

# Why the Stories of the Virgin Birth Fit Together

*Tom Davis answers the charge that the two nativity accounts in the gospels contradict each other, showing how well they complement each other by contributing details from two different perspectives.*

It is December again, the time of year that western culture celebrates Christmas. Historically Christians claimed that Jesus was born on December 25 as early as the late second century.<sup>[1]</sup> The primary biblical and historical sources for Jesus' birth are found in Matthew chapters 1 and 2, and Luke chapters 1 and 2. These chapters tell us the history of God becoming one of us through the virgin conception and birth of Jesus. The birth of Jesus is important because it is the beginning of God fulfilling his promise to send a savior to Israel. Many opponents of Christianity reject these stories as myths or fanciful stories. Their view is that these stories are made up to fulfill prophecy. They claim that these accounts are two completely different stories that are incompatible with each other.

## Some Alleged Problems

One skeptic in particular, New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman, claims that "The problem is that some of the differences between Matthew and Luke are very difficult to reconcile with one another."<sup>[2]</sup> When reading objections like this it sounds as if the early Christians were not aware that the four Gospels were not identical in the way that they told the story of the life of Jesus.

However, the early Christians were aware that each Gospel tells us about the life of Jesus from a particular point of view. When these stories are examined, they complement each

other and give a more complete account of the birth of Jesus. The end process of examining these issues and giving a complete account is called a harmony. The first harmony, the Diatessaron, was written by a Christian named Titian around A.D. 170. {3}

Ehrman raises an issue that he thinks is irreconcilable: "Where was Joseph and Mary's home town?" {4} Ehrman points out that Luke says Joseph and Mary live in Nazareth and have to travel to Bethlehem because of a census, while Matthew does not mention them living in Nazareth before the birth of Jesus. But is this really a contradiction? No! Luke tells us about the things that happened in Nazareth while Matthew chooses not to address those things.

Ehrman points out that there are wise men in Matthew, but there are shepherds in Luke. {5} But Luke tells us that the shepherds visited Jesus on the night of his birth, while Matthew says that the wise men came some time, probably more than a year, after Jesus was presented at the Temple.

Ehrman also points out that Matthew tells us Herod wants to kill Jesus, while Luke tells us Caesar wants a census taken. {6} But these are not contradictory claims. There is no reason to say that if one happened the other could not.

We have seen in a brief overview how the claim that the stories of Jesus' birth in Matthew and Luke are not compatible with one another can be resolved. But how do the stories fit together? I will summarize the narratives in Matthew and Luke, then combine the narratives to show that when they are combined they fit together to make one fuller narrative.

## **Matthew's Narrative (Matthew 1:18-2:23)**

As I summarize the birth narrative in Matthew, who is visited by angels? Who is making the decisions? From whose perspective is the story being told? These questions help tell us who is

the possible source of the story.

Matthew begins his narrative with Joseph. Joseph and Mary were engaged to be married. In ancient Israel, engagements lasted a year. Mary is pregnant before they are married. Joseph does not want to marry Mary, but also does not want to disgrace her family. He decides to make the divorce private.

While Joseph was thinking these things over, an angel from God tells him that Mary's pregnancy is an act of God. Joseph will have a son, and the son's name will be Jesus. Jesus will save his people from their sins.

When Joseph wakes up he changes his mind and marries Mary. Joseph and Mary do not have sexual relations and she is a virgin when her son is born. They named their son Jesus as the angel instructed Joseph. Matthew tells us that Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

Later, some Magi, probably from Persia, show up looking for the one who was born King of the Jews. These Magi claim to have seen this king's star, so they came to worship him.

King Herod does not like the news that the Magi bring. He is the king and there is no room for another king. So Herod goes to the chief priests and the scribes to find out where the Christ is supposed to be born. They search the scripture and tell Herod that the Christ will be born in Bethlehem. Herod tells the Magi that the new king was born in Bethlehem. Herod asks the Magi to stop by on their way back to Persia and tell him where the new king will be found so he can go and worship him too. However, Herod wants to kill this new king, because he is the king and there will not be another king.

