Bart Ehrman's Complaint and the Reliability of the Bible

The academician and former evangelical Dr. Bart Ehrman now claims we cannot trust the biblical documents. Don Closson responds with reasons why we can.

Introduction

While traditional Christian beliefs never seem to suffer from a shortage of critics, the diversity and intensity of the current group of antagonists is impressive. We have the so called "New Atheists," mostly consisting of individuals from the scientific community, modern day Gnostics both in academia and of *Da Vinci Code* fame, as well as Scientologists, Jehovah's Witnesses and other groups too many to mention. However, one critic stands out, primarily because of his academic pedigree and the impact that his books are having in the popular culture and among Christians.

Bart Ehrman is a product of evangelicalism's center. Educated at Moody Bible Institute and Wheaton College, he knows how conservative Christians think because he used to be one. His recent book *Misquoting Jesus* has been called "one of the unlikeliest bestsellers" of the year, and with it he has managed to bring to the public's attention the obscure world of New Testament textual criticism.

Having professed faith in Christ while in high school, Ehrman went off to college with a simple trust in the New Testament text, a trust that included verbal, plenary inspiration. In other words, he believed that God had inspired and preserved every word of the Bible. By the time Ehrman began doing graduate work at Princeton, he was having serious reservations about the text and its source. He now considers himself an agnostic and writes books that question most of what his

fellow classmates at Moody and Wheaton believe.

How did a bright, well-educated evangelical become so disillusioned? Even Dr. Ehrman's detractors acknowledge his credentials and intelligence. One book that attempts to refute his views says that he is "known for his indefatigable scholarship and provocative opinions."{1} The provocative opinions will be the focus of this article.

Just what is Ehrman's complaint regarding the New Testament text? His first point is that we do not have the original manuscripts of the New Testament, and the Greek copies that we do have were made too long after the originals. He also says that these Greek manuscripts contain more variants, or places where the manuscripts are different, than there are words in the entire New Testament itself. Finally, he complains that the Gospels were not written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John, and that, whoever the real authors of these texts were, they were not eyewitnesses to the life and ministry of Jesus. As Ehrman sees it, these facts create an insurmountable problem for Christians.

Our focus will be on Dr. Ehrman's assertion that the variants in the New Testament text have corrupted it to the point that it cannot trusted to communicate God's truth to us today.

Textual Variants and the Autographa

Ehrman begins his critique with the fact that we do not have the original documents, called autographs, of the New Testament Gospels, letters, and other documents. Nothing new here; this is acknowledged by virtually everyone. But he goes on to add that the copies we do have, even the earliest copies, aren't accurate representations of the originals, and, as a result, what the NT authors wrote has been lost. Ehrman and others note that the approximately 5,700 Greek NT manuscripts we possess differ from one another in as many as

400,000 places even though there are only around 138,000 words in the NT. Ehrman writes, “How does it help us to say that the Bible is the inerrant word of God if we don’t have the words that God inerrantly inspired, but only the words copied by the scribes—sometimes correctly but sometimes (many times!) incorrectly?”{2}

The important question is, Do the manuscripts available today accurately convey the truth that God wanted to communicate to those in the first century? I believe that they do, and so do many others.

Conservative Bible scholars argue that although there are many scribal errors and additions in the texts, even in the oldest texts, the vast majority of them do not change its meaning. In his book *Reinventing Jesus,* Daniel Wallace points out that the overwhelming majority of the differences or variants in the texts are insignificant, and he offers four categories of textual errors to help determine if a variant is both meaningful and viable.

The first category of variants, and by far the largest, is the least significant. They are mostly spelling differences, like the difference between the way we spell “color” and the way the British spell “colour.” This category also includes nonsense errors, scribal mistakes that result in words that either don’t exist, or the misspelling of a word that is similar to another. For example, in one early manuscript the Greek word *kai* was written instead of *kurios* (*kai* is the conjunction *and*; *kurios* means *Lord*). The first word makes no sense while the second is supported by many other manuscripts. None of the variants described here change the meaning of the NT text.

The use of articles provides another source of variants. Some NT manuscripts use the definite article with a proper name and sometimes they don’t. For instance, for Luke 2:16 some

manuscripts have “the Mary” but in others we find just “Mary.” Although Greek may use the definite article with proper names, English does not, so in either case they will be translated just “Mary.”

Another type of variant is called transposition, where two manuscripts have different word orders for the same passage but the meaning isn’t changed. Greek uses different endings on verbs and nouns rather than word order to convey meaning. In English, “Paul loves God” has a different meaning than “God loves Paul.” But in Greek, even if the word order is different, the meaning isn’t if the correct suffixes are used. Differences in word order can be used to change the emphasis of a passage but not the meaning. So two manuscripts might have different word orders but translate into English the same way.

Some variants involve synonyms. In this case, the translation might actually be changed by exchanging one word for another but the meaning of the passage is not. These alterations often occurred because the Scriptures were being read in public. Some long passages didn’t identify the subject; for example the Gospel of Mark goes on for eighty-nine verses using only pronouns for Jesus. Church books called lectionaries would occasionally change a “he” to “Jesus” or “the Lord” or “teacher,” making a public reading easier. Eventually these changes found their way back into the NT manuscripts. Again, the meaning of the New Testament was not changed.

