

Misquoting Jesus: Does Bart Erhman Prove the New Testament is Corrupt?
by Daniel McCarthy

In his best selling book, *Misquoting Jesus*, Dr. Bart Erhman, a well known New Testament scholar and critic, seeks to show that the New Testament is a corrupt document changed through the evolutionary process of scribal alteration, early Christian theological apologetics, and poor scholarship. Since he contends that if God had set out to write a book, he would have preserved an uncorrupted and inerrant work, Dr. Erhman seeks to show that the New Testament is riddled with errors. By showing it is riddled with errors, Erhman seeks to prove that the Bible is not the inerrant word of God, but strictly a human book reflecting human hopes, dreams and aspirations. This paper considers his arguments and rebuts several of his claims.

At the beginning of *Misquoting Jesus*, Dr. Erhman outlines his conversion from a believer in orthodox Christianity to agnosticism. He goes on to set the stage that he grew up in a “conservative place and time”¹ with very conservative, somewhat naive friends. While a sophomore in high school, he believes he had a genuine “born-again” experience. He claims this experience led him to become so passionate about the Bible that he chose to attend Moody Bible Institute.

It is at this point in the book Dr. Erhman introduces the central theme of his book to the reader: the Bible is error-ridden. Therefore; one cannot know what the Bible actually means. The beginning of this revelation came to him in one of the first classes at Moody. He learned that, “None of the copies is completely accurate, since the scribes who produced them inadvertently and/or intentionally changed them in places...So rather than actually having the inspired words of the autographs of the Bible, what we have are the error-ridden copies of the autographs.”² Becoming defensive, Erhman decided to study even harder so he could become a New Testament scholar to help recover God’s words. Once he had recovered these words, he could “become an evangelical ‘voice’ in secular circles.”³

After graduating from Moody Bible Institute, Dr. Erhman enrolled at Wheaton College. To pursue his goal of finding the true words of the Bible, he delved deeply into Greek and the original biblical languages. He states, “The full meaning and nuance of the Greek text of the New Testament could be grasped only when it is read and studied in the original language.”⁴ Therefore, by pursuing the languages, he could recover the original meaning and text.

His study of the original languages helped him research the developmental history of the manuscripts of the New Testament documents. Through this study, he learned that, “We have only error-ridden copies, and the vast majority of these are centuries removed from

¹ Erhman, Bart *Misquoting Jesus*, page 1

² Ibid, page 5

³ Ibid, page 5

⁴ Ibid, page 6

the originals and different from them, evidently in thousands of ways.”⁵ At this point, Dr. Erhman began having serious doubts about the inspiration of the New Testament and whether he could recover the original words. These doubts drove Erhman to dig deeper and deeper into the history and text of the New Testament ultimately leading him to go to Princeton Seminary to study with the world’s leading expert in the field of New Testament, Dr. Bruce Metzger.

At Princeton Seminary, he recounts one of the first experiences he had with a conservative professor Dr. Cullen Story. Dr. Erhman had been given the task to discover a solution to the textual variant in Mark 2. Jesus cites the Old Testament to show the Pharisees that the “Sabbath was made for humans, not humans for the Sabbath.”⁶ David had gone into the temple when Abiathar was high priest, seemingly in violation of the Sabbath according to the Pharisees. The problem seems to be that Abiathar was not the high priest, but rather, was his father, Ahimelch. Erhman recounts how he arduously labored over a “long and complicated”⁷ and ultimately “convoluted”⁸ story to show that this was in fact not a mistake. Shockingly, Professor Story wrote back, “Maybe Mark just made a mistake.”⁹ At this point, Dr. Erhman says he could not accept the Bible as the Word of God and rejected Christianity.

Dr. Craig Evans cites Erhman’s quote in *Fabricating Jesus*. He states that Erhman’s line of reasoning is “so typical of brittle fundamentalism.”¹⁰ He continues by stating “rigid ideas about the verbal inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture underlie Erhman’s problem.”¹¹ Evans summarizes that “the truth of the Christian message hinges not on the inerrancy of Scripture...but on the resurrection of Jesus.”¹² Throughout *Fabricating Jesus*, Evans points out that many people, like Erhman, have lost their faith because they have an inflexible understanding of what inerrancy and verbal inspiration mean.

