Bart D. Ehrman

By Rhyne Putman

Date of Birth: October 5, 1955, in Lawrence, Kansas

Selected Publications: The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture (1993); Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew (2003); Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why (2005); God’s Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer (2008); Jesus Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (And Why We Don’t Know About Them) (2009); Forged: Writing in the Name of God—Why the Bible’s Authors are Not Who We Think They Are (2011); Did Jesus Exist?: The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth (2012); How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee (2014); Jesus Before the Gospels: How the Earliest Christians Remembered, Changed, and Reinvented the Stories of the Savior (2016).

Present Title: James A. Gray Distinguished Professor of Religious Studies, the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill (2003-present).

BIOGRAPHY

Bart D. Ehrman is a prominent American scholar who has written extensively in the area of New Testament studies and early Christian history. Ehrman, a self-avowed agnostic and former evangelical Christian, has gained great notoriety for scholarly and popular-level books that call into question traditional Christian beliefs about God, the reliability of the Bible, and the divinity of Jesus. Of the nearly thirty books published by Ehrman, five have been New York Times Bestsellers. In addition to his many speaking engagements and debates at universities, seminaries, and churches, Ehrman is regularly featured on major television networks such as the Discovery Channel, A&E, the History Channel, and National Geographic.

Ehrman was raised in a “churchgoing but not particularly religious” mainline Protestant family of five from Lawrence, Kansas. As a teenager, he claims he “asked Jesus into [his] heart and had a bona fide born-again experience.” Desiring to become a Christian scholar, Ehrman went on to earn associate and undergraduate degrees from the Moody Bible Institute and Wheaton College. He later became a student of renowned New Testament scholar Bruce Metzger (1914-2007) at Princeton Theological Seminary, where he earned both a Master of Divinity and a PhD in New Testament studies. Ehrman briefly served as the pastor of Princeton Baptist Church in Princeton, New Jersey before joining the faculty at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill in 1988.

Ehrman’s earliest research and publications were in the area of New Testament textual criticism, a discipline that “works to establish the wording of the text as originally produced and to determine where, when, how, and why the text came to be changed over the course of its transmission.” Although Metzger, Ehrman’s mentor in the field of textual criticism, held mostly conservative views about the trustworthiness of the Bible, Ehrman came to differing conclusions.

One of Ehrman’s most significant early works was The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture (1993), in which he argued that scribes intentionally manipulated New Testament manuscripts to reinforce what they believed to be orthodox Christian theology over and against groups they deemed to be heretical. Ehrman restated this theory with dramatic flair in his 2005 best-selling book Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why.

Although Ehrman acknowledges that his research caused him to question his beliefs about biblical inerrancy, he says that it was the problem of suffering that ultimately drove him to abandon the Christian faith. “I came to a point when I could no longer believe. . . . I could no longer explain how there could be a good and all-powerful God actively involved in the world given the state of things.”
MAJOR CRITIQUES

**God:** Ehrman denies the existence of God. He contends that the belief in an all-powerful, all-good God is fundamentally incompatible with the problem of evil and suffering in the world. “For many people who inhabit this planet, life is a cesspool of misery and suffering. I simply could not believe that there is a good and kindly disposed Ruler in charge of it.”

**Scripture:** Consistent with his agnosticism, Ehrman rejects the divine inspiration, authority, and inerrancy of the Bible. (Not all who reject the divine inspiration of the Bible are atheists or agnostics, but all atheists or agnostics who reject the existence of God necessarily reject the idea that God inspired the Bible.) Throughout his writings, Ehrman has made several historical claims about the New Testament being inconsistent with Christian beliefs.

First, Ehrman rejects the *textual reliability* of the New Testament. In other words, Ehrman believes that the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament that we have today do not represent the original documents. Ehrman argues that the copies of the New Testament we have today have been corrupted by the theological interests of the scribes that copied them. He concludes that we can have little assurance of knowing whether the texts we possess in any way resemble the originals.

Second, Ehrman rejects the *historical reliability* of the Gospels, at least in part. While Ehrman acknowledges that the Gospels give us *some* access to the Jesus of history, he believes them to be contradictory and distorted by the theological interests of their authors and editors. Ehrman asserts that the memories of the disciples and eyewitness accounts of Jesus were not reliable in recounting the activity of Jesus, especially considering the length of time between the life of Jesus and the time that the Gospels were actually written. He contends that oral traditions are rarely trustworthy historical sources.

