

## **Has Bart Ehrman Proven the New Testament to be False?**

By Aaron Wentz

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Bishop J.C. Ryle once wrote, “The men who wrote the Bible had no special advantages. They lived in a remote corner of the civilized earth. They had, most of them, little leisure, few books, and no learning- such as learning is reckoned in this world. Yet the Book they composed is one which is unrivalled! There is but one way of

accounting for this fact. They wrote under the direct inspiration of God.”<sup>1</sup> Though many people believe the Bible is unique and one of the most important books ever written, the idea that the words in the Bible are directly from God is losing ground. One such strong attack comes from Bart Ehrman, professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In his book *Misquoting Jesus*, Ehrman admits, “the Bible is, by all counts, the most significant book in the history of Western civilization.”<sup>2</sup> Though Ehrman admits the significance of the Bible, like many scholars today, Ehrman sees the uniqueness of the Bible as simply a work of great human effort alone. Interesting though, Ehrman did believe at one point that the Bible was from God and inspired. What changed his mind?

While a student at Princeton University and into his professional career, Ehrman was able to study many of the vast ancient Greek, Coptic and Syriac manuscripts of the New Testament. To his shock, he found that the manuscripts were full of scribal errors, some intentional and some non-intentional. Eventually, this led Ehrman to seeing the Bible as simply a human book. His final conclusion, and thesis of his book is: “Given the circumstance that he didn’t preserve the words, the conclusion seemed inescapable to me that he hadn’t gone to the trouble of inspiring them.” Though Ehrman is correct that in the tens of thousands of hand written copies of the New Testament there are many scribal errors, his evidence however does not discredit the life of Jesus, the Gospel, the overall integrity of the Scriptures, and the fingerprints of God upon the writings of the New Testament. Overall, *Misquoting Jesus* actually makes the Gospel shine forth as still historical and trustworthy, not fraudulent and made-up by the work of well-meaning men.

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<sup>1</sup> J.C. Ryle, *How Readest Thou?* (Charles Nolan: Moscow), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Bart Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), 208.

### **The Gospel of Jesus Christ Remaining True and Reliable**

In writing in response to the claims that the Bible is no longer credible because of manuscript evidence to paint a true picture of the historical Jesus, scholar, Christian author and pastor Dr. John Piper wrote “It helps to be sixty years old. I have watched the cards collapse over and over.”<sup>3</sup> In the introduction to his book, *What Jesus Demands from the World*, Piper explains briefly the waves of attack upon the New Testament through higher criticism starting in the seventeenth century with Benedict Spinoza and ending with Albert Schweitzer and Martin Kahler in the early to middle twentieth century. The second wave of critics came in 1953 and the early 1970’s with Rudolf Bultman and Ernst Kasemann. The third wave started in the 1980’s with new archaeological and manuscript evidence claiming scholars have new data on the gospels.<sup>4</sup> Despite the constant wave of attacks on the Bible, Piper says the challenges that have come against “the historical validity of the portrayal of Jesus in the Gospels are not compelling.”<sup>5</sup> Here is the first major reason why.

Though John Piper was probably not referring to Ehrman specifically, his illustration of the new evidence against the historic Jesus falling down like a deck of cards is correct in regards to *Misquoting Jesus*. Through the book, Ehrman educates the reader on the how the New Testament was copied, compiled and preserved. Along the way, Ehrman gives his knowledge on how many of the copies of the New Testament have been corrupted, and how many verses are up-for-grabs on the original meaning. Like a wake turning into a small wave, Ehrman does his scholarly best to convince his readers at the end of the book that the New Testament has been so distorted, it should no

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<sup>3</sup> John Piper, *What Jesus Demands from the world* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 31.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-32.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

longer be viewed as God's Word, but a fragmented piece of human writing. What is his tidal wave of new evidence to persuade followers of the Bible? Here is his climatic defense in the conclusion section of his book: "Was Jesus an angry man? Was he completely distraught in the face of death? Did he tell his disciples that they could drink poison without being harmed? Did he let an adulteress off the hook with nothing but a mild warning?...The questions go on and on..." Are these his greatest objections? Are the discrepancies in the Greek manuscripts over whether Jesus at one point was angry or compassionate enough to persuade a person that the New Testament is no longer trustworthy? Ehrman says the questions go on and on. If so, what are they? What evidence is there greater than the problems with Jesus being angry, or the woman being caught in adultery in John 8 etc?

What kind of major blow to the New Testament would a skeptic be looking for in Ehrman's book? Some very compelling damage to the New Testament and the historic Jesus would be something like this: First, there are so few New Testament manuscripts left in the world, that to believe Jesus lived, died on the cross, and body no longer remained in the tomb would be to believe in a myth, not on historical facts. Second, the New Testament manuscripts have been so changed by scribes over the years, that to piece together an accurate picture of what truly happened in the life, death, and missing body of Jesus is impossible. Third, the numerous, accurate, and historical data surrounding the events of Jesus in the first century so contradict the writings of the New Testament that the New Testament, though numerous in its manuscripts, is considered hyperbole and made-up by the followers of Jesus.