Dr. Erhman goes on to tie Christianity to Judaism as a religion that relied on letters and books. And as such, Early Christian books were purported to have been written by a small group of religious elites who used them to control uneducated people. He claims “Christians, like most other people throughout the empire (including Jews!), were illiterate.”¹³ Due to widespread illiteracy, the common people had to rely upon well-educated people like Paul and the scribes to tell them what was true. These evangelists “unified the faith and the practices of the Christians; they indicated what the Christians were supposed to believe and how they were supposed to behave.”¹⁴

⁵ Ibid, page 7

⁶ Ibid, page 9

⁷ Ibid, page 9

⁸ Ibid, page 9

⁹ Ibid, page 9

¹⁰ Evans, Craig *Fabricating Jesus*, Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove IL 2006, page 31

¹¹ Ibid, page 27

¹² Ibid, page 31

¹³ Ibid, page 20-1

¹⁴ Ibid, page 22

Dr. Erhman goes into depth to show that people like Paul and the scribes defined what became known as “orthodox” and “heresy”. Erhman suggests that the fight over orthodoxy is a fight over books which were presented to illiterate and superstitious people. Like an archetype of himself, Erhman shows that better educated Greeks like Celsus, “the learned critic,”¹⁵ pointed out that the earliest Christians were poor and uneducated. Orthodoxy eventually won out because theologically motivated apologists like Origen defeated those who “chose the wrong way to understand their faith”¹⁶ and labeled them as heretics.

Throughout *Misquoting Jesus*, Erhman builds his case to try to prove that the process of developing the New Testament was fatally flawed. He portrays the compilation of the New Testament documents like a two to three hundred year game of telephone tag among illiterate people. Before Jerome and the advent of professional scribes, the manuscripts of the New Testament were copied when one of their members could, “cobble together enough free time to make a copy of a text.”¹⁷ Therefore, the New Testament Documents were developed in a completely untrustworthy manner.

Dr. Erhman’s bleak outlook of the text is not shared by the majority of textual critics. Daniel Wallace PhD, a fellow textual critic, is quick to point out, that, “Here (chapter 2) Erhman mixes standard text-critical information with his own interpretation, an interpretation that is by no means shared by all textual critics, nor even most of them.”¹⁸ In *Misquoting Jesus* and on primetime television, Dr. Erhman deceptively leads the audience to believe his questionable interpretation is how all or the great majority textual critics view the scribal process. In *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, Dr. Blomberg counters that, “one of the better kept secrets”¹⁹ is “how reliable the New Testament documents are.”²⁰ In *Misquoting Jesus*, Dr. Erhman never references conservative counterpoints, like Drs. Wallace or Blomberg, to his assertions, though he does consistently bring up more liberal counterpoints to make himself look more moderate.

Dr. Erhman attempts to demonstrate dramatic flaws in modern versions of the Bible. He accuses Erasmus, whose work heavily influenced modern versions of the Bible like the King James Version, as being a sloppy scholar who was under competitive pressure to complete the work and, “rushed out rather than edited”²¹ his final manuscript. He sums up by saying that Erasmus’ interpretation of the texts, “entered into the English stream of consciousness merely by a chance of history, based upon manuscripts that Erasmus just happened to have handy to him and one that was manufactured for his benefit.”²²

¹⁵ Ibid, page 40

¹⁶ Ibid, page 28

¹⁷ Erhman, page 73

¹⁸ http://www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=4000

¹⁹ Blomberg, Craig *Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 2007, page 17

²⁰ Ibid, page 17

²¹ Ibid, page 79

²² Ibid, page 82

Due to all of these various changes to the text, Erhman claims that there are more variants in the New Testament text than there are words in the text. Erhman has loudly proclaimed in several appearances on the television show Primetime that since there are an enormous amount of variants in the New Testament, we cannot know what the original authors meant. Daniel Wallace agrees with Erhman that there are about 400,000 variants; he goes on to say “but by itself is misleading. Anyone who teaches NT textual criticism knows that this fact is only part of the picture and that, if left dangling in front of the reader without explanation is a distorted view. Once it is revealed that the great majority of these variants are inconsequential—involving spelling differences that cannot even be translated, articles with proper nouns, word order changes, and the like—and that only a very small minority of the variants alter the meaning of the text, the whole picture begins to come into focus. Indeed, only about 1% of the textual variants are both meaningful and viable.”²³

