

## Misanalyzing Text Criticism--Bart Ehrman's 'Misquoting Jesus'

Ben Witherington III

from Dr. Witherington's Blog (<http://benwitherington.blogspot.com>)

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Bart Ehrman is both an interesting person and an engaging lecturer. He speaks well, he writes well, he obviously has a gift for what he does. I like Bart though I find his spiritual pilgrimage troubling, and as an alumnus of UNC I am sad to see him as the successor to Bernard Boyd at Carolina. Boyd had such a positive spiritual impact on many persons including myself while at Carolina. In fact I have been told some 5,000 persons went into some kind of ministry as a result of Boyd's decades of teaching the Bible at Carolina.

I am however glad Bart is honest about his pilgrimage. If only he could be equally honest and admit that in his scholarship he is trying now to deconstruct orthodox Christianity which he once embraced, rather than do 'value-neutral' text criticism. In my own view, he has attempted this deconstruction on the basis of very flimsy evidence-- textual variants which do not prove what he wants them to prove.

His most recent book, "Misquoting Jesus" has now made it to the NY Times bestseller list. It is apparently receiving a wide audience, although you can never tell whether those who buy the books actually read all the way through them. And with this book that might be just as well. The first four chapters provide a laypersons guide to textual criticism, and while one could quibble with this or that, basically Ehrman has provided us with a clear statement of the principles applied in that discipline. This is material I could happily assign to seminary students wanting to understand the basics of text criticism. I don't have a lot of qualms or quibbles about much of what he says there. However, like reading the Da Vinci Code, in the middle of this book it takes a left turn and what we have is a simplified version of what was present in Ehrman's earlier scholarly monograph-- "The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture" and along the way we have some personal testimony on why he has become an agnostic.

Dan Wallace, whom many of you will know if you know the NET Bible or [www.bible.org](http://www.bible.org). has now reviewed Ehrman's book which he has graciously agreed to allow me to reprint here. What follows after that are some of my own comments as well. Especial thanks to the folks at [Christusnexus.org](http://Christusnexus.org) for allowing me to reprint Dan's review here, particularly Ed Komoszewski.

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Review of

Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*  
(San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005)

by

Daniel B. Wallace,

Executive Director,

Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts ([csntm.org](http://csntm.org))

Bart Ehrman is one of North America's leading textual critics today. As a teacher and writer, he is logical, witty, provocative, and sometimes given to overstatement as well as arguments that are not sufficiently nuanced.

His most recent book, *Misquoting Jesus*, for the most part is simply New Testament textual criticism 101. There are seven chapters with an introduction and conclusion. Most of the book (chs. 1—4) is simply a lay introduction to the field. According to Ehrman, this is the first book written on NT textual criticism (a discipline that has been around for nearly 300 years) for a lay audience.

The book's very title is a bit too provocative and misleading though: Almost none of the variants that Ehrman discusses involve sayings by Jesus! The book simply doesn't deliver what the title promises.

But it sells well: since its publication on November 1, 2005, it has been near the top of Amazon's list of titles. And since Ehrman appeared on two of NPR's programs (the Diane Rehm Show and "Fresh Air" with Terry Gross)—both within the space of one week—it has been in the top fifty sellers at Amazon.

For this brief review, just a few comments are in order.

There is nothing earth-shaking in the first four chapters of the book. Rather, it is in the introduction that we see Ehrman's motive, and the last three chapters reveal his agenda. In these places he is especially provocative and given to overstatement and non sequitur.

In the introduction, Ehrman speaks of his evangelical background (Moody Bible Institute, Wheaton College), followed by his M.Div. and Ph.D. at Princeton Seminary. It was here that Ehrman began to reject some of his evangelical upbringing, especially as he wrestled with the details of the text of the New Testament.

The heart of the book is chapters 5, 6, and 7. Here Ehrman especially 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."

Some of the chief examples of theological differences among the variants that Ehrman discusses are (1) a passage in which Jesus is said to be angry (Mark 1:41), (2) a text in which "even the Son of God himself does not know when the end will come" (Matt 24:36), and (3) an explicit statement about the Trinity (1 John 5:7-8).

