

Critique of Bart D. Ehrman's *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*, Harper Collins Publishers, 2005.

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INTRODUCTION

When there are two opposing sides of an issue, complicated by the fact that each side has very reputable and trusted adherents, it may be instructive to examine the philosophical leanings of each side to help deepen our understanding of the argument itself.

The problem is that someone who is an unbeliever (or prone to unbelief) will read Ehrman's account and feel justified in their unbelief. To me, this is both sad and dangerous. Sad: because in all probability they will never read the Bible for themselves and the message of the Bible will remain foreign to them. They will be "reading" the Bible through Ehrman's chronic unbelief. Dangerous: because it is the very message of the Bible that is of utmost importance.

There are many biblical scholars at Ehrman's level who would totally disagree with the conclusions he has settled upon. Read on.

NOTHING NEW

The issues brought up by Bart D. Ehrman's *Misquoting Jesus* are nothing new. It is no secret that we do not have the original manuscripts of the New Testament. We also do not have the original manuscripts of any other ancient work of literature. However, the manuscript evidence that gives us assurance that we have reliable copies of the Bible far outweighs the evidence for all other ancient writings put together. In fact, Bruce Metzger, whom Ehrman frequently quoted and to whom his book was dedicated, has written regarding this fact. Metzger wrote that compared to the manuscript evidence of all other ancient writings "the textual critic of the New Testament is embarrassed by the wealth of his material."¹ In other words, the evidence is there and comparisons can be made to retrieve a very close proximity to the original text.

We can trust that what we hold in our hands is very nearly accurate (not perfect), yet accurate enough to lead people to put their faith and trust in the God of the Bible. Once this most basic and reasonable faith exists, then we may place our trust in the message of the Bible in good confidence and in good faith.

Herein lays the difference: faith. Ehrman has lost his faith. The assertion that I will put before you is that faith makes all the difference. Some look at the range of evidence and their faith increases all the more. Others doubt. The choice is yours. Obviously, there will be disputed texts and passages. My contention is that there are none that damage the accuracy of the message of the Bible, nor the doctrines that comprise the orthodox Christian faith.

¹ Bruce Metzger, *The text of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 34.

There were three major sections of Scripture that Ehrman cited as being inauthentic: the passage in John 8:1-11, about the woman caught in adultery, the passage that closes Mark's gospel (Mark 16:9-20), and the text of 1 John 5:7,8. These are well known disputed passages and there is no conspiracy to hide the problem. Most modern Bibles will make reference to the controversy in footnotes. No doctrine of the Christian faith is weakened by this problem. This is because no doctrine of the Christian faith rests solely on one portion of Scripture. Rather, essential doctrines of the Christian faith are found in the context of the entire Bible. Anyone who has the desire may inquire about these disputed texts and judge for themselves what makes them controversial.

I will focus on a few points of interest in *Misquoting Jesus*:

Doubtful Scribes – Doubtful Interpretation – Doubtful Jesus.

DOUBTFUL SCRIBES

There is very tangible and scientific evidence of the accuracy of copying in the ancient world. With the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947, we now have Old Testament manuscripts that pre-date previous manuscripts by over 1000 years. 1000 years is a long time and should more than satisfy even the most hardened skeptic that an honest comparison of the manuscripts in question would qualify as a valid test for the accuracy of the copying techniques. For example, the Old Testament book of Isaiah was compared and there was little substantial difference at all. This is an amazing, almost miraculous, finding. No one can say, in the light of real, tangible evidence that the ancient Jews did not cautiously and reverently copy their Scriptures. Christianity inherited this very same tenacity in the propagation of its Scriptures.

Ehrman's contention is that since the Christian faith hinges on a book, and if this book was not copied correctly, then the very foundation of the Christian faith has no foundation at all. He made a huge leap in logic that since there were no "professional scribes" the amateur scribes made a mess of the copying challenges confronting them. According to Ehrman, these amateur scribes would also have had free reign to make changes to suit their whims.

This was not necessarily the case. Scribes, professional and amateur, were human. There would be human error right along with human bias regarding certain theological truths no matter the level of competence of the copyist. Even though this might have happened on occasion, it is unfair to assume that no one would get it right. There must have been a few skillful and honest copyists along with trustworthy people who could also be trusted to check what was copied.

By discounting the accuracy of the copying of the New Testament, Ehrman has neglected to mention a very important fact. The very first converts to Christianity were mostly Jews. It is very plausible that there were some professional scribes who were converts to Christianity. Furthermore, the Hebrew tradition of reverence for the word of God (as evidenced by the Dead Sea Scrolls) would naturally carry over in any attempt to copy what was considered sacred Scripture by those of the Christian faith. Ehrman's argument that we cannot trust our Bible because of copying errors is unnecessarily hyper-skeptical. There are thousands of ancient manuscripts that have been used to help us arrive at a very close proximity of the original writings. Plus, there are quotations from early Christian writers that can help us as well. There are hundreds of scholars who have dedicated their lives studying the ancient manuscripts who have had their faith made even stronger by the manuscript evidence. Moreover, there is no doctrine of the Christian faith in danger by the evidence at hand.

