

Review: JAB111

A SUMMARY CRITIQUE

IS WHAT WE HAVE NOW WHAT THEY WROTE THEN?

a book review of
Misquoting Jesus: The Story behind Who Changed the Bible and Why
by Bart D. Ehrman
(HarperSanFrancisco, 2005)

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For most students of the Bible, a book on textual criticism is a real yawn. Textual criticism is the discipline that strives to discover the wording of the original text of the Bible. The tedious details are not the stuff of a bestseller—or so it seemed. Since its publication in November, 2005, and since its author Bart Ehrman, one of North America's leading textual critics, was interviewed on two National Public Radio programs (*The Diane Rehm Show* and *Fresh Air* with Terry Gross)—both within the space of one week—*Misquoting Jesus* has been on the top-sellers list of books at Amazon.com. Within the first three months, more than 100,000 copies were sold. Not bad for an academic book on a “boring” topic!

Why all the hoopla? Well, for one thing, Jesus sells. Not the Jesus of the Bible, however. The Jesus that sells is the one that is palatable to postmodern society. With the provoking subtitle, *The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*, Ehrman has found and fostered a ready audience via the hope of fresh evidence that the biblical Jesus is a figment. Ehrman did not choose the title, but it has been a publishing coup.

Textual Criticism 101. *Misquoting Jesus* contains seven chapters with an introduction and conclusion. According to Ehrman, this is the first book written on New Testament textual criticism (a discipline that has been around for nearly 300 years) for a lay audience (p. 15). Most of the book (chaps. 1–4) is simply an introduction to the field, and a very good one at that. The introductory chapter betrays Ehrman's motive, and the last three chapters reveal his agenda. In these places Ehrman is especially provocative and given to overstatements and inferences that do not follow logically from their premises.

Ehrman's Evangelical Background. In the introduction, Ehrman speaks of his evangelical education (at Moody Bible Institute and Wheaton College), which was followed by a more liberal education (at Princeton Seminary, where he earned his M.Div. and Ph.D.). It was at Princeton that Ehrman began to reject some of his evangelical upbringing, especially as he wrestled with the details of the text of the New Testament. He notes that the study of the New Testament manuscripts increasingly created doubts in his mind: “I kept reverting to my basic question: how does it help us to say that the Bible is the inerrant word of God if in fact we don't have the words that God inerrantly inspired, but only the words copied by the scribes—sometimes correctly and sometimes (many times!) incorrectly?” (7).

This is an excellent question. It is featured prominently in *Misquoting Jesus*, being repeated throughout the book. Ehrman unfortunately does not spend much time wrestling with it directly.

The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture. The heart of the book is chapters 5, 6, and 7. Here especially Ehrman discusses the results of the findings in his major work, *Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* (Oxford, 1993). His concluding chapter closes in on the point that he is driving at in these chapters: “It would be

wrong...to say—as people sometimes do—that the changes in our text have no real bearing on what the texts mean or on the theological conclusions that one draws from them. We have seen, in fact, that just the opposite is the case” (208).

We see two theological points, then, being made in this book: first, it is irrelevant to speak of the Bible’s inerrancy because we no longer have the original documents; second, the variants in the manuscripts change the basic theology of the New Testament. I will not take the time to address this first question, in part because Ehrman does not really develop it and in part because I have addressed it in some detail elsewhere.¹ Ehrman’s second theological point, however, will occupy the bulk of this review.

In chapters 5 and 6, Ehrman discusses several passages that involve variants that allegedly affect essential Christian beliefs. He summarizes his findings in these texts in his concluding chapter as follows (references in brackets indicate the “problem” passages that raise each alleged issue):

In some instances, the very meaning of the text is at stake, depending on how one resolves a textual problem: Was Jesus an angry man [Mark 1:41]?...Is the doctrine of the Trinity explicitly taught in the New Testament [1 John 5:7–8]? Is Jesus actually called “the unique God” there [John 1:18]? Does the New Testament indicate that even the Son of God himself does not know when the end will come [Matt. 24:36]? The questions go on and on, and all of them are related to how one resolves difficulties in the manuscript tradition as it has come down to us. (208)

The Problem with Problem Passages. In such a brief review, I can only comment on a few of these textual problems. For well over a century, most New Testament scholars—including most *evangelical* New Testament scholars—have considered 1 John 5:7–8 and other passages that Ehrman questions here (Mark 16:9–20 and John 7:53–8:11) inauthentic.² Ehrman, however, writes as though the excision of such texts could shake up our theological convictions. Such is hardly the case. (I will discuss 1 John 5:7–8 as my final example.)

