

Bart D. Ehrman. *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*. Harper San Francisco, 2005, page 266.

By now, most scholarly evangelical Christians know about this book and many refutations have been written (though for the most part the audience to whom the refutations are written is not the audience to which Ehrman's book was written). The title sounds ominous for Christianity, and the content of the book did destroy Ehrman's faith in Christianity. He claims to have been committed to biblical inerrancy and to evangelical born-again faith prior to his discovery of the facts recited in this book.

For many of us, once saved is always saved, so we are confused by his sharp and well-considered move toward agnosticism. Many of us are well-acquainted with the facts he rehearses about textual criticism, problem passages, and seeming inconsistencies in the biblical text. In other words, little in this book is new to the community of New Testament scholars at any of our theological schools, but the conclusions drawn by Southeastern's faculty are certainly not the same as Ehrman's. It cannot, then, be a purely factual matter that so decisively turned him away from his faith. Gerald Hawthorn gets the credit in the book for getting Ehrman to consider real and significant errors in the Bible. What a sad legacy for Gerald Hawthorn.

Ehrman's basic point is that hand copied manuscripts always have textual variations. Printing is a 15th century development, so we have well over 5,000 handwritten pre-1450 Greek manuscripts, but they all contain variations from one another. He admits that the vast majority of variants are inconsequential, but the few that are significant convinced him that Christianity was just like all other religions, a human construction of ideas from a prominent ancient teacher, not divine revelation preserved by the inspiration of Scripture.

Ehrman's book is short and easy to read. The title is provocative and appeals to the modern distrust of the church and rejection of authority, but as erudite and scholarly (and generally factual) as his book is, to me it is quite misleading in its overall thrust.

He admits virtually all my points, that the "errors" are mostly not really errors in teachings. They are spelling issues or grammar or some literal reading of a figure of speech (the mustard seed, for example, may not literally be the very smallest seed of any kind in the whole world. It is, however, the smallest recognizable seed planted by the farmers). On the other hand, Ehrman does cite several well-known disputed passages (the last verses of Mark; the woman caught in adultery) that led him to doubt inerrancy. Apparently, I am sorry to say, Ehrman allowed his studies at Moody Bible Institute to convince him that Christianity depends on a particular theory of biblical inspiration and inerrancy. In fact it is the other way around. It is the attitude and teaching of Christ that leads us to an affirmation of the fully truthful nature of the authentic (original) biblical teachings. Inerrancy does not mean that every word or phrase or passage in an English translation from the early 17th century (or even from certain ancient manuscripts) must have been in the original text. (In other words, if the story of the woman caught in adultery were to turn out not to have been original, then the doctrine of inerrancy would

not apply to it. Inerrancy only applies to the original text. To discover that a scribe made an inadvertent or even a deliberate transcriptional mistake is no argument against the truthfulness of the original meaning of the original apostolic text of the passage in question. It is Ehrman's mistake not to follow the lead of Christ Himself when referring to the teachings of the Bible. The only legitimate claim for inerrancy is that our Lord seems to have held that view and taught His disciples to trust the Bible as the Word of God (and thus as truthful) in the parts and the whole. Unlike the Book of Mormon and/or the Koran, the Bible never claims to have been dictated by God with God's own style and form. The Bible was not handed down on divine tablets. That is its strength. It is God's truthful word revealed to and through human authors.

We could spend pages discussing all of the points Ehrman makes. Most of the information seems factual, none of it is new. So why does it seem so threatening to our church people. First, Ehrman is in an influential teaching position at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. North Carolina is generally a theologically conservative state. His claims threaten many simple believers. Second, he is presenting his views without much formal recognition of the caricature he is painting of authentic evangelicalism. We do not hold to inerrancy out of ignorance (which I think he implies). Evangelicals who have gone to our seminaries are fairly well acquainted with textual criticism and with disputed passages.

Frankly, I enjoyed the book. It reminded me once again how strong the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy really is. Ehrman has made a serious error at this time in his career. With all the resources available to him, he only comes up with a few passages that he thinks actually threaten the biblical claim for full truthfulness and none that require our original sources to be teaching that some doctrine or fact is false. Even if Ehrman were right, and there are actual factual errors here and there that would have been affirmed in the original text (which I deny), I can't see how any of his proposals have any negative effect on New Testament doctrine.