Finally, Ehrman denies the traditional authorship of some New Testament books and contends that other New Testament books were outright *forgeries* created to manipulate readers into believing their authenticity as accounts of the disciples of Jesus. He avows that several of the epistles attributed to Paul were, in fact, forgeries written in Paul’s name (Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, and Titus). Ehrman also denies the traditional authorship of many of the general epistles (James, 1-2 Peter, and Jude).

**Jesus:** Much to the dismay of many in his skeptical fan base, Ehrman rejects the Christ Myth theory that denies the existence of a historical Jesus. Ehrman calls this rejection of Jesus’ historical existence a conspiracy theory with little evidence: “It is clear from the avalanche of sometimes outraged postings on all the relevant Internet sites, there is simply no way to convince conspiracy theorists that the evidence for their position is too thin to be convincing and that evidence for the traditional view [that Jesus existed in history] is thoroughly persuasive.”

While Ehrman argues for some version of a historical Jesus, he rejects the traditional *Christian belief that Jesus is truly God and truly human.* According to Ehrman, Jesus’ followers, like many other religious sects in the ancient world, fabricated stories about his divinity. He asserts that Jesus did not believe himself to be divine. Instead, Ehrman understands Jesus to have been a failed first-century *apocalyptic prophet* who predicted the world’s end within his lifetime. Ehrman agrees that Christian *belief* in the resurrection was a major factor in early Christian worship of Jesus, but he does not believe the data supports the resurrection event.

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

Even though Ehrman is an opponent to the Christian faith, his work has served as a catalyst for important conversations about New Testament origins and early Christian history. Through his popular level works, Ehrman has increased public awareness of the problems and questions with which New Testament scholars work. While public discussion of issues like textual criticism or historical criticism can be a good thing, Ehrman’s work in these areas is prone to unhelpful generalizations and dramatic misrepresentations of the data.

**God:** As many philosophers of religion have pointed out, there is no necessary contradiction between the existence of an all-powerful, all-good God and the reality of evil. Nothing about the existence of an all-powerful, all-good God necessitates that God should remove all evil and suffering, especially if the suffering God allows serves a greater good or prevents a greater evil (such as creatures being created without free will). The Bible depicts suffering as result of life in a broken world where God’s creatures have rebelled against their Creator’s intentions for their lives. While the Bible does not offer any single explanation to evil
and suffering, it does paint a picture of God suffering alongside us in the incarnation of Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{17}

**Scripture:** The textual reliability of the New Testament. Though misused and misrepresented by Ehrman’s books, textual criticism—the science of comparing ancient manuscripts—is an important area for New Testament studies because the original documents (called the “autographs”) no longer exist and because of the thousands of New Testament manuscripts that are in existence today, no two are exactly alike.\textsuperscript{18} Textual criticism is not only useful in helping New Testament scholars determine the best readings of biblical texts, it can serve a significant apologetic purpose in establishing the general reliability of the New Testament manuscripts that exist today.

Ehrman is technically correct when he says that “there are more differences among our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament,”\textsuperscript{19} but his resulting claim that we can have little confidence in our surviving Greek texts is misleading. Of the roughly 5,500 surviving manuscripts, there are roughly 400,000 variants in the manuscripts. Considering the hundreds of millions of words, in spanning all these copies of the New Testament, the percentage of variants is comparably small. Furthermore, as textual critics such as Metzger and Daniel Wallace point out, the vast majority of these differences are of insignificant and have no impact on the overall reliability of the Bible.\textsuperscript{20}

Most of the copying mistakes are “spelling differences that have no bearing on the meaning of the text.”\textsuperscript{21} Other differences include the use of synonyms and differences of word order that do not impact the translation. For example, there are at least sixteen different ways in Greek that the sentence “Jesus loves John” could be written.\textsuperscript{22} The smallest category of textual differences is what Wallace calls “textual variants . . . that are both meaningful and viable.”\textsuperscript{23} For example, one important early Greek manuscript (Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus) records the number of the beast as 616 in Rev. 13:18, not 666.\textsuperscript{24}

The most-well known textual differences in the manuscript tradition—and ones targeted by Ehrman’s criticism—are the longer ending of Mark in Mk. 16:9-20, the story of the adulteress and the angry mob in Jn. 7:53-8:11, and the explicitly Trinitarian statement in 1 Jn. 5:7 (a statement that does not appear in modern translations). The earliest known manuscripts of the New Testament do not include these passages, and even conservative evangelical scholars raise questions about their authenticity.\textsuperscript{25} These variants, while making up a very small percentage of the New Testament textual tradition, have very little effect on biblical doctrine. “Major New Testament scholars are of the opinion that no doctrine, no teaching of the New Testament, is jeopardized by these variants.”\textsuperscript{26}