Attempting to demonstrate that textual critics face an insurmountable hurdle when attempting to reconstruct the original text, Erhman cites Celsus again who, “argued that Christians changed the text at will, as if drunk from a drinking bout.”²⁴ He also points out that discrepancies in the Bible were acknowledged in the early Church. “Pope Damascus was so concerned about varieties of Latin manuscripts that he commissioned Jerome to produce a standardized translation.”²⁵

What seems to evade Erhman is that there appears to have been a standard against which to compare these variants. Otherwise, how could one know that there were variants or the text was changed? Erhman dubiously cites a chief critic of Christianity as if what Celsus says is uncritically true. Erhman criticizes the manuscripts that were available to Jerome as, “manuscripts that cannot be trusted.”²⁶

While criticizing the process of transmission, Erhman ignores the massive variety of New Testament manuscripts and commentaries on the New Testament available to textual critics. Craig Blomberg points out there are more than 5000 manuscripts available in Greek to help identify textual variants and move close to the original text. Unlike Erhman who give the impression that all textual scholars seem to think that the original text is unrecoverable due to the questionable transmission process, “Scholars of almost every theological stripe attest to the profound care with which the NT books were copied in the Greek language, and later transmitted and preserved in Syriac, Coptic, Latin and a variety of other ancient European and Middle Eastern languages.”²⁷

Moreover, critics have other sources of ancient information to reconstruct much of what is contained in the New Testament. As Professor Kenneth Samples points out, “Even without these thousands of manuscripts, virtually the entire New Testament text could be reproduced from specific scriptural citations within written (and preserved) sermons,

²³ http://www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=4000

²⁴ Erhman, page 101

²⁵ Ibid, page 101

²⁶ Ibid, page 103

²⁷ Craig, William L. *Reasonable Faith*, Moody Press, Wheaton IL, 1994, page 193

commentaries, and various other works of the early church fathers.”²⁸ Erhman’s apologetic intentions become clear as he seeks to mislead the reader into believing that the New Testament was compiled by a group of illiterate, lazy scribes who cannot be trusted.

After reviewing the problems of *recovering* the text in the early church, Erhman considers how 18th century textual critics including Johann Bengel and Johann Wettstein *approached* the text. Erhman views Bengel as, “a classically trained, extremely careful interpreter of the biblical text.”²⁹ Not only is he perhaps the best known biblical commentator, but “he wrote extensive notes on every book of the New Testament.”³⁰ Though Bengel was meticulous and intellectually accomplished, Erhman points out that, his, “religious commitments permeated his life and thought.”³¹ Vital to Erhman’s apologetic, he amazingly links Bengel to Hal Lindsey and Tim Lahaye because Bengel believed that the Olivet Discourse may be used in predicting end time events. The goal of Erhman is to discredit Bengel by showing that the only way he could believe the Bible was the inspired word of God was due to his wacky religious presuppositions.

In contrast to Bengel, Erhman picks what he most likely sees as a person who parallels his life, Johann Wettstein. He is described by Erhman as starting out in University as a devoted evangelical who saw that God had, “bestowed this book (Bible) once and for all on the world as an instrument for perfection of human character.”³² Wettstein’s goal was to become expert on the Bible and further its cause for mankind. On a trip to England where he was given full access to the Codex Alexandrinus, he had his faith shaken. While studying the text, he found that many of the references to Jesus’ divinity involved textual variants. Similar to Erhman’s loss of faith due to his loss of trust in the *inerrancy* of the Bible, Wettstein lost his faith because of the problems he saw the *text* posed in verses like 1 John 5:7-8, the Johannine Comma.

Dr. Erhman turns next to modern textual critic’s use of internal evidence to evaluate the manuscripts. Internal evidence is the evaluation and study of the authors writing style, use of vocabulary and the theology perspective. Erhman holds much in common with scholars like Rudolph Bultmann believing “the writers were more concerned about faith and the application of the Christian message to daily concerns than about the actual events in the life of Jesus.”³³ Ehrman’s post-modern worldview is relevant in his analysis because he views the documents as more reflective of the interpretive community developing the manuscripts rather than being committed to what the original authors had to say.