He points to non-canonical "gospels," but they are not authentically apostolic, nor do the one's he mentions arise from the first century. To read second century writings (in particular the apologists) is to move into a different world, a new style and vocabulary, and a different set of issues. The apostolic gospels differ from one another but not by as much as they collectively differ from second century writings. Later writings often quote from the first century writings, giving the first century documents a distinctive place in terms of the authority structure. Luke mentions that he consulted others who had written about the life and works of Jesus, but he never quotes them. It is simply false and misleading to put all these things out there and then assume that our New Testament is made up merely of the books that survived.

A final point (out of many I wish I had time to recite), every time I saw Ehrman claiming that this passage or that phrase was a mistake (and was not in the original), I asked myself how he could know that? If you don't know what the original was, because you think the original has been lost, how could you with any assurance identify the mistake?

A final word! Look at this example: The original said, “The city is on the hill.” Now read this variant: “The citi is on the hill.” Now another variant reading from a later manuscript: “The village on the hill is,” and lastly from a manuscript dated three centuries later: “The city is on the hill.” Given this evidence, are you unsure about the original wording? Of course not! What is the difference between the accurate wording of the late manuscript and the original? There is none. Can we not, with some degree of assurance know how to “correct” the second version even if the original were lost? My contention is and for years has been, that the correct concept of an original autograph has almost nothing to do with the original handwriting or the original paper and ink. The original autograph refers to any accurate copy or reproduction of that finalized and authenticated copy that the prophet or apostle produced. If I am right, we do have the original autographs with a high degree (95-99%) of certainty. In most cases where there is a disputed passage, it is easy through comparative studies to recognize the original text. When it is more difficult, we simply apply the best scholarly principles we know in order to restore the original wording to the extent we can, and we depend on that highly reliable restored text. Most of us essentially have no doubts about the vast majority of the biblical text.

The significant issues lie with the 10 to 15 passages that perplex us because of what they say, not because of whether or not we have sufficient evidence to convince us that they were in an original apostolic text. The Bible is not always easy to understand even when we know for sure what the original teaching was.

Again, however, even Ehrman admits the reliability and authenticity of the vast majority of the New Testament. He affirms this in his book in various places, but he chooses to emphasize the problems rather than the things we can affirm regarding biblical truthfulness. He does this seemingly because he has been disappointed to find that God did not produce the Bible as Ehrman may have thought would have been stronger. Maybe Ehrman was expecting something in the manner of the Koran or the Book of Mormon. God spoke through human prophets selected for their faithfulness, a fact in which I rejoice. Through various godly, called prophets and apostles, God confirmed the reality of His revelation. The unity of the biblical writers (yet without claims of dictation or collusion) is a strong evidence of the divine/human nature of the Bible. That single insight of the dual nature of the Bible explains virtually all of Ehrman’s problem passages, and ancient transcriptional techniques explains virtually all of the textual problems.

Ehrman knows that Christian faith depends on the historical Jesus, His resurrection, and ascension. He knows we have no serious knowledge of Jesus apart from the truthful account in the New Testament. His agnosticism is not valid because I do not hear the intellectual humility of true agnosticism. He seems to know that he is right about the loss of authentic knowledge about Jesus and salvation due to some unresolved issues of New Testament criticism. He seems determined sweetly to convince his readers that the problems are so great that Christian claims cannot be trusted unless we can achieve a cogent, rational response to every problem passage. But it’s not the “problem passages” that we should be concerned about. If they are not solvable, then let’s just admit that fact

and reconsider our formulation of the doctrine of inerrancy or our identification of the original text. We will not stand before the judgment based on our commitment to biblical inerrancy in any one formulation or another. We will stand before the judgment based on our trust in Christ, that he is Lord, that he died a sacrificial atoning death for us, that he lay in the tomb according to the sign of Jonah, that he was raised bodily from the grave, and that he then ascended back into heaven from which he came, to take his place at the right hand of the Father. This is the faith we defend. This is the faith inerrancy supports. This is the truth of the gospel. And Jesus was not misquoted in the initial versions of the New Testament gospel texts. Had he been, the text would have immediately been corrected by those who had been there to hear Jesus teach and preach and make his claims. Many of these witnesses were still alive when the New Testament writings were coming into their initial circulation within the early Christian communities. This is the historical character of our trustworthy faith, different as it is from all others.

L. Russ Bush, Director
Center for Faith and Culture
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary
PO Box 1889
Wake Forest, NC 27588