Concerning the first text, a few ancient manuscripts speak of Jesus as being angry in Mark 1:41 while most others speak of him as having compassion. But in Mark 3:5 Jesus is said to be angry—wording that is indisputably in the original text of Mark. So it is hardly a revolutionary conclusion to see Jesus as angry elsewhere in this Gospel.

Regarding Matt 24:36, although many witnesses record Jesus as speaking of his own prophetic ignorance ("But as for that day and hour no one knows it—neither the angels in

heaven, nor the Son—except the Father alone”), many others lack the words “nor the Son.” Whether “nor the Son” is authentic or not is disputed, but what is not disputed is the wording in the parallel 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.” Thus, there can be no doubt that Jesus spoke of his own prophetic ignorance in the Olivet Discourse.

Consequently, what doctrinal issues are really at stake here? One simply cannot maintain that the wording in Matt 24:36 changes one’s basic theological convictions about Jesus since the same sentiment is found in Mark.

In other words, the idea that the variants in the NT manuscripts alter the theology of the NT is overstated at best. Unfortunately, as careful a scholar as Ehrman is, his treatment of major theological changes in the text of the NT tends to fall under one of two criticisms: Either his textual decisions are wrong, or his interpretation is wrong.

These criticisms were made of his earlier work, *Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, which *Misquoting Jesus* has drawn from extensively. Yet, the conclusions that he put forth there are still stated here without recognition of some of the severe criticisms of his work the first go-around. For a book geared toward a lay audience, one would think that he would want to have his discussion nuanced a bit more, especially with all the theological weight that he 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 that they are simply not prepared to wrestle with. Time and time again in the book, highly charged statements are put forth that the untrained person simply cannot sift through. And that approach resembles more an alarmist mentality than what a mature, master teacher is able to offer. Regarding the evidence, suffice it to say that significant textual variants that alter core doctrines of the NT have not yet been produced.

Finally, regarding 1 John 5:7-8, virtually no modern translation of the Bible includes the “Trinitarian formula,” since scholars for centuries have recognized it as 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 and now knew that it is not authentic. The early church did not know of this text, yet the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451 affirmed explicitly the Trinity! How could they do this without the benefit of a text that didn’t get into the Greek NT for another millennium? Chalcedon’s statement was not written in a vacuum: the early church put into a theological formulation what they saw in the NT.

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 NT. 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 NT. The Trinitarian formula only summarized what they found; it did not inform their declarations.

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 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.

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I am in basic agreement with what Wallace says in his critique of Ehrman, which is why I have reprinted here. It is simply not the case that any significant theological truth is at issue with the textual variants that Ehrman wants to make much of.

As I remember Bruce Metzger saying once (who trained both Bart and myself in these matters) over 90% of the NT is rather well established in regard to its original text, and none of the remaining 10% provides us with data that could lead to any shocking revisions of the Christian credo or doctrine. It is at the very least disingenuous to suggest it does, if not deliberately provocative to say otherwise.

Take for example the arguments that Ehrman makes in Chapters 5ff. in this book. Does the absence of the Trinitarian formula in 1 John 5 somehow prove that the NT has no notion of three person in one God? Absolutely not. There are a whole variety of texts where such an idea is found (see e.g. Mt. 28). Furthermore, its not so much whether we have a 'formula' here and there, but whether the notion of the divinity of Christ and the divinity of the Spirit are affirmed in various places in the NT along with the divinity of the Father. And in fact they are--- repeatedly so. Even our chronologically earliest NT documents, Paul's letters are perfectly clear on this point.

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).

Furthermore, Ehrman does not reckon with the profound theology of divine condescension reflected in a hymn like Phil. 2.5-11 which suggests that the pre-existent Son of God deliberately put on hold the 'omnis' so he could be fully human while remaining divine. By this I mean that he accepted our normal limitations of time, space, knowledge and power to be fully human. Notice that as Hebrews says however he was not like us in regard to sin. Sin, is not an inherent quality that God originally programmed into humanity. Ehrman writes as though he has never seriously dealt with the concept of divine self-limitation and Incarnation-- an idea we find in the NT from its earliest Pauline sources to its latest Johannine ones.