Does *Misquoting Jesus* present anything close to the above statements? Not at all. Instead, Ehrman goes on in the conclusion of his book to say that all English Bibles are “based on texts that have been changed in places” and then lists a few more such as Mark 1:41 (an angry Jesus ), Luke 22:43-44 (Jesus in agony thinking about his crucifixion) and Hebrews 2:9 (Jesus dying apart from God).<sup>6</sup> Do any these arguments about the Greek text change the historical Jesus in regards to his birth, miracles, perfect life, death, burial and the empty tomb three days later? Obviously, no. In fact, Ehrman admits that in many of the disputed Greek texts such at the ones above, many good scholars take issue on both sides.<sup>7</sup> As John Piper said, the evidence to portray a different Jesus, and a different story with a different gospel is not compelling.

Again, the most damaging blow to the New Testament and gospel of Jesus Christ would be to say that there is not enough evidence to piece together a clear life of Christ, or that Greek and Latin texts are so fragmented, changed, and distorted, that to ever believe Christ died on a cross by the Roman government, was buried, and then seen alive by His disciples would be a fairly tale. Instead, Ehrman never even comes close to saying anything of the sort. His absence is telling. Even very liberal and highly skeptical New Testament scholar like John Dominic Crossan has admitted: “That he was crucified is as sure as anything historical can ever be.”<sup>8</sup> Likewise, former chair of history at Oxford and Roman historian Thomas Arnold says “...I know of no one fact in the history of mankind which is proved by better and fuller evidence of every sort, to the

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<sup>6</sup> Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 209.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Gary R. Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope* (Lanham MD: Rowman and littlefield, 2003), 17.

understanding of a fair inquirer, than the great sign which God hath given us that Christ died and rose again from the dead.”<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, in a recent debate with William Lane Craig on the resurrection of Jesus, Ehrman takes a philosophical stance against the resurrection, not an argument based on the corruption of the Greek text. If Jesus has been so misquoted because of the corruptions of the Greek texts, now was Ehrman’s time to pull out his expertise and make his case. But instead, he mentioned alleged contradictions of the resurrection story in the gospels (such as how many angels were there at the tomb) and then his main point that because miracles don’t happen in everyday life, to say a miracle happened to account for the resurrection of Jesus is unlikely.<sup>10</sup> When *Misquoting Jesus* is read, the gospel of Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection for lost humanity is upheld and unmoved. What seems to be lacking from Ehrman is what Jesus asks of all people: do you believe? (John 3:16, 3:36, 6:64, 11:26, 20:27).

### **The Overall Integrity of the Scriptures**

One of the most shocking statements by Ehrman in his book is his reporting to the public that the New Testament contains 200,000 to 400,000 variants or changes in the thousands of manuscripts documented.<sup>11</sup> This is not new news, but to the common person who wants to know more about the Bible, this report by an expert is damaging to any persons trust in the New Testament. What do other experts say to this alarming claim?

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted in *The Best of Josh McDowell: A Ready Defense* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993), 216.

<sup>10</sup> [www.youtube.com/](http://www.youtube.com/)

<sup>11</sup> Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 89.

The place to start is the man who taught Ehrman, the late Dr. Bruce Metzger from Princeton. Surprisingly, Ehrman dedicated *Misquoting Jesus* to Metzger. This is so surprising due to the fact that Dr. Metzger came to a very different conclusion from Ehrman when studying the manuscripts and all the variants. When Metzger was interviewed by Lee Strobel on this subject in the book, *The Case for Christ*, the interview ended in this very positive note:

Strobel: "So," I started to say, "scholarship has not diluted your faith-"  
 He jumped in before I could finish my sentence. "On the contrary," he stressed, "it has built it. I've asked questions all my life. I've dug into the text, I've studied this thoroughly, and today I know with confidence that my trust in Jesus has been well placed."  
 He paused while his eyes surveyed my face. Then he added, for emphasis, "Very well placed."<sup>12</sup>

What information did Ehrman not share in his book that Metzger and others are so confident in?

First, the belief that there are 200,000 to 400,000 unique errors is misleading. Metzger says, "If a single word is misspelled in two thousand manuscripts, that's counted as two thousand variants."<sup>13</sup> Therefore, to possibly promote that the New Testament has 400,000 unique transmission errors is not honest. Second, the majority of all the counted variants are misspelled words. Dr. Bruce Wallace, director of the Center of New Testament manuscripts says seventy to eighty percent of all the variants are misspelled words. Meaning, if the high number was chosen of 400,000 variants, 280,000 to 320,000 would be inconsequential differences.<sup>14</sup> After Ehrman's shock value on page 89 of his book of the many variants, he actually agrees with Metzger and Wallace in his conclusion that "To be sure, of all the hundreds of thousands of textual changes found among manuscripts, most of them are completely insignificant, immaterial, of no real importance

<sup>12</sup> Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 71.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 64-65.