²⁸ Samples, Kenneth *Without A Doubt*, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 2005, page 92

²⁹ Erhman, page 109

³⁰ Ibid, page 109

³¹ Ibid, page 109

³² Ibid, page 112

³³ Habermas, Gary *The Historical Jesus*, College Press Publishing Co; Joplin, MO. 1996, page 47

As Professor Samples points out, the foundation of a post modern worldview is based upon, “the individual’s perceptions, opinions, experiences, inclinations and desires.”³⁴ This is further corroborated by Wallace who points out, “It’s *almost* as if external evidence is a nonstarter for Ehrman.”³⁵ There is “internal evidence” for Erhman’s worldview in chapter 5 because Erhman immediately attempts to show that three different authors within the New Testament seem to have three completely different pictures of Jesus. He believes the words they penned to make sense of the world were purely subjective because they seemed to have conflicting viewpoints of Jesus.

Erhman supports this thesis through the lens of Mark 1:41. He compares the seemingly angry Jesus in Mark 1:41 to a parallel passage which portrays an imperturbable Jesus in Luke 22:39-46. Then he compares both passages to another parallel in Hebrews 2:8-9 where Jesus seems forsaken by God, not angry or imperturbable. Ehrman uses this comparison to attempt to prove that these interpretive communities highlight a subjective and disjointed picture of the Jesus. Erhman sums up, “Luke’s portrayal of Jesus stands in contrast not only to that of Mark, but also to that of other New Testament authors, including the unknown author of the Epistle to the Hebrews.”³⁶

According to Erhman, this discontinuity raises a powerful challenge to those who see the Bible as not only inerrant, but inspired by God. In his book *Inerrancy*, Gordon Lewis briefly attempts to address this question by discussing how the human authors may have interfaced with divine inspiration. Lewis acknowledges this objection cited by Dr. Erhman. “Because of the complexity of the subject, this chapter must be considered merely a preliminary draft of a major book or books needed on this issue, with all of its ramifications.”³⁷ Lewis continues on to quote B.B. Warfield who provides an excellent illustration of why each of these authors described Jesus differently by comparing each of the authors to colors, “What if the colors of the stained glass window have been designed by the architect for the express purpose of giving to the light that floods the cathedral precisely by the tone and quality it receives from them.”³⁸ In other words, each author of scripture is able to illuminate the audience to another facet of the divine picture of God.

Erhman then returns to the early church period where he suggests that the Bible we have today is the result of a theological battle between diverse groups of people. Just Erhman believes that the New Testament writers seem to have a diverse set of beliefs, outside groups of people, with different backgrounds and ideologies, saw him even more differently. According to Erhman, naturally they had, “lots of other gospels, acts, epistles and apocalypses having very different perspectives from those found in the books that eventually came to be called the New Testament.”³⁹ Erhman states, “All these groups

³⁴ Samples, page 230

³⁵ http://www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=40005

³⁶ Erhman, page 144

³⁷ Geisler, Norman *Inerrancy*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 1980, page 229

³⁸ Ibid, page 250

³⁹ Erhman, page 153

claimed to be Christian, insisting that their views were true and had been taught by Jesus and his followers.”⁴⁰

All of these groups that claimed to be Christians warred until Constantine ratified what became known as orthodoxy. “The group that established itself as ‘orthodox’ (as always in quotation marks) then determined what future Christian generations would believe and read as scripture.”⁴¹ He states, “Only one group eventually ‘won out’ in these debates. It was this group that decided what the Christian creeds would be...this was the group that decided which books would be included in the canon of scripture.”⁴²

Dr. Erhman is unbalanced in his presentation and never discusses challenges to his hypothesis. For instance, Richard Bauckham has strongly argued that the Gospels were based on eyewitness testimony. Bauckham argues the Gospels identify eyewitnesses to the “whole ministry of Jesus, from its beginning.”⁴³ Gary Habermas states that even most critical scholars believe 1 Corinthians 15 was written within 5 years of Jesus’ death. Dr. Craig Blomberg states Paul believed and confirmed the content or kerugma of 1 Corinthians 15 and “that he was telling the truth.”⁴⁴

Darrell Bock and Daniel Wallace sum it up well when they state that Bart Ehrman confuses “second and third century gospel and gospel-like texts as giving us an equally relevant picture of this early period”⁴⁵ with the New Testaments with “roots in the earliest era of belief in Jesus.”⁴⁶ They further point out extensive scholarly work devoted to why certain books were included and why different books were excluded. They conclude that Erhman misleads his readers because he ignores the massive body of scholarly material contradicting his thesis in *Misquoting Jesus*.

