

Review of Bart D. Ehrman's *Misquoting Jesus*

by

James Arlandson

Bart D. Ehrman has questioned the substantial integrity of the transmission of the New Testament manuscripts. Some orthodox scribes in the church corrupted the New Testament to sustain and fortify their own theology, he says.

Since his book is now making the rounds in paperback, a review is still in order. This review, combined with others linked below, challenges Ehrman's reasoning and conclusions.

Inspiring false dilemmas

Ehrman's personal story of his born again experience, which he now seems to repudiate (p. 14), is interwoven into his skepticism about the New Testament text. He learned early on in his college career that the original text no longer exists. Consequently, it is misguided and irrelevant to believe that God inerrantly inspired no-longer-existing original documents.

The essence of Ehrman's belief about the (non)inspiration of the New Testament is found on p. 211, in his Conclusion (but see also p. 11 in the Introduction). He writes a series of if-then clauses almost in a chain argument, though it is informal. Here is his argument, tidied up.

- (1) If God inspires his original words in the New Testament, then he should miraculously preserve those original words.
- (2) If God miraculously preserves his original words, then we should have them now.
- (3) But we do not have those original words now (for they were changed by scribes, not miraculously preserved).
- (4) Therefore, God did not inspire any original words in the New Testament.

Despite my numbering the premises, which gives Ehrman's ideas an appearance of rationality and intellectual calm, he uses more exclamation points than one would expect, especially in the Introduction and Conclusion.

So what are the implications of Ehrman's argument? Far reaching.

- The doctrine of inspiration and inerrancy is "irrelevant" and "probably wrong" (p. 211).

- Origins do not anchor truth. We are cut loose from the anchor, adrift (Chapters titled “The Quest for Origins” and “Originals that Matter”).
- If the New Testament is not inspired, then other early writings about Christianity, such as the Gnostic gospels or even more “orthodox” writings (Ehrman frequently puts that word in quotation marks), are equally uninspired and therefore equally (in)valid (pp. 14; 24-25).
- Since all claimants to Christianity are equally (in)valid, there are Christianities, plural (title of a book by Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, on the front cover of the book jacket).
- Leaving aside inspiration, *orthodoxy* is a term of power, not truth, because there is no bedrock truth, such as the historical, apostolic (= original) connection to the four canonical Gospels (pp. 24-25; 153-55).
- The powerful and orthodox winners write history and exclude—not to say persecute—the unorthodox, on the basis of political control that steers away from the Spirit (pp. 25-26; 28-29; 33-36; 153-55).

At least three misguided assumptions and misunderstandings are found in the three premises. Once they are sketched out, a reply is offered for each one.

The first misunderstanding is his standard of inspiration. It is super high, too high in fact, and this lands him into false dilemmas. For example, in his analysis of Galatians (pp. 58-62), he uses the terms “100 percent.” The *scribe* in the following sentence is the original one who wrote down Paul’s letter (Gal. 6:11). Ehrman writes: “Suppose, though, that the scribe got all of the words 100 percent correct” (p. 59).

So far, an inerrantist would agree with Ehrman, perhaps with some qualifications that cannot be explored here due to scope. Regardless, Ehrman demands perfection after this first and original step. He writes:

If multiple copies of the letter went out, can we be sure that all of the copies were also **100 percent correct**? It is possible, at least, that even if they were all copied in Paul’s presence [a hypothetical that did not happen] a word or two here or there got changed in one or the other of the copies. If so, what if only one of the copies served as the copy from which all subsequent copies were made—then in the first century, into the second century and the third century, and so on? In that case, the oldest copy that provided the basis for all subsequent copies of the letter was **not exactly** what Paul wrote, or wanted to write. (p. 59, emphasis added)

So what is the result of this process of copying? Can textual criticism reach back to the original, as far as this can be ascertained and is humanly possible? He hesitates a little, but his answer seems to be no (but see p. 62, quoted below, and p. 210).

In short, it is a very complicated business talking about the “original” text of Galatians. We don’t have it. The best we can do is get back to an early stage of its transmission, and simply hope that what we reconstruct about the

copies made at that stage . . . reasonably reflects what Paul himself actually wrote, or at least intended to write when he dictated the letter. (p. 60)

In reply, however, surely there is some middle ground between “100 percent” on the one hand and the irrelevance and wrongness of the doctrine of inspiration on the other. It is impossible to find a textual critic who believes that we can achieve metaphysical certitude in recovering the pure and original text of the New Testament. (Incidentally, this is true for the writings of all the significant world religions.) But does this mean that all is lost? Does this mean that we do not have the inspired words? Why can’t they be approached with a reasonable degree of certitude after the rigors of textual criticism are followed? If this is the case, then the doctrine of inspiration does not vanish with the physical stuff of the original documents (original parchment or papyrus, ink and the physical shape of the letters on the page). Instead, the original words are preserved (Ehrman’s word) in the multitude of manuscripts, after sifting through them in a controlled, scientific, artistic, and skilled way.

