy of Mark's Gospel. With the final two million, I'd establish a little team of scholars and communicators to publish all the results of these digs in real time and create another podcast in the Undeceptions network all about it. Let me know. If you win that lottery, I'm at your service.

John Dickson:

We got so many questions, and I've answered a few more that we're making available to our Undeceptors why we consider Paul authoritative when he never knew Jesus, Old Testament violence, the ending of Mark. What's with that? Is it missing? And a couple more. If you want to hear that bonus content and tons of other extras, you can become one of our Undeceptors and get access to uncut interviews and an invitation to join a private Facebook group to get the inside running on the stuff we're doing here, plus invitations to special events, and every so often, I'll pick a few extra questions from our listeners and answer them too.

John Dickson:

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John Dickson:

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