As the Magi are approaching Bethlehem they see the star again. The star leads them to the house where Mary, Joseph, and Jesus are staying. The Magi worship Jesus and give him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The Magi are warned in a dream not to go back to see Herod, so they go back to Persia without

stopping in Jerusalem.

An Angel appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him that Herod wants to kill Jesus, and that he needs to go to Egypt to escape Herod. Joseph wakes up and takes Mary and Jesus to Egypt.

Herod realizes that the Magi went back to Persia without telling him where the new king was born. Herod is furious! He sends soldiers into Bethlehem with orders to kill every boy under the age of two.

Joseph, Mary, and Jesus live in Egypt until Herod dies. Then, an angel appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him to return to Israel. Joseph wants to return to Judea, but he is afraid the new ruler, Archelaus, will kill Jesus so he moves to Nazareth.

Notice that in Matthew the narrative focuses on Joseph's role in the events surrounding Jesus' birth. Matthew 1 gives Jesus' genealogy through Joseph's lineage. The narrative begins with Joseph having to decide whether he should divorce Mary, or continue with their engagement and marriage. Joseph is visited by an angel in his dreams three times. This focus on Joseph suggests that this narrative is told from Joseph's point of view. Next I will summarize Luke's narrative.

## **Luke's Narrative (Luke 1:5-2:52)**

As we did with Matthew, ask, who is the main character in the story? Who does the story focus on?

Zechariah, a priest faithful to God, had no children because his wife, Elizabeth, could not have children. Zechariah was selected to enter the sanctuary of the Temple to burn incense when the angel Gabriel appeared to him. Gabriel tells Zechariah that Elizabeth will become pregnant and they will have a son who is to be named John. Zachariah is skeptical, so Gabriel makes him unable to speak. As Gabriel said, Elizabeth

becomes pregnant.

Six months later Gabriel is sent to Nazareth to visit a virgin, Mary. Mary is engaged to Joseph. Gabriel tells Mary that she has found favor with God and she will conceive and have a boy who is to be named Jesus. Mary does not understand how this can be. Gabriel explains that it is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Mary goes to visit Elizabeth, who happens to be Mary's cousin. When Mary arrives John, who is not yet born, recognizes that Mary's child, Jesus, is the coming Messiah. Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and recognizes that Mary's child will be blessed.

Elizabeth gives birth to John. After John was circumcised her neighbors and relatives wanted to name the child after Zechariah. Elizabeth tells them the child is to be named John. This causes an argument among the people because he has no ancestor named John. Zechariah regains his speech and ends the discussion by proclaiming that his son's name is John. This amazes the people and news of this spread throughout Judea.

Mary is back in Nazareth when Caesar calls for a census. Joseph, her husband, is from the lineage of David, who is from Bethlehem. This means that Joseph and Mary have to travel to Bethlehem for the census. While they are there, Mary gives birth to Jesus. Mary wraps Jesus in blankets and lays him in a manger because there is no room in the guest room.

There were shepherds in the area who were watching over their flocks of sheep. Suddenly an angel from God appeared to them. This frightened the shepherds. The Angel told them not to be afraid. He brought them good news, the Messiah was born in Bethlehem. Then a group of angels appeared proclaiming, "Glory to God in the highest heaven and peace on earth to people he favored."

When the angels leave, the shepherds decide to go to Bethlehem

to see the child. When they arrive, they find Mary, Joseph, and the baby in a manger just like the angels told them they would. The shepherds tell Joseph and Mary about the visit of the angels and what they said about the child. The shepherds leave praising God. Mary continues to think about these things.

After eight days Joseph and Mary take Jesus to the Temple to be circumcised. While at the Temple Joseph and Mary are approached by Simeon, who has been told by the Holy Spirit that he would see the Messiah before he died. Simeon shares this with Mary and Joseph, telling them that Jesus would be a light to the Gentiles and would bring glory to Israel. Then Anna, a prophetess, comes to see Jesus in the Temple. Anna thanks God and tells the people about Jesus.

After all the requirements of the law were fulfilled, Mary and Joseph return to Nazareth.

Notice that in Luke, the angels appear to Mary. Luke includes Mary's journey to visit Elizabeth, and that John and Jesus are relatives on Mary's side of the family. The genealogy in Luke 3 goes through Heli, who is Mary's father. Luke's account of the birth of Jesus seems to come from Mary's perspective.