<sup>14</sup> Lee Strobel, *Finding the Real Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 38.

for anything other than showing that scribes could not spell or keep focused any better than the rest of us.”<sup>15</sup>

Third, many of the remaining variants are errors that are correctable. Metzger says many of the remaining variants are words out of place, or the right words in the wrong sequence. One example given by Metzger is in English if someone says dog bites man or man bites dog, the word order obviously changes the meaning. In Greek however one word stands as the object in the sentence despite where it is in the sentence.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, though there can be many scribal errors due to copying mistakes, correcting these mistakes and finding the original meaning is not impossible or difficult like it would be in English. Metzger even says these kind of scribal mistakes are actually inconsequential.<sup>17</sup>

Fourth, there are more manuscripts of the New Testament than any other work of antiquity. If any one argument knocks the ball out of the park for validity of the New Testament, it is this one. According to Ehrman and Wallace the current number of Greek manuscripts is 5,700. Wallace comments: “There are another 10,000 copies in Latin. Then there are versions in other languages- Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, and so on. These are estimated to number 10,000 and 15,000. So right there we’ve got 25,000 to 30,000 handwritten copies of the New Testament.”<sup>18</sup> What makes the number of manuscripts so important to the validity of the Bible? If historians only had one copy of the gospel of John, who would know if it was accurate? If historians had 2-3 copies of the gospel of John, and each of them had a slight variance of John 3:16, who would know

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<sup>15</sup> Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 207.

<sup>16</sup> Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 64.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>18</sup> Strobel, *Finding the Real Jesus*, 34-35.



what is the original meaning of John 3:16? But if historians have hundreds of copies of the gospel of John, any variances that would arise can all be checked and cross-checked to find the original meaning. Therefore, the New Testament stands alone as the superior document in antiquity in comparison to all others.<sup>19</sup> Consider the following chart:<sup>20</sup>

<b>Author</b>	<b>When Written</b>	<b>Earliest Copy</b>	<b>Time Span</b>	<b>Number of Copies</b>
The New Testament	A.D. 40-100	A.D. 125	25 years	24,000
Homer	900 B.C.	400 B.C.	500 years	643
Demosthenes	383-322 B.C.	A.D. 1100	1,300 years	200
Sophocles	496-406 B.C.	A.D. 1000	1,400 years	193
Aristotle	384-322 B.C.	A.D. 1100	1,400 years	49
Tacitus	A.D. 100	A.D. 1100	1,000 years	20 (-)
Caesar	100 – 44 B.C	A.D. 900	1,000 years	10

Because of the overwhelming manuscript evidence, the New Testament is not myth but well-attested history. Dr. Bruce Wallace says the large number of variants is due to the large amount of manuscripts circulating. Realistically he says, due to the high number of manuscripts the potential for variants could be in the tens of millions! So, to understand the New Testament in as many times as it has been copied to only have 200,00 to 400,000 variants, which the majority are spelling is actually quite a accomplishment considering what could be the case. What about the minority of textual variants that scholars have a hard-time discovering the original meaning?

<sup>19</sup> Kenneth Samples, *Without a Doubt: Answering the 20 Toughest Faith Questions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 93.

<sup>20</sup> McDowell, *A Ready Defense*, 45.

Fifth and last, only a small amount of variances in the manuscripts effect the original meaning of some verses, but in the verses that are affected by scribal changes, no major doctrine of the Christian faith is affected. Is Ehrman right that there are some verses in the New Testament that scholars have a hard time knowing the original meaning? The answer is yes. But again, according to Dr. Bruce Metzger, the small amount of verses in question tend to minor, and have no bearing any doctrine of Christianity.<sup>21</sup> Dr. Wallace says “only about one percent of variants affect the meaning of the text to some degree...but most of these are not very significant at all.”<sup>22</sup> One New Testament verse that both Ehrman and Wallace mention as an example is Romans 5:1. English Bibles today say because of being justified by faith, “we have peace with God” (Romans 5:1). Because of the differences in some of the Greek manuscripts by one letter, scholars are split over if it should be translated, “We have peace” or, “Let us have peace.” But is any Christian doctrine jeopardized because of this variant? The answer is no, along with some other verses that scholars say are up-for-grabs on their original meaning.<sup>23</sup> Even scholar Norman Geisler would say the variants would add up to one-half of one percent.<sup>24</sup> Whether it be one percent or one-half of one percent, manuscript authority expert Sir Fredric G. Kenyon, former principal librarian of the British Museum needs to be heard loud and clear when he writes, “No fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith rests on a disputed reading...”<sup>25</sup>

### **The Fingerprints of God**

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<sup>21</sup> Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 65.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Strobel, *Finding the Real Jesus*, 39.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in McDowell, *A Ready Defense*, 46.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

It is interesting that Bart Ehrman tried to convince his readers that the Bible was purely a human book, but yet nothing was mentioned about the prophecies fulfilled by Jesus. If just one prophecy was fulfilled by Jesus Christ, then the fingerprints of God are truly upon the human writers.