Dr. Erhman finishes *Misquoting Jesus* by attempting to show that the text of the New Testament is heavily influenced by the apologetic interpretations of the scribes. He portrays the New Testament writers as anti-women and anti-pagan. Most flamboyantly, Erhman attempts to show that the early Christians were anti-Jewish. Erhman first states that Jesus had no intention of starting a new religion, but as his followers were increasingly excluded from the Temple, they became anti-Jewish. “Within just a few decade of his death, Jesus’ followers had formed a religion that stood over-against Judaism.”⁴⁷

Erhman then turns his guns at the apostles and tries to show that there was conflict within their ranks over whether to be pro Jewish or anti-Jewish. Here we see a bizarre conspiracy theory floated by Ehrman grounded in his post modern worldview. “Early

⁴⁰ Ibid, page 152

⁴¹ Ibid, page 154

⁴² Ibid, page 154

⁴³ Bauckham, Richard *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*; Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 2006 Page 116

⁴⁴ Blomberg, Craig *Historical Reliability of the Gospels*; Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL 2007, page 145

⁴⁵ <http://blog.bible.org/bock/node/362>

⁴⁶ <http://blog.bible.org/bock/node/362>

⁴⁷ Erhman, page 187

Christians, of course, had other opinions-as they did on nearly every issue of the day!”⁴⁸ Dr. Erhman contrasts Matthew’s position in which Jesus’, “followers naturally kept the Law, just as Jesus did himself”⁴⁹ with Paul’s position that “keeping the Law had no role in salvation.”⁵⁰ What Erhman conveniently leaves out is that Matthew does not imply that you had to keep the Law to attain salvation. Darrell Bock agrees and states that in Acts we see this tension between different practices within the earliest Christian movement, “But Paul, Peter, and James did share the same faith, as Paul himself notes in Galatians.”⁵¹

Perhaps the most offensive (my wife is a Messianic Jew) and ignorant assertion made by Dr. Erhman is when he asks the question, “Why would Jesus pray for forgiveness for this recalcitrant people who had willfully rejected God himself?”⁵² Clearly, Dr. Erhman does not understand the character of God himself. For throughout the Old Testament, the Jews continually rejected God, yet they were in fact forgiven. Jesus himself stated that he wept over Jerusalem rejecting him as Messiah. Even Paul stated in Romans that He is a Jew first and there would be a future time when the Jews would turn back to their Messiah.

Dr. Erhman concludes his book in the vein of a post-modern manifesto. He declares that scribes had changed the texts of the New Testament both to suit their theological and social circumstances, as well as due to their ineptitude. Furthermore, Dr. Erhman states that the scribes were constrained by subjective and normal human tendencies by stating, “What they were doing with the text was not all that different from what each of us does every time we read a text.”⁵³ Erhman asserts that there is no absolute truth to be found. His position is well stated in his conclusion. “I began to see that since each of these authors is different, it was not appropriate to think that anyone of them meant the same thing as some other author meant.”⁵⁴ In other words, the work of the New Testament is not the work of God and man in inerrant harmony, but the work of the New Testament is simply the work of human hands. Moreover, the reason the New Testament was written was not to reveal the God of the Bible in the person of Jesus, but so that the writers, “texts might have significance for them, and how they might help them make sense of their own situation and their own lives.”⁵⁵

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⁴⁸ Ibid, page 189

⁴⁹ Ibid, page 189

⁵⁰ Ibid, page 189

⁵¹ <http://blog.bible.org/bock/node/362>

⁵² Erhman, page 193

⁵³ Ibid, page 216

⁵⁴ Ibid, page 212

⁵⁵ Ibid, page 218

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