Regarding the remaining three passages, Ehrman appeals either to an interpretation or to evidence that most scholars consider, at best, doubtful. For example, a few ancient manuscripts of Mark 1:41 speak of Jesus as being angry, while most others speak of Him as having compassion. Ehrman suggests that if Mark originally wrote about Jesus’ anger in this passage, it changes our picture of Jesus significantly. In fact, this textual problem is his lead example in chapter 5 (“Originals That Matter”), the central thesis of which is that some variants “affect the interpretation of an entire book of the New Testament” (132). This thesis is overstated in general, and particularly in regard to Mark’s gospel. In Mark 3:5 Jesus is said to be angry—wording that is indisputably in the original text of Mark, and in Mark 10:14 He is said to be indignant at His disciples. It is hardly a revolutionary conclusion, then (one that affects our basic understanding of Jesus), to see Jesus as angry one more time in this gospel.

Some manuscript witnesses record Jesus as speaking of His own prophetic ignorance in Matthew 24:36 (“But as for that day and hour no one knows it—neither the angels in heaven, *nor the Son*—except the Father alone”), but others lack the words “nor the Son.” Whether “nor the Son” is authentic is disputed,³ but the wording in the parallel passage on the Olivet Discourse in Mark 13:32 (“But as for that day or hour no one knows it—neither the angels in heaven, *nor the Son*—except the Father”), is not disputed. There can be no doubt that Jesus spoke of His own prophetic ignorance; consequently, what doctrinal issues are really at stake here? One simply cannot maintain that the wording in Matthew 24:36 changes one’s fundamental theological convictions about Jesus, since the same sentiment is found in Mark 13:32.

Not once in *Misquoting Jesus* does Ehrman mention Mark 13:32, even though at least five times he explicitly discusses Matthew 24:36 and how its wording changes our basic view of Jesus. In reality, this verse doesn’t even change our basic understanding of *Matthew’s* view of Jesus. Even if Matthew 24:36 originally lacked “nor the Son,” the fact that the Father *alone* has this knowledge (the “alone” is found only in Matthew 24:36) certainly implies the Son’s ignorance, but Ehrman does not mention this important detail.

In the last half of John 1:18, Ehrman argues that “Son” instead of “God” is the authentic reading. He goes beyond the evidence, however, by stating that if “God” were in the original, the verse would be calling

Jesus “the unique God.” The problem of such a translation, in Ehrman’s words, is that “the term *unique* God must refer to God the Father himself—otherwise he is not unique. But if the term refers to the Father, how can it be used of the Son?” (162). Ehrman’s sophisticated grammatical argument for this is not found in *Misquoting Jesus*, but is detailed in his earlier work *Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*. Interacting with the grammatical point is beyond the scope of this review, though I have dealt with it elsewhere.⁴ Suffice it to say that if “God” is authentic here, it is hardly necessary to translate the phrase as “the unique God”; rather, as the New English Translation (the NET Bible) renders it, John 1:18 says, “No one has ever seen God. The only one, *himself God*, who is in closest fellowship with the Father, has made God known” (see also the New International Version and New Revised Standard Version).

In other words, at best, Ehrman overstates the idea that the variants in the New Testament manuscripts alter the theology of the New Testament.⁵ As careful a scholar as Ehrman is, his treatment of major theological changes in the text of the New Testament unfortunately tends to fall under one of two criticisms: either his textual decisions are wrong or his interpretations are wrong. These criticisms first were made of *Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, which *Misquoting Jesus* has drawn from extensively. For example, Gordon Fee said of the earlier work, “Unfortunately, Ehrman too often turns mere *possibility* into *probability*, and *probability* into *certainty*, where other equally viable reasons for corruption exist.”⁶ The conclusions that Ehrman put forth in *Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, however, are offered again in *Misquoting Jesus* without recognition of some of the severe criticisms of his work the first go-around. One would expect a responsible scholar to clarify the nuanced differences between proven theories and his own controversial speculation in a book geared toward a lay audience, especially with all the theological weight that Ehrman says is on the line.