## **Combining the Stories**

Finally I will place the two stories together to make one story. Do the transitions from Luke to Matthew, or from Matthew to Luke, flow smoothly? Are there any contradictions or irreconcilable differences?

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be counted in the census. While they are there, Mary gives birth to Jesus. Mary wraps Jesus in blankets and lays him in a manger because there is no room in the guest room.

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When we combine both narratives we can see that we have two narratives that are told from two different perspectives. These differing perspectives lead to an emphasis on different details. When the accounts are harmonized we can see that these details are not contradictory, they are complementary. The narratives fit nicely together, like the pieces of a puzzle, to make a more complete larger picture of the events surrounding the birth of Jesus.

# Conclusion

God became one of us. God did what he promised he would do in the Old Testament. The conception and birth of Jesus is the beginning of the defeat of death and sin. Jesus' birth is directly tied to His death and resurrection. The power of sin, death, and Satan is broken. This is the reason that Christians celebrate this event every year. As the angels said, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to people he favors." (Luke 2:14 SCB)

## Notes

1. "The traditional date for the birth of Christ from as early as Hippolytus (ca. A.D. 165-235) has been December 25th." Hoehner, Harold W. *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 25.
2. Ehrman, Bart. *Jesus: The Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*. (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 1999), 36.
3. Thomas, Robert, L. *A Harmony of the Gospels with Explanations and Essays*. (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1978), 269.
4. Ehrman, 37.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.

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# Who Wrote the New Testament?

*David Graieg explores Bart Ehrman's contention that we can't trust the Bible's supposed authors. Yes we can.*

# Bart Ehrman

What if eighteen of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament were not written by the people who have traditionally been credited with their authorship?[{1}](#) Just such a claim is made by Bart Ehrman's book *Forged: Writing in the Name of God* in which he argues that the Bible's authors are not who we think they are.



Dr. Ehrman is a professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. His work has been featured in *Time*, and he has appeared on NBC's *Dateline*, *The History Channel*, *National Geographic*, and other top media outlets.[{2}](#) Ehrman has authored over twenty books, including three *New York Times* bestsellers: *Jesus Interrupted*, *God's Problem*, and *Misquoting Jesus*, which argues that the New Testament manuscripts are unreliable and, hence, the text of the Bible is inaccurate. Ehrman's works are having a huge impact on the way that people perceive Christianity both here in the U.S. and abroad. Believers need to be ready to give an answer to Dr. Ehrman's claims.

Ehrman grew up in a liberal Episcopal church, but says that in high school a Youth for Christ leader took advantage of the loneliness that every teen experiences and led Ehrman to be born again.[{3}](#) Ehrman attended Moody Bible Institute and Wheaton College where his studies in New Testament textual criticism began to fuel doubt concerning the importance of variants in the manuscripts. Ehrman went on to pursue doctoral work at Princeton University, and, partly due to an issue concerning who the high priest was in the second chapter of Mark, Ehrman went down the path of agnosticism.

Ehrman's new book, *Forged*, contains eight chapters that include considerable overlap, and much of the space is devoted to forgeries outside the Bible. This makes the book's subtitle, "*Why the Bible's Authors Are Not Who We Think They*

Are," a little misleading. Also, there's not much new here. These concerns are covered in most recent textbooks on the New Testament.<sup>[4]</sup> Ehrman sees himself as making the public aware of what scholars have known for years.

As for the claim of *Forged*, Ehrman argues that Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, James, Jude, and 1–2 Peter are not written by those whose names are traditionally attached to them. It follows that if these books are written by liars and are deceptive in nature, and God Himself does not lie, the Church must have been mistaken in thinking these books were inspired by God. It would also follow that these books should be removed from the canon of the Bible. However, as we shall see, there's good reason to think that these books are not forgeries.

## Determining Authorship

To begin, we will look into the important question of how scholars determine the author of a book written thousands of years ago.