Furthermore, it is simply false to say that Jesus is presented as non-divine in the

Synoptics in general, or even in their earliest source material (Q?, M?, L?), whereas in John, Jesus is presented as divine. The Fourth Gospel certainly more clearly and loudly presents the divine side of Jesus, but this is by no means lacking in the other Gospels, and there are no nefarious textual variants out there lurking that suggest there was ever a Gospel or a Gospel source that merely presented Jesus as man or a teacher or a messianic prophet.

Consider for example the fact that Jesus's two most frequently used phrases are Son of Man (in reference to himself) and Kingdom of God (which he is bringing in). Where in the OT do we find these two notions, indeed where do we find them together? In Dan. 7.13-14 where the Son of Man figure is promised to reign forever in a kingdom on earth. One has to ask-- what sort of person could personally reign forever in a kingdom? Who would God give this privilege to? The answer is to a forever person who was also a 'son of man'.

I have argued at length that Jesus exegeted himself and his mission out of Dan. 7.13-14 in my book 'The Christology of Jesus'. He also saw himself as God's Wisdom come in the flesh. This means that the historical Jesus saw himself as both human and indeed more than human--- as divine. The church then was not wrong in any sense to view him in this fashion. The tired old notion that the divinity of Jesus was something concocted late in the first century A.D. is historically false. Whether one likes it or not, Jesus is the one who suggested such a notion himself and the church simply amplified and clarified these ideas.

I want to turn around now and say something about one thing Ehrman is right to complain about. Ehrman is right that later pious scribes sometimes over-egged the pudding, to use a British phrase. Sometimes they did revise the text to better highlight Christian doctrine including the notion of the Trinity and other such truths. This is really quite irrelevant because when one stripes away the later accretions one still has a portray of Jesus that involves: 1) the virginal conception; 2) the atoning death of Jesus; 3) the bodily resurrection of Jesus; 4) the raw stuff of Trinitarian thinking, and we could go on. Ehrman's so-called evidence that these are later ideas imposed on the text by scribal corrupters is frankly false-- historically false, text critically false, theologically false.

Take another issue. Ehrman makes much of the fact that originally Mark's Gospel ends at Mk. 16.8, or at least its original ending is lost, and so we do not have an account of Jesus's resurrection appearances in this Gospel. In the first place, it is not at all likely that Mk. 16.8 is the original ending of this Gospel, as has recent been made abundantly clear by Clayton Croy's fine recent monograph on this subject. 'The Greek phrase 'for they were afraid...'' is not a proper ending to any such book. It is grammatically awkward and inappropriate as an ending. I have argued as well in my Mark commentary at length that the original ending is lost, and the later material in Mk. 16.9ff. does not represent the original text. On this last point, I think Ehrman would agree.

But let us take the harder tact for a moment. Suppose Mark's Gospel does end at Mk. 16.8. Does this mean we have no early evidence of Jesus rising from the dead? Absolutely not. We have evidence from over a decade earlier in 1 Cor. 15-- Paul provides

us with a long list of witnesses of the risen Lord, including himself. He is citing a tradition here and not making this up. This is what the early church believed whether they were disciples of Paul or Peter or John or James. Notice for example the Aramaic prayer at the end of 1 Cor. 16--- marana tha--'Come o' Lord'. Paul here cites a prayer that Aramaic speaking Jewish Christians he knew uttered. It is a prayer prayed to Jesus for him to return. All the earliest disciples of Jesus were monotheistic Jews, and yet here they are praying to Jesus for him to return. You don't pray to deceased rabbis to return.

I am glad we have a book like 'Misquoting Jesus' to tease our minds into active thought, though ironically very little of the book has anything to do with the actual sayings or teachings of Jesus himself. The title like the book is more of a tease, than really providing substantial evidence for 'the orthodox concoction of the Christian faith'. I would simply say to the reader-- caveat emptor. This author has a strong ax to grind, and the fact that he grinds it well in fluid prose makes it all the more beguiling. As my granny used to say-- Don't be so open minded that your brains fall out!

*posted by Ben Witherington at [12:54 PM](#)*