1. **Born of a virgin**, see Isaiah 7:14, Matthew 1:22,23.
2. **Born in Bethlehem**, see Micah 5:2, Matthew 2:1-6.
3. **Descendant of David**, see Genesis 12:2-3, 2 Samuel 7:14, Matthew 1:1, 22:42-45.
4. **A prophet who prepares Jesus' coming**, see Isaiah 40:3, Malachi 3:1, Matthew 3:1-3.
5. **Performing miracles**, see Isaiah 35:5-6, Matthew 9:35.
6. **Sinless**, see Isaiah 53:9, Matthew 26:57-60.
7. **Death by crucifixion**, see Isaiah 53, Psalm 22, Luke 23:33.
8. **Piercing of his side**, see Zech. 12:10, John 19:34.
9. **Casting of lots for his garments**, see Psalm 22:18, John 19:23-24.
10. **Resurrection**, see Psalm 16:10, John 20.

Jesus Christ lived in Israel, performed miracles, died by Roman execution on a cross, was buried in a borrowed tomb, and then was seen three days later by His disciples. The New Testament is the best attested work of antiquity, with more manuscripts to compare one to another for accuracy than any other ancient work. Plus, the New Testament alone has documents going back to the first and second century, making it the document closest to the original in comparison to all others. The New Testament can be trusted and no doctrine, especially the doctrine of salvation is comprised in any way. Has the gospel of Jesus Christ been comprised and not preserved as to reject the belief of the inspiration of the Scriptures and them being the Word of God? According to Bart Ehrman, the answer is yes, but according to clear evidence as stated above, God has preserved his message for all people to come to Christ and be saved.

## Works Cited

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6. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 209.
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24. Quoted in McDowell, *A Ready Defense*, 46.
25. *Ibid.*, 46.

Bart Denton Ehrman (/bɜːrt ɛːrm/; born October 5, 1955) is an American New Testament scholar focusing on textual criticism of the New Testament, the historical Jesus, and the origins and development of early Christianity. He has written and edited 30 books, including three college textbooks. He has also authored six New York Times bestsellers. He is currently the James A. Gray Distinguished Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Dr. Bart Ehrman, author of 'Misquoting Jesus,' claims that the New Testament has been altered by scribes and religious leaders. However, his claim does not hold up to scholarly examination. According to Bart Ehrman, not only was Jesus misquoted, but we have no real way of knowing anything He said, since the apostles and scribes basically wrote whatever they wanted. Accordingly, these people, and later Christian leaders, chose from among a plethora of writings to "create" Christianity. Does the evidence show that this is how Christianity originated or is Ehrman just reflecting his own personal biases? I have been talking about the challenges of doing that with the New Testament. In many, many ways we are much better situated with the New Testament than with any other ancient book (or set of books) from the ancient world. We have WAY more evidence – TONS more – for the NT than for anything else from antiquity. The reason is not hard to figure out. Throughout the Middle Ages, when most of our surviving manuscripts of every ancient book were produced, who was doing the copying? Still, we are also fortunate to have two other kinds of evidence for reconstructing the text of the New Testament: the versional evidence and the Patristic evidence. These are terrifically valuable for us. They are also inordinately difficult to access and analyze. The versional evidence involves Bart Ehrman has done a masterful job at developing what at times are the most arcane issues of early Christian textual studies in such an inviting and clear manner that he's able to not only keep students' interest, but also present the arguments in a clear, concise, and highly logical manner. Of special interest are the boxes, which have provided some of the best discussions for my students."--George Heyman, St. Bernard's School of Theology and Ministry. "The text makes a special effort to acquaint students with recent developments in New Testament scholarship and offers responsible appraisals of scholarly opinions. Well, Bart Ehrman is at it again. Not content with his all-or-nothing illogic concerning the transmission of the text (and so the concepts) of the New Testament, professor Ehrman is once again coming to a Barnes and Noble near you (and maybe a Fantasy Channel er, History Channel special or two). Here's an excerpt from the link: "Scholars have long resisted using the term 'forgery' to characterize Biblical writings made under false authorship, on the grounds that such concepts as forgery, plagiarism and intellectual property are modern legal constructs and don't apply to the ancients.