There are two main lines of evidence that scholars use to determine the likely author of a book. The first is internal evidence, the most obvious being a claim to authorship in the document itself. There might also be hints in the document about when and where it was written, which may or may not match what we know of the life of the author, or might just seem out of place. For instance, if someone wrote that he visited Dallas, Texas in July and adds that it froze overnight, this scenario is not impossible but is very unlikely. Thus, we would have good reason to question other claims in the text.

If we have two letters that are supposed to have been written by the same author, we can compare their styles for confirmation. Do the documents share a similar vocabulary? Do

they use the same figures of speech and cultural expressions? Do they both use specific words or ideas in the same way or are they fairly distinct? If one of the documents uses a large number of unique words that are not used in the other, it may put in question mutual authorship.

Another important variable is the intended audience of a document since that can have a significant impact on its style and vocabulary. For instance, a medical doctor might write a work-related letter to a fellow oncologist and on the same day send a personal email to her husband. Ten years later, that same doctor writes a letter to her friend about a personal hobby. In all three cases, it's the same person writing, but there would be three distinct styles and vocabularies in each letter. Determining authorship can be a very complicated matter when considering both objective and subjective elements.

There's also external evidence to consider, information gathered from outside the letter itself. Eyewitness accounts can affirm a document's authorship. For instance, Grandma might have a letter that says, "Happy Valentine's Day, from your secret admirer." Grandma insists that she received this letter from Grandpa fifty years ago when they were still dating. Although there is nothing in the letter that identifies Grandpa as its author, we have the external testimony of a reliable witness. Such evidence is not certain, as Grandma might be a bit of a romantic who after all these years forgot who it was really from, but it is more probable than not that she is correct.

## **What Is at Stake?**

What if Ehrman's main contention is right, that seven of Paul's books, as well as James, Jude, and 1-2 Peter, are not written by who we traditionally have attributed them to? Not that I think Ehrman is right, but let us grant that he is. Is Christianity now false? Not at all. Ehrman concedes that

Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon were written by Paul and that Revelation was written by someone named John. Even with these few books, the heart of the Christian faith is maintained. Ehrman even includes the earliest account of the death and resurrection of Jesus in 1 Corinthians chapter 15. So while I do not think Ehrman is right in even one accusation of New Testament forgery, it is worth keeping all of this in proper perspective: Christ still saves and we still need to trust him.

So what evidence does Dr. Ehrman use to establish his claim of forgery? Let's consider his strongest case, that of 1 and 2 Peter. Ehrman's main argument is that Peter could not have written either of these books because he was a simple fisherman from Galilee and would surely have been illiterate.<sup>[5]</sup> He points to Acts 4:13 which says that when Peter and John were brought before the Jewish high priest, it was realized that they "were unschooled, ordinary men." From this Ehrman assumes that they were illiterate.

There is one major problem with this line of argument. Ehrman considers the book of Acts to be a forgery. So by Ehrman's own standard, Acts is unlikely to be reliable. That aside, it's more likely that Acts 4:13 is not indicating that Peter and John are illiterate, but that the Jewish leaders were comparing their training in the best schools of the day to the two men who lacked a rabbinic education.

Luke describes Peter's family's fishing business as having several boats along with the necessary nets and men to operate them. The business was located in Capernaum, only a few miles from the large Greek cities of Tiberias and Sepphoris. As a successful merchant, Peter likely had some knowledge of the Greek language as well as basic literacy. Even if we allow the shaky assumption that Peter might have been illiterate, it doesn't necessarily follow that 1 and 2 Peter are forgeries. It's likely that Peter may have used a secretary to write down

his words, a common practice in the first century.

Dr. Ehrman has failed to make his case that 1 and 2 Peter are forgeries. We still have good reason to trust these books as they guide us in defense of the faith and encourage us to endure sufferings for righteousness sake.

## Paul's Letters

Ehrman argues that Paul could not be the author of Ephesians because the letter contains some unusually long sentences, and the book "has an inordinate number of words that don't otherwise occur in Paul's writings."[\[6\]](#) Ehrman notes that Ephesians has fifty percent more unique words than found in Philippians which he says is about the same length.