DOUBTFUL INTERPRETATION

a. Misinterpreting Jesus

Ehrman has intimated that Jesus may have led his followers astray by his peculiar “interpretation” of Scripture.

It was not long, however, before Christians began accepting other writings as standing on par with the Jewish scripture. This acceptance may have had its roots in the authoritative teaching of Jesus himself, as his followers took his *interpretation* of scripture to be equal in authority to the words of scripture itself. Jesus may have encouraged this understanding by the way he phrased some of his teachings. (p. 30, emphasis in the original)

Ehrman stated that Jesus, as the founder of their religion, may have led his followers to believe that his words were on par with Old Testament Scripture. In fact, according to Ehrman, Jesus countermanded the Old Testament Law. If Jesus countermanded the Old Testament then that would make him a law breaker and a sinner. In fact, this was exactly what Jesus was accused of doing (and being) by his opponents who were constantly baiting him in an effort to prove that he was indeed a law breaker and a sinner. Ehrman has misinterpreted Jesus just like Jesus’ opponents of old. Here is a sample passage from Matthew:

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, “Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.” But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, “Raca,” is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, “You fool!” will be in danger of the fire of hell (Matthew 5:21-22).

This excerpt from the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus appeared to “countermand” the Old Testament law was, instead, Jesus amplifying the law. That is, Jesus was showing that there was a deeper problem than the physical act of murder. The deeper problem was sin in the human heart.

The point Jesus was trying to make was that people who prided themselves on never having committed the crime of murder could not rest in their own righteousness. Sin lies in the human heart to which murder is but a symptom. Jesus’ whole point was to combat the self-righteousness of those who might be tempted to think that they possessed the righteousness that God required simply because they have not murdered. Jesus amplified the law in regard to adultery as well. “You have heard it said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:27).

Jesus went on to address a series of arguments aimed specifically at ritualistic (religious) interpretations of the law that would lead people to misconstrue themselves as having righteousness in themselves, i.e., self-righteousness. Again, the entire context of the Sermon on the Mount was to show that no one is righteous and that we are all law breakers. The very first words of the Sermon on the Mount make that implication: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God” (Matthew 5:3). To be poor in spirit is to be able to admit need. This is the impetus in Jesus’ parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector: “God have mercy on me, a sinner” (Luke 18:13).

Ehrman cited Jesus’ teaching on divorce as an example of further confusion in the text of Scripture (and in the mind of Jesus) which led Jesus’ followers to wrongly interpret the words that he spoke as having the weight of Scripture.

On some occasions these authoritative interpretations of scripture appear, in effect, to countermand the laws of scripture themselves. For example, Jesus says, “You have heard it said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife should give her a certificate of divorce’ [a command found in Deut. 24:1], but *I* say to you that everyone who divorces his wife for reason other than sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” It is hard to see how one can follow Moses’ command to give a certificate of divorce, if in fact divorce is not an option. (p. 30).

Ehrman is correct in bringing to our attention what appears to be a contradiction. How can the law in Deuteronomy say to give the wife a certificate of divorce and then Jesus come along and say divorce is not an option? Again, Ehrman has misinterpreted the teachings of Jesus just like the opponents of Jesus of old. We can read in Matthew 19 that a group of religious leaders approached Jesus to try to trap him and prove that he was law breaker and a sinner. They asked Jesus about divorce. After listening to Jesus’ answer, which affirmed the holiness of the marriage bond, they posed this question: “Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?” So, they too were puzzled (just like Ehrman) and thought they had caught Jesus in a contradiction. Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning” (Matthew 19:8).

The command regarding divorce was not a command, but a concession. Without some sort of control, women were cut loose without any recourse which was a travesty of justice. Jesus affirmed the higher law that to protect women from hard-hearted cruelty was why Moses “permitted” divorce.

b. Misinterpreting Paul

One of the major themes Ehrman repeatedly used to bolster his contention that the copies of the New Testament were untrustworthy was that the majority of the copyists were illiterate.

In the Gospel accounts, we find that most of Jesus’s [sic] disciples are simple peasants from Galilee – uneducated fishermen, for example. Two of them, Peter and John, are explicitly said to be “illiterate” in the book of Acts (4:13). The apostle Paul indicates to his Corinthian congregation that “not many of you were wise by human standards” (1 Cor. 1:27). (p. 39-40).