The general historical reliability of the New Testament. Contrary to Ehrman’s claims, oral tradition provided a reliable source for the life of Jesus in a predominantly oral culture where memorization was a vital part of maintaining cultural identity.\textsuperscript{27} Ehrman alleges that the Gospels contain numerous contradictions about the life of Jesus, many of which have been addressed adequately by Christian apologists for centuries. Many of these so-called contradictions are not contradictions but rather differences in detail and selection of material on the part of the Gospel writers. Biblical writers truthfully communicated the events surrounding the life of Jesus in the historical conventions of their day. When interpreted correctly, it becomes evident that there are no genuine contradictions in the New Testament.\textsuperscript{28}

The authorship of the New Testament books. Conservative biblical scholars and Ehrman agree on an important point: pseudonymity, or the writing of books under a false identity, undermines the credibility of the witness. Ehrman’s insistence that the use of apostolic pseudonyms in the New Testament would be deceptive forgeries is a refreshingly frank position when contrasted with other liberal views that will deny the attested authorship of biblical books and somehow justify their continued authority.\textsuperscript{29} However, conservative scholars disagree that the New Testament includes such forgery.

Biblical scholar Terry Wilder gives several reasons why claims about forgery in the New Testament are wanting. First, the early church and the New Testament writers had a negative assessment of forgery.\textsuperscript{30} Second, biblical exhortations to “put off falsehood and speak truly” (Eph. 4:25) would make little sense in a forged document.\textsuperscript{31} Third, claims about differences in writing style, theology, and chronology between the Pauline epistles have relatively simple explanations. Finally, the external witness of the early church such as the very early acceptance of these books weighs heavily in favor of their reliability.\textsuperscript{32}

**Jesus:** Many of the issues surrounding historical Jesus research are beyond the scope of this brief response, but a few observations are worth noting. The Gospels and the New
Testament epistles repeatedly attest to their belief in the divinity of Jesus. Even the gospel of Mark—the Gospel Ehrman believes to be the most important historical source for the life of Jesus—paints a clear picture of Jesus as divine. Like God, Jesus has the authority to forgive sin (Mk. 2:5), lordship over the Sabbath (Mk. 2:28), power over demons (Mk. 5:8; 9:25), and control over nature (Mk. 4:39). One important evidence for Jesus’ divine self-understanding, given little attention by Ehrman, is Jesus’ description of himself as the “Son of Man.”

The phrase “son of man” has several uses in the Old Testament. It can mean a mere human being, as the phrase literally means “son of Adam” (Ps. 8:4). It was also a title given to prophets like Ezekiel (Ez. 2:1ff). But the most crucial link to Jesus’ self-understanding is its use in Dan. 7, wherein the prophet describes a vision of “One like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven” who “was given authority to rule, and glory, and a kingdom . . . an everlasting dominion” (Dan. 7:13, 14). This description of God as “one like a son of man” is what Jesus has in mind in his own self-description, as evidenced by his joint quotation of Dan. 7:13 and Ps. 110:1 before the Sanhedrin when asked whether he was the Messiah (Mk. 14:62). Those who accused Jesus of blasphemy (Mk. 14:62) were well aware of what he was implying when he quoted Dan. 7:13 in reference to himself; he was asserting he was the divine figure whose everlasting dominion would be known upon his glorious appearance. Despite what skeptics like Ehrman say, Jesus gives numerous indications that he believes in his own divinity, even in Mark.33

Notes
3 Ibid., 3.
7 Ehrman, God’s Problem, 3.
8 Ibid.
9 Ehrman, The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture; idem, Misquoting Jesus, 151-76.
11 Bart D. Ehrman, Forged: Writing in the Name of God—Why the Bible’s Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 79-114.
12 Ibid., 9-10, 43-78.
19 Ehrman, Misquoting Jesus, 10.
22 Ibid., 39-40.
23 Ibid., 40.
24 Ibid., 40-41.
25 Ibid., 42-43.
26 Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, 109-10.
27 Ibid., 21-32.
31 Ibid., 171-72.
32 Ibid., 172-77.
33 The following titles represent scholarly responses to Ehrman’s claims: Alcorn, Randy. If God is Good: Faith in the Midst of Suffering and Evil. Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2014. This book includes a detailed response to God’s Problem (ch. 11).
Komerszewski, J. Ed., M. James Sawyer, and Daniel B. Wallace. Reinventing Jesus: How Contemporary Skeptics Miss the Real Jesus and Mislead Popular Culture. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006. This address the NT text, the canon, and Jesus.