It's true that Ephesians does have long sentences, but this is a bit subjective. There are long sentences in Romans, 1 Corinthians, Colossians and Titus, which Ehrman accepts as Pauline. His comparison with Philippians is also a bit unfair. Ephesians is thirty-three percent longer than Philippians and should be expected to have a greater number of unique words. In fact, Galatians has even more unique words than Ephesians but again is accepted as Pauline by Ehrman. Further, Ephesians is a circular letter that was meant for a broader audience. It's reasonable to expect that it would address different topics from Paul's other letters and have more unique words.

Another point made by Dr. Ehrman is that Ephesians uses the words "saved" and "raised" mostly in the present tense while other Pauline letters refer to them as future events.[\[7\]](#) But is this really the case? In Romans, Paul talks of the believer as already saved being dead to sin and alive to Christ, and in Galatians Paul declares that "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." Ehrman's case against Ephesians is less than conclusive.

According to Ehrman, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus should be removed because the letters contain unique expressions not found in Paul's other works. Phrases such as "promise of life" and "with a pure conscience" are unique to these books.[\[8\]](#) Ehrman also argues that these pastoral letters replace an emphasis on the imminent return of Christ with information on the organizational structure of the church.

Paul does use unique vocabulary in his books to Timothy and Titus, but these letters are to individual friends and most of Paul's other letters are to community groups. Stylistic variation would be expected because of the different audiences. Other scholars point out that Ehrman exaggerates his case regarding the information about church structure. He seems to ignore the fact that there is information on church leadership and organization in Romans, Galatians, and especially in 1 Corinthians, letters accepted as Pauline by Ehrman.

In summary, it can be said that Dr. Ehrman often overstates his case and is somewhat selective in his examples.

## **Presuppositions**

To wrap up this article, I will look at some general problems in the way that Dr. Ehrman builds his case that many of the NT books are forgeries.

As with everyone, Dr. Ehrman interprets the world through a set of presuppositions. For instance, he has come to the conclusion that Jesus was merely an apocalyptic prophet.[\[9\]](#) Ehrman's Jesus proclaims that God is going to reveal himself in history and overthrow evil as represented by the Roman Empire. Ehrman discounts the role that the resurrection played in both confirming Jesus' claims to divinity and establishing Christianity itself. The result of constructing Jesus in this untraditional manner causes him to view passages that speak of the resurrection as inauthentic and probably later



fabrications.

Another weakness in *Forged* is that Ehrman doesn't seriously consider the role that secretaries (or an *amanuensis*) could have played in the writing of the New Testament.<sup>{10}</sup> Ehrman himself admits that "Virtually all of the problems with what I've been calling forgeries can be solved if secretaries were heavily involved in the composition of the early Christian writings."<sup>{11}</sup> Other scholars have argued that secretaries did play a significant role in the formation of the NT.<sup>{12}</sup> Ehrman assumes either no secretaries were involved, or if they were, they had no impact on the wording of the texts. Such a conclusion is at odds with modern scholarship on the subject. Dr. Ehrman either needs to interact more with this scholarship, or at worst he should take an agnostic position on the authorship of the NT books.

This is important because we know that secretaries were involved in helping Paul write his letters. Tertius inserts a greeting in Romans 16:22 as the one who "wrote down this letter." In 1 Corinthians, Galatians, and Philemon, Paul makes a point of telling his readers that he had written the letters with his own hand, acknowledging that other letters were written down for him. It is also recognized that others may have contributed to Paul's writings or at least had an impact on the style of some sections of his letters. For instance, Sosthenes, Silas, and Timothy are recognized contributors in the introductions of Paul's letters to the churches at Corinth, Philippi, Colossae, and Thessalonica.

Dr. Ehrman raises important questions regarding the text of the New Testament, but his accusations of forgery seem somewhat subjective. He has not given us good enough reason to abandon the authenticity of the New Testament writings nor their message of eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ.