Another category of manuscript differences are those that might actually change the meaning of a passage, but it’s fairly easy to show that the variant does not go back to the original wording of the text. For example, a late medieval manuscript has for 1 Thessalonians 2:9 “the gospel of Christ” instead of “the gospel of God” that is found in almost all other manuscripts. This is a meaningful difference, but it is not viable. As Daniel Wallace argues, “There is little chance that one late manuscript could contain the original wording

when the textual tradition is uniformly on the side of another reading."{3}

Textual Variants that Are Meaningful and Viable

The last group of variants or differences in the New Testament Greek texts are those that are both meaningful—in other words, they actually change the meaning of the text—and viable—in the sense that they cannot easily be explained away by looking at other manuscript evidence or external factors. This is by far the smallest group of variants or differences in the manuscripts, making up less than one percent of the total. Let's look at a couple of examples.

Some manuscripts have Romans 5:1 using a Greek letter called an *omicron* to create the word *echomen*; others use an *omega* resulting in the word *echōmen*. Thus the passage could be saying either "We have peace" or "Let us have peace" with God, depending on this single disputed letter. But how different are the two results? The bottom line is that neither usage contradicts the overall message of the New Testament.

Another example is found in 1 John 1:4. Again, a single contested letter means the difference between the passage saying "Thus we are writing these things so that *our* joy may be complete," or "Thus we are writing these things so that *your* joy may be complete." The meaning is certainly affected by the change, but neither translation violates Christian doctrine. In fact, as Wallace argues "Whether the author is speaking of his joy or the readers' joy, the obvious point of this verse is that the writing of this letter brings joy."{4}

The largest textual variant in the New Testament is found in the last chapter of Mark's Gospel. What many consider to be the best and earliest manuscripts end at verse eight. However, the vast majority of manuscripts add twelve more verses to the

text. While scholars continue to debate where the actual ending is to the book of Mark, the point is that no doctrinal teaching or truth is affected by the dispute.

Although Dr. Ehrman can point to places in the NT text where scribes either purposely changed the text or allowed errors to creep in, Christian doctrine is not in peril. In his book *Misquoting Truth,* Timothy Jones writes, "In every case in which two or more options remain possible, every possible option simply reinforces truths that are already clearly present in the writings of that particular author and in the New Testament as a whole; there is no point at which any of the possible options would require readers to rethink an essential belief about Jesus or to doubt the historical integrity of the New Testament."{5}

From One Fundamentalism to Another

What might be driving the current criticism of the New Testament?

There is an old saying that one should not "throw out the baby with the bathwater." I feel that this is exactly what Bart Ehrman has done in his book *Misquoting Jesus*. He first assumes that for the New Testament to be reliable it must be perfectly transmitted across the centuries; ninety-nine percent just won't do. He then highlights textual variants that have been known by New Testament scholars for decades and declares that whatever truth was in the Scriptures has been lost forever.

Ehrman seems to have gone from one form of fundamentalism to another. In his earlier state he held to an idealistic view of the New Testament that was unrealistic and unnecessary. Later, when his ideal view was shattered by his study of the Greek text, he went over to an opposite, equally unnecessary view that the text was of little or no value. As Wallace explains, "It seems that Bart's black and white mentality as a

fundamentalist has hardly been affected as he slogged through the years and trials of life and learning, even when he came out on the other side of the theological spectrum. He still sees things without sufficient nuancing, he overstates his case, and he is entrenched in the security that his own views are right."{6} He adds that "Bart Ehrman is one of the most brilliant and creative textual critics I've ever known, and yet his biases are so strong that, at times, he cannot even acknowledge them."{7}

It seems that Dr. Ehrman and others have fallen for what has been called the "Myth of Absolute Certainty."{8} This myth argues that as time goes by we are getting further and further from the words recorded in the original New Testament documents. Some use this myth to argue for the supremacy of the King James Version of the Bible. Others, like Ehrman, use it to argue for a position of complete despair, claiming that we can no longer pretend to have anything like an inerrant text.

It's important to realize that we not only have virtually all the documents that were used for the translation of the King James Bible, but we now have one hundred times the number of Greek manuscripts that were available when the King James Bible was written, and over four hundred of these manuscripts predate the earliest ones available to its King James authors.{9}

If, in its most basic sense, inerrancy means to tell the truth, we have a New Testament text that is more than capable of accurately conveying the truth that God intended for the church in the first century and today.

Notes

1. J. Ed Komoszewski, M. James Sawyer, and Daniel B. Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus*, (Kregel Publications, 2006), 110.
2. Bart Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, (HarperCollins, 2005), 7.

3. Ibid., 59.
4. Ibid., 62.
5. Timothy Paul Jones, *Misquoting Truth* (IVP, 2007), 55.
6. Daniel Wallace, “The Gospel according to Bart,” found at bible.org/article/gospel-according-bart on September 24, 2019.
7. Ibid.
8. *Reinventing Jesus*, 66.
9. Ibid., 67.

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