The second misunderstanding is his view of God’s (non)miraculous (non)intervention in the (non)preservation of his inspired words. But in reply how far does one take inspiration? Does even the staunchest inerrantist hold to the claim that God preserves the copies in one hundred percent purity? Inerrantist Louis Berkhof says:

The original autographa [autographs] were penned under divine guidance, and were therefore absolutely infallible. But it is not claimed that a perpetual miracle preserved the sacred text from the errors of the copyists. (*Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, Baker, 1950, 1988, p. 50)

Thus, in the subsequent copying process, humans made mistakes. Since God works through humans and history—time and space—culminating in the Incarnation, maybe through the hard work of textual critics God chooses to restore and preserve his own inspired words. C. S. Lewis’ preliminary study on miracles is relevant. Once the inspired manuscripts get assimilated into history, they undergo the deleterious effects of time:

The moment [the newcomer, the miracle] enters [Nature’s] realm, it obeys her laws. Miraculous wine will intoxicate, miraculous conception will lead to pregnancy, inspired books will suffer all the ordinary processes of textual corruption, miraculous bread will be digested. (*Miracles: A Preliminary Study*, p. 81)

The third misunderstanding is the difference between inerrancy and infallibility and Ehrman’s views. Infallibility provides a middle ground between inerrancy as normally understood by theologians such as Berkhof on the one hand, and Ehrman’s super-high and confused opinion on inspiration and inerrancy, on the other. The point here is not to debate the merits of inerrancy over infallibility (or vice-versa), but to show that Ehrman did not provide a thorough discussion of either.

P. J. Williams of Evangelical Textual Criticism in his review of Ehrman's book also sees some problems with Ehrman's understanding of the doctrine of inspiration. Williams writes:

3. Misunderstandings of Concepts of Inspiration. The book [*Misquoting Jesus*] is in some ways framed as an argument against divine verbal inspiration of the scriptures (a core historic evangelical belief, as well as one found widely in churches that are not evangelical). Nevertheless, it contains a number of statements that either misunderstand or misrepresent standard expressions of inspiration. One might well ask why this is the case. It might be, of course, that those evangelicals with whom Ehrman had contact as he was working through the question of inspiration did not correctly understand or present standard positions on inspiration. Yet, whatever the reason, Ehrman is now a mature scholar and should not merely engage with the non-intellectual expressions of evangelicals he happens to have encountered, but also with the ablest exponents of verbal inspiration. He has not, and the result is often unsatisfactory as will be seen as a few passages below are discussed. ([Source](#))

To wrap up, Ehrman's is a strange doctrine of inspiration and divine protection of the copies, which even the staunchest inerrantist would not hold. But maybe this is his point. He was aching for a fight that he knew he could win if he defines the terms, notwithstanding his Introduction and his personal journey that tells a gradual story from faith (= religious oppression) to doubt (= freedom from religion). It seems as if he strongly desires to set up a strawman just to knock it down. How can he lose? Now he is set loose from a core, a center, an original. Now he can lead others down his path (p. 15).

An assumed original

Moisés Silva is a prominent textual critic. Writing about Ehrman's more scholarly work, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, from which *Misquoting Jesus* draws heavily, Silva says in the following passage that Ehrman must have an original textual starting point in order to detect scribal intentional corruption in favor of orthodoxy.

For us to retreat from the traditional task of textual criticism is equivalent to shooting ourselves in the foot. And my exhibit A is Bart Ehrman's brilliant monograph *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* . . . Although this book is appealed to in support of blurring the notion of an original text, there is hardly a page in that book that does not in fact mention such a text or assume its accessibility. "Why is such-and-such reading in Mark a later corruption and not original? Because Mark (authorial intent!) would not likely have said such a thing." Indeed, Ehrman's book is unimaginable unless he can identify an initial form of the text that can be differentiated from a later alteration ("Response," in *Rethinking New Testament Textual Criticism*, ed. David Alan Black, Baker Academic, 2003, p. 149)

Silva brings up two essential points about Ehrman's assumptions.

First, we must have a gold standard before we can detect corruption, just like the Treasury Department has the original plates and design and font of paper money so officials can detect counterfeits. Thus, an overzealous scribe must first have a pure starting place before he alters a text to make it conform to orthodoxy.