First of all, the comments about Peter and John are found in the flow of the narrative in Acts reflecting the opinion of those opposed to them in the context of that opposition. There was a steady undercurrent of misunderstanding regarding this strange sect of Jews. The Romans accused the Christians of orgies and even cannibalism due to their misunderstanding of what came to be called “love feasts” (communion). Christians called themselves “brother” and “sister” which led to accusations of incest as well. The final insult would be that these Christians were thought to be totally ignorant and unschooled. Church historian, Justo Gonzalez speaks of the well-known prejudice against the Christians in Roman society.

Thus, the enmity against Christianity on the part of many cultured pagans was not a purely intellectual matter, but was deeply rooted in class prejudice. The cultured and sophisticated could not conceive the possibility that the Christian rabble could know a truth hidden to them. Their main objection was that Christianity was a religion of barbarians who derived their teaching, not from Greeks or Romans, but from Jews, a primitive people whose best teachers never rose to the level of Greek philosophers.²

² Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Harper Collins: 1984), 51.

Secondly, the passage from 1 Corinthians (cited out of context by Ehrman) completely misses the heart of Paul's argument. Reading the entire context from 1 Corinthians 1:18 all the way until 2:16, we find the famous "wisdom passage" in Paul's letter to the church in Corinth.

In this section Paul addressed the ever-present problem of the wisdom of God that seems, on the surface, both counter-intuitive and in error when compared to human wisdom. Paul very powerfully and successfully pulled the rug out from under those who would undermine God's wisdom to promote wisdom of their own. Toward the end of Paul's treatment of this topic he wrote, "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:14). The wisdom to which Paul was referring encompassed both the literate and the illiterate. He was not stating that the believers in Corinth were illiterate. That was not at all the thrust of this section in Paul's Corinthian letter. Paul was affirming the necessity of embracing wisdom from God and that those who embrace (by contrast) the wisdom of this world, will never come to a correct understanding of the gospel.

However, Ehrman used this passage as evidence that the copyists were illiterate and not capable of accurate copying. The point of this passage in 1 Corinthians was written to highlight an entirely different situation.

DOUBTFUL JESUS

Ehrman's doubts regarding the biblical text has carried over to doubts about the biblical Jesus. There was discussion about the Latin Vulgate and how a spurious verse was inserted into our modern translations from the Vulgate in order support the church's doctrine of the Trinity.

There was one key passage of scripture that Erasmus's source manuscripts did not contain, however. This is the account of 1 John 5:7-8, which scholars have called the "Johannine Comma" [segment], found in the manuscripts of the Latin Vulgate but not in the vast majority of Greek manuscripts, a passage that has long been a favorite among Christian theologians, since it is the only passage in the entire Bible that explicitly delineates the doctrine of the Trinity, that there are three persons in the godhead but, that the three all constitute just one God. In the Vulgate, the passage reads:

There are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Spirit, and these three are one; and there are three that bear witness on earth, the Spirit, the water and the blood, and these three are one. (p. 81).

Erasmus could find no Greek manuscripts that contained the wording as seen above. After several editions of his translations were published, he was finally pressured into including the Johannine Comma in a later edition which allowed it eventually to be carried over into the King James translation. The fact that Erasmus was unwilling to include this passage is a testimony to his integrity as a scholar. It was only after an interesting bit of intrigue that the passage was allowed to "leak" its way into the King James Bible. We must never discount the power of politics, ecclesiastical or otherwise, in issues of theology.

It is interesting that the principles involved in making the determination that the Johannine Comma is not legitimate are the same principles that have allowed us to reconstruct a reliable copy of our Bible in the first place. We look at the manuscript evidence. But the main point is that Ehrman has concluded that the Christian faith is based on a Jesus who never existed as he is portrayed in the Bible. His claim that the Johannine Comma “has long been a favorite among Christian theologians, since it is the only passage in the entire Bible that explicitly delineates the doctrine of the Trinity” is very misleading.

First of all, very few scholars have this passage as a favorite, unless it is favored simply as an example of bad translation practices and political chicanery. Secondly, the historical Christian doctrine of the Trinity does not need, nor does it rest upon, one verse of Scripture. The doctrine of the Trinity unfolds clearly in the whole context of Scripture. This errant entry in the King James Bible is not needed at all to uphold the doctrine of the Trinity. Ehrman has built a straw man with this argument.

The title Ehrman gave chapter six brings it all home – “Theologically Motivated Alterations of the Text.” Let’s grant that his motives are not theologically motivated and that he somehow has the incredible ability to know the motives of people who lived 1500 years ago. His claim is that since the New Testament was not compiled until the fourth century the church was in a complete state of confusion.