**Notes**

1. This article is a slightly adapted version of the program that aired on the Probe radio program.
2. Bart D. Ehrman. [www.bartdehrman.com](http://www.bartdehrman.com) (accessed November 6, 2011).
3. Gary M. Burge, "The Lapsed Evangelical Critic," *Christianity Today*, June 1, 2006, vol. 50, no. 6. (accessed November 6, 2011).
4. D. A. Carson and Douglas Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2005); Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*. 4th ed. (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1990).
5. Bart D. Ehrman, *Forged: Writing in the Name of God—Why the Bible's Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers. 2011), 70-77.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 97.
9. Ehrman lays out his view on this in: Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophets of the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). For an evaluation of the different views on Jesus see: James K. Beilby, and Paul R. Eddy, *The Historical Jesus: Five Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009).
10. Ehrman, *Forged*, 133-139.
11. Ibid., 134.
12. E. Randolph Richards, *The Secretary in the Letters of Paul* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991).

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# 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 be 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](http://bible.org/article/gospel-according-bart) on September 24, 2019.
  7. Ibid.
  8. *Reinventing Jesus*, 66.
  9. Ibid., 67.

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## A Brief Overview of the Gospel of Judas

*Dr. Patrick Zukeran explains why the Gospel of Judas poses no threat to the Bible or to Christianity; it only provides insight into early Gnosticism.*

Newspaper headlines all over the world reported that the lost *Gospel of Judas* has been recovered and translated. Reporters state that this gospel sheds new light on the life of Christ and His relationship with Judas who may not be the traitor portrayed in the New Testament Gospels. In fact he may be the hero! He is cast as the most senior and trusted of Jesus' disciples who betrayed Jesus at the Lord's request! This gospel further states that Jesus revealed secret knowledge to Judas instructing him to turn Jesus over to the Roman authorities. So rather than acting out of greed or Satanic influence, Judas was faithfully following the orders given to him by Christ. Does the *Gospel of Judas* reveal a new twist to the passion story of Christ? Are there new historic insights

that should have Christians concerned?

The *Gospel of Judas* was discovered in 1978 by a farmer in a cave near El Minya in central Egypt. Scholars date this Coptic text to have been written between A.D. 300 and 400.<sup>{1}</sup> Most scholars believe the original text was written in Greek and that the original manuscript was written in middle second century.<sup>{2}</sup>

The authorship of this gospel is unknown but it is unlikely that Judas or a disciple of Christ wrote it. It represents Gnostic thought that began to flourish around that time. The earliest mention of it is from Irenaeus writing in 180 A.D. who condemned this work as heretical.

The *Gospel of Judas* is similar to the Gnostic literature found in other areas along the Nile, including the Nag Hammadi library that contained nearly forty-five Gnostic texts, the *Gospel of Mary*, the *Gospel of Peter* and other texts.

## What is Gnosticism?

Gnosticism flourished from the second to the fourth century A.D. What is Gnosticism? Gnosticism derives its title from the Greek word *gnosis* which means knowledge and refers to the mystical or secret knowledge of God and the oneness of self with God. Here is a basic summary of Gnostic philosophy.<sup>{3}</sup>

First, Gnosticism taught the secret knowledge of dualism that the material world was evil and the spiritual realm was pure. Second, God is not distinct from man but mankind is, in essence, divine. God is the spirit and light within the individual. When one understood self, one understood all. Third, the fundamental problem in Gnosticism was not sin but ignorance. The way to attain oneness with the divine was by attaining mystical knowledge. Fourth, salvation was reached by gaining secret knowledge, or *gnosis* of the real nature of the world and of the self. Fifth, the goal in Gnosticism was unity

with God. This came through escaping the prison of the impure body in order for the soul of the individual to travel through space avoiding hostile demons, and uniting with God.

In reference to Jesus, Gnosticism taught that Jesus was not distinct from His disciples. Those who attained Gnostic insight became a Christ like Jesus. Princeton University professor of religion Dr. Elaine Pagels writes, "Whoever achieves *gnosis* becomes no longer a Christian but a Christ."[\[4\]](#) So Jesus was not the unique Son of God and a savior who would die for the sins of the world, but a teacher who revealed secret knowledge to worthy followers.

Gnostic philosophy is contrary to Old and New Testament teachings. The Bible is in opposition to Gnostic teaching on fundamental doctrines such as the nature of God, Christ, the material world, sin, salvation, and eternity. Jews and Christians rejected Gnostic teaching as heretical, and the Gnostics rejected Christianity. Gnostic philosophy is what is taught throughout the *Gospel of Judas*. Like other Gnostic literature, there is very little similarity between the *Gospel of Judas* and the New Testament writings. This gospel contradicts the New Testament in major ways.