One almost gets the impression that he is encouraging the Chicken Littles in the Christian community to panic at data with which they are simply not prepared to wrestle. Time and again in the book, Ehrman puts forth highly charged statements that the untrained person simply cannot sift through. This approach resembles more of the mentality of an alarmist than of a mature, master teacher. Regarding the evidence, *significant textual variants that alter core doctrines of the New Testament have not yet been produced*.

Finally, regarding 1 John 5:7–8, virtually no modern translation of the Bible includes the “Trinitarian formula” (also known as the *Comma Johanneum*), since for *centuries* scholars have recognized that it was added later. Only a few very late manuscripts have the verses. One wonders why this passage is even discussed in Ehrman’s book. The only reason seems to be to fuel doubts. The passage made its way into our Bibles through political pressure, appearing for the first time in 1522, even though scholars then knew as they do now that it was not authentic. The early church did not know of this text, yet the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451 explicitly affirmed the Trinity! How could they do this without the benefit of a text that didn’t get into the Greek New Testament for *another millennium*? Chalcedon’s statement was not written in a vacuum: the early church put into a theological formulation what they got out of the New Testament.

A distinction needs to be made here: just because a *particular* verse does not affirm a cherished doctrine does not mean that that doctrine cannot be found in the New Testament. In this case, anyone with an understanding of the healthy patristic debates over the Godhead knows that the early church arrived at their understanding from an examination of the data in the New Testament. The *Comma Johanneum* only *summarized* what they found; it did not *inform* their declarations.

Chicken Little and Biblical Scholarship. Ehrman’s latest book does not disappoint on the provocative scale, but its primary contention falls short on genuine substance. Scholars bear a sacred duty not to alarm lay readers regarding issues of which those readers have little understanding. The average layperson unfortunately will have far greater doubts about the wording and teachings of the New Testament after reading this book than any textual critic ever would entertain. A good teacher doesn’t hold back on telling his students the knotty facts, but he also knows how to package the material so that they don’t let emotion get in the way of reason. A good teacher does not create Chicken Littles.

— reviewed by Daniel B. Wallace

NOTES

1. See Daniel B. Wallace, "Inerrancy and the Text of the New Testament: Assessing the Logic of the Agnostic View," *Apologetics*, North American Mission Board, <http://www.4truth.net/site/apps/nl/content3.asp?c=hiKXLbPNLrF&b=784441&ct=1799301>.
2. An accessible discussion of the textual problem in these three passages can be found in the NET Bible's footnotes on these texts, NET Bible home, Bible.org, <http://www.bible.org/default.asp?scid=3>.
3. See the discussion in the NET Bible's footnote on this verse.
4. In essence, the grammatical construction that Ehrman says is unattested elsewhere in the New Testament is actually found dozens of times. See my essay, "The Text and Grammar of John 1.18," Bible.org, http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=4.
5. Ehrman notes that eighteenth-century scholar Johann Wettstein "became attuned to the problem that the New Testament rarely, if ever, actually calls Jesus God" (114, emphasis added) and seems to represent this conclusion as his own as well. For the case that the New Testament speaks clearly of Christ's deity, as well as for an alternate, well-balanced introduction to textual criticism and other issues, see J. Ed Komoszewski, M. James Sawyer, and Daniel B. Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus: What The Da Vinci Code and Other Novel Speculations Don't Tell You* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006).
6. Gordon D. Fee, review of *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* in *Critical Review of Books in Religion* 8 (1995), 204. It should be noted in passing that *Misquoting Jesus* is dedicated to Bruce Metzger, whom Ehrman describes as "the world's leading expert in the field [of New Testament textual criticism]" (*Misquoting*, 7). Metzger, however, would fundamentally disagree with Ehrman's thesis in this book.