Second, the very original starting point for orthodox doctrine is the New Testament, such as the Virgin Birth or the deity of Christ. It is not as if a scribe in the fourth or eighth century, for example, fabricates these two doctrines by himself and out of thin air. True, his knowledge of orthodox doctrine may be strengthened by church teachings outside of the New Testament, but it is still the original source of these doctrines. Specifically, the church councils throughout the first four centuries and beyond based their decrees on this inspired source, as they understood its clear teachings. Neither did they fabricate doctrines on their own without first referencing the New Testament, and then they developed doctrine, not invent them. However, paradoxically, and perhaps contradictorily, Ehrman seems to think that getting back to the originals is achievable for the most part (pp. 62 and 210), a view we analyze next.

Momentary optimism?

Ehrman seems to express confidence about getting back as close as possible to the originals that no longer exist. After mentioning textual critics (but not by name) who have abandoned a quest for the original text, he writes:

For my part, however, I continue to think that even if we cannot be 100 percent certain about what we can attain to, we can at least be certain that...it is at least possible to get back to the *oldest* and *earliest* stage of the manuscript tradition for each book of the New Testament...This oldest form of the text is no doubt closely (very closely) related to what the author originally wrote, and so it is the basis for our interpretation of his teaching. (p. 62, emphasis original; see also p. 210)

Thus, in that excerpt he seems to backpedal from the entire flow of his book, which expresses skepticism. Perhaps he means that we can get back to purged manuscripts that do not include essential doctrines like the deity of Christ. However, Ehrman is unclear on this point in that excerpt quoted above and its context. In any case, to me, this backpedaling shows the instability of his thesis that the New Testament has been "radically altered" (p. 207). Therefore, I put no confidence in his one moment of optimism. However, we should be grateful for any positive assessment we can get from Ehrman.

The huge number of variants

Ehrman says that there are somewhere between 200,000 and 400,000 variants in the manuscripts. "There are more variations among our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament" (p. 90).

However, those numbers are misleading, because even the smallest spelling variant is counted. To use three examples in English, a variant may be *-ed* after a word (*answered*) or without an *-ed* (*answer*) or *centre / center* or *labor / labour*. Plus, in Greek the word order of a sentence is much more flexible than in English. So if the word order changes in even the slightest way without changing the meaning (see Part Three in a series, below, and Question One), then this too is counted as a variant. Such trivial differences are counted in the grand total.

Further, there are several million pages of manuscripts. If there are one million variants (and that number is much too high), then that would be much less than one variant per page, on average.

Thus, saying that there are hundreds of thousands of variants turns the huge number of pages into a vice, when the huge number of pages is in fact a virtue of New Testament manuscripts. Ehrman wants us to believe that even more manuscript pages would make the New Testament less reliable, but that is wrongheaded.

Doctrines still stand firm

Next, this [review](#) of Ehrman's book, by Ben Witherington, a highly qualified New Testament scholar, says that the sweep of the entire New Testament or even one book or one epistle solidifies doctrine, such as the divine knowledge that Christ possessed in a human body. If one word or clause in one verse needs to undergo textual criticism, then other verses are clear about basic doctrine. Witherington writes:

Take another example. Ehrman points to the fact that in Matthew's version of the ignorance saying (cf. Mk. 13.32 to Mt. 24.36) as some sort of proof that Jesus should not [be] seen as divine, at least in Matthew's Gospel. We can debate the textual variants, but even if we include 'not even the Son' here which is certainly present in Mk. 13.32 it in no way proves that Matthew presents a merely human Jesus. The Emmanuel (God with us Christology) which we find at the beginning and end of this Gospel rules that notion out all together, as do various other texts in Matthew where Jesus presents himself as the Wisdom of God come in the flesh (see my forthcoming Matthew commentary).

Scribal fidelity

Throughout Ehrman's book he constantly doubts the care of the scribes as they copied holy Writ. It is true that some scribes deliberately changed a word or clause here and there, but on the whole they were careful, even in the first century, according to Paul D. Wegner, a textual critic, who writes:

Ehrman raises a plausible viewpoint, but we have very little evidence that the early church was trying to fortify theological positions rather than trying to maintain an accurate text . . . Ehrman and others suggest that these changes were made very early in the transmission of the text. While it is difficult to know what happened in the first hundred years of the history of transmission,

there is little convincing evidence for such changes. The early church seems to have taken great care to monitor errant theology and their sacred texts (e.g., their controversies with the Gnostics, docetists and Marcion). (Wegner, pp. 38-39)

Wegner then cites an example of the early church's reverence and care for the New Testament.