In the second and third centuries there were, of course, Christians who believed that there was only one God, the Creator of all there is. Other people who called themselves Christian, however, insisted that there were two different gods – one of the Old Testament (a God of wrath) and one of the New Testament (a God of love and mercy). These were not simply two different facets of the same God: they were actually two different gods. Strikingly, the groups that made these claims – including the followers of Marcion, whom we have already met – insisted that their views were the true teachings of Jesus and his apostles. Other groups, for example, of Gnostic Christians, insisted that there were not just two gods, but twelve. Others said thirty. Others still said 365. All these groups claimed to be Christian, insisting that their views were true and had been taught by Jesus and his followers. (p. 152)

Did these disputes affect the scribes as they reproduced their scriptures? In this chapter I will be arguing that they did. (p. 154).

Ehrman claimed that these various views of Jesus so threatened the reality of the Christian Jesus that Scripture had to be hijacked to promote a more theologically correct portrait of Christ which would be more in harmony with the trends of the church. Something that Ehrman did not mention was that the reason the teachings of Marcion, for example, could be discounted was the fact that Marcion had a portrait of God that was unbiblical. Marcion’s God was antithetical to the God of the Old Testament; therefore his view of God would be antithetical to the Christian as well. The Christian will not have any view of God that would contradict how God was viewed in the Old Testament. There will never be “two, twelve, thirty or 365 gods.”

Ehrman’s conclusion is that we don’t really know who Jesus is. Is he an angry or a loving Jesus? Is he a distraught or a calm Jesus? Was he called the “unique God” and was he part of some holy Trinity? According to Ehrman, we will never know. Instead, I guess we will just have to trust his version of how the Bible came to be. And his version is that Jesus is not the Jesus of our Bible. The reason for this is that the Bible is not to be trusted as it has been tainted by human tradition.

As I realized already in graduate school, even if God had inspired the original words, we don't have the original words. So the doctrine of inspiration was in a sense irrelevant to the Bible as we have it, since the words God reputedly inspired had been changed and, in some cases, lost. Moreover, I came to think that my earlier views of inspiration were not only irrelevant, they were probably wrong. For the only reason (I came to think) for God to inspire the Bible would be so that his people would have his actual words; but if he really wanted people to have his actual words, surely he would have miraculously preserved those words, just as he had miraculously inspired them in the first place. Given the circumstance that he didn't preserve the words, the conclusion seemed inescapable to me that he hadn't gone to the trouble of inspiring them. (p. 211).

Ehrman's final conclusion is that God has not left us his words. The transmission of the so-called sacred text has been so corrupted that it is no use trying to hear the voice of God. The Bible is not the final rule of faith and practice. The Bible is not a reliable document nor has it been inspired by God.

CONCLUSION

The problem is further complicated by the fact that, even if we had the exact copy of the original, we would not have the original words anyway because there would still have to be a translation. No language can be translated to another language verbatim. Plus, there are metaphors, figures of speech and cultural idioms impossible to translate without adding words. So there would always be "other words" – to use Ehrman's phrase. There will always be variable translations besides the variations in the texts.

Evidence that slight variations in the text posed little problems was seen in how the Jews handled their translation of the Old Testament. The Old Testament was translated into Greek (the Septuagint) before Jesus came on the scene. The Septuagint was the main Bible for this "new sect" of Judaism (Christians) before the New Testament was developed. Minor variations in wording and spelling did not stop Jesus himself from calling people to account for what was written in the Septuagint. He obviously trusted the copies – variously worded as they were.

Here are a few last words:

1. Statistics can be misleading. What does it really mean when Ehrman throws up his hands in despair because there are some 30,000 variations? It could mean that there were 29,000 variations constituting minute differences in spelling which would then thrust otherwise valuable manuscripts into the trash heap that adds up to 30,000 variations. The differences that Ehrman did cite had little bearing on the doctrines of the Christian faith.
2. The fact that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John do not completely tell the same story should be expected. It would be a scandal (and ridiculous) if the four gospels were identical. Each told his story in his own way. Choosing to leave out or add certain details, in style or substance, does not constitute a contradiction.
3. There have been many scholars with equal or greater credentials than Ehrman who have been able to trust our modern Bible as reliable. While this is not a popularity contest it does at least allow for the possibility that he might be taking his doubts too far in the face of good evidence.

4. The New Testament is in line with the Old Testament. Jesus considered the Old Testament the rule. On many occasions he corrected people for distorting and acting contrary to its teachings. Someone once said that, “The New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old lies open in the New.” In other words, there is one revelation given by God and there is harmony between the Old and New Testaments. This unity of Scripture is what helped serve as a corrective in the acceptance and the rejection of certain writings that tried to find their way into what we now have as our New Testament.

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