To give some idea of the authority and reverence that these sacred texts engendered, one need only look at quotations from the early church fathers. For example, in a letter to the Corinthians (c. 95 [AD]), Clement of Rome states: "Take up the epistle of the blessed Paul the Apostle" (1 Clement 47:1), which implies that they had in their possession an authoritative letter from Paul. (Wegner, pp. 38-39)

Wegner goes on to reference passages in the New Testament itself showing the reverence that the early church had for apostolic writings (2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20-21) and their authors (2 Peter 3:15-16). He draws this inference: "So it is doubtful that they would change their writing (see also Revelation 22:18-19)" (p. 39).

Pushing fear

In this short [review](#) by Daniel Wallace, a New Testament professor at Dallas Theological Seminary (see his longer review [here](#)), he says that Ehrman deliberately engages in fear mongering because the average untrained person cannot sift through the claims and data.

In sum, Ehrman's latest book does not disappoint on the provocative scale. But it comes up short on genuine substance about his primary contention. Scholars bear a sacred duty not to alarm lay readers on issues that they have little understanding of. Unfortunately, the average layperson will leave this book with far greater doubts about the wording and teachings of the NT [New Testament] than any textual critic would ever entertain. A good teacher doesn't hold back on telling his students what's what, but he also knows how to package the material so they don't let emotion get in the way of reason. A good teacher does not create Chicken Littles.

Further, Wallace in his shorter review also agrees with Witherington (quoted above in the section Doctrines Still Stand Firm). No textual variant overturns a doctrine:

Regarding the evidence, suffice it to say that *significant textual variants that alter core doctrines of the NT [New Testament] have not yet been produced.* (emphasis original)

Breathless and "wild"

Three things strike me about Ehrman's book.

First, Ehrman's book has been described as lively or engaging or a good read. Perhaps. But it seems to me that it is breathless and "wild." Ehrman uses the latter term to characterize the scribal business of copying (p. 124). Here are some examples of his tone.

- Emphasis (note the exclamation point): the scribes copied words of the (supposedly) inerrant Bible "sometimes correctly but (many times!) incorrectly." In reply, however, it is more accurate to reverse *sometimes* and *many*. The scribes copied words correctly more often than incorrectly, by far. This word placement and exclamation point indicate Ehrman's breathless and "wild" presentation of the facts. (p. 7)
- Emphasis (note the *italics* and exclamation point): "What would be the point if we don't *have* the very words of scripture?" "It's a bit hard to know what the words of the Bible mean if we don't even know what the words are!" "What if God *didn't* say it?" That is, God's words are just human words. (pp. 11 and 14)
- Some examples of extra-strong skepticism and language: "radical rethinking" and "seismic change" (p. 11); "radical shift" (p. 12); the New Testament has been "radically altered" (p. 207).

For more instances of Ehrman's overstatements, go to Wallace's longer [review](#).

Second, Wallace is right. Ehrman is needlessly provocative. He sells fear to the untrained readers. However, I admit that I admire Ehrman's willingness to confess his personal journey, even if it reveals his odd doctrines and need for metaphysical proofs for historical documents—even inspired ones. It has been observed that many people lose their faith when they demand such a super-high level of certainty from time-bound documents or facts, but they are disappointed when the texts do not measure up. After recounting his life's story from faith to doubt, he tells his readers that "maybe, for others, [his book] can be a part of a journey of their own" (p. 15).

Third, it seems, then, that Ehrman would like his book to influence people, but for better or for worse? The sweep of his book can only lead to a lack of trust in the reliability of the Bible. What is so tragic about his overarching theme is that there is an alternative to it. This "reverse evangelism" is, if you pardon the pun, bad faith. This is a sign of a reckless teacher. This also matches his breathless and "wild" tone.

And this is too bad.

Further reading

See these articles in a four-part series:

1. Preliminary Questions and Answers
2. Basic Facts on Producing New Testament Manuscripts
3. Discovering and Classifying New Testament Manuscripts
4. The Manuscripts tell the Story: the New Testament Is Reliable

The last article surveys the optimism of prominent textual critics who state that we can get back very close to the originals or autographs of the New Testament. They certainly do not share Ehrman's (fluctuating) hyper-skepticism yet paradoxical demand for miraculous preservation from errors in copied manuscripts.

This article originally appeared in *American Thinker*. If readers would like to click on the links, they may go there, click on archives, find "James Arlandson" and then the review. Or they may follow this URL:

http://www.americanthinker.com/2007/03/review_of_bart_d_ehrmans_misqu.html

See the review by Craig L. Blomberg of Denver Seminary: "[Review of *Misquoting Jesus*](http://www.denverseminary.edu/dj/articles2006/0200/0206.php)." <http://www.denverseminary.edu/dj/articles2006/0200/0206.php>

Mark D. Roberts has a review, plus a lot more.

<http://www.markdroberts.com/htmlfiles/resources/biblequran.htm>