## Contents of the Gospel of Judas

Gnostic philosophy is contrary to biblical Christianity, and the *Gospel of Judas* reflects Gnostic thought rather than biblical theology. An example of Gnostic philosophy is reflected in the mission of Jesus as portrayed in this gospel.

Dr. Marvin Meyer, professor of Bible at Chapman College, summarizes the goal of Jesus' mission according this gospel.

"For Jesus in the *Gospel of Judas*, death is no tragedy, nor is it a necessary evil to bring about forgiveness of sins.... Death, as the exit from this absurd physical existence, is not to be feared or dreaded. Far from being an occasion of

sadness, death is the means by which Jesus is liberated from the flesh in order that he might return to his heavenly home, and by betraying Jesus, Judas helps his friend discard his body and free his inner self, the divine self.”{5}

In the New Testament, Jesus’ mission is clearly stated. He came to die an atoning death for the sins of the world and conquer the grave with His bodily resurrection. This contradicts the Gospel of Judas that teaches Christ sought death to free himself from the imprisonment of his body.

Another Gnostic fundamental teaching is that the problem of man is not sin but ignorance. Jesus is not a savior but a teacher who reveals this secret knowledge only to those worthy of this insight. Judas is considered worthy of this knowledge. Dr. Meyer writes,

“For Gnostics, the fundamental problem in human life is not sin but ignorance, and the best way to address this problem is not through faith but through knowledge. In the *Gospel of Judas*, Jesus imparts to Judas – and to the readers of the gospel – the knowledge that can eradicate ignorance and lead to an awareness of oneself and God.”{6}

Another Gnostic teaching is that since the physical world is evil, God did not create the physical world. Instead, He creates aeons and angels who in turn create, bring order to, and rule over the physical world. Since matter is impure, God does not enter directly into physical creation. In the *Gospel of Judas*, Jesus asks His disciples, “How do you know me?” They are unable to answer correctly. However, Judas answers saying, “I know who you are and where you have come from. You are from the immortal realm of Barbelo.”

Barbelo in Gnosticism is the first emanation of God, often described as a mother-father figure. Since God does not enter into the material world because it is impure, Barbelo is an intermediary realm from which the material world can be

created without contaminating God.[{7}](#)

Barbelo is clearly a Gnostic term and foreign to Christianity. Jesus stated in John 3:13 that He is from heaven. The Greek word is *houranos*. Other times, the New Testament writers see Jesus as sitting at the right hand of the Father. Jesus is from heaven with His Father with whom He dwells eternally.

## **Reasons the Gospel of Judas is Not Part of the New Testament**

There are several reasons we should not consider the *Gospel of Judas* inspired scripture. First, it is written too late to have any apostolic connection. The Apostles of Christ were given the authority to write inspired scripture. One of the requirements for inclusion in the New Testament canon was that the book had to be written by an apostle or a close associate. Since an apostolic connection was necessary, it would have to have been written within the first century. There is compelling evidence that the four New Testament Gospels are written in the first century A.D. (See my article [“Historical Reliability of the Gospels.”](#)) The *Gospel of Judas* is written in mid-second century A.D. so it is too late to be apostolic.

Second, inspired literature must be consistent with previous revelation. God is not a God of error but of truth, and His word would not present contradictory truth claims. The Gnostic philosophy in Judas is inconsistent with Old and New Testament teachings.

The Old Testament teaches that God created the physical universe and Adam and Eve (Genesis 1-3). In the Genesis creation account, God created all things good. So contrary to Gnosticism, God created the physical world and He declared it good.

Gnosticism teaches that God would not create a physical universe because the material world is impure, so God creates

aeons and angels. These beings in turn create the physical realm. In the *Gospel of Judas*, Jesus reveals to Judas the creation of the world, humanity, and numerous aeons and angels. The angels bring order to the chaos. One of the angels, Saklas, fashioned Adam and Eve. The Gospel reads:

“Let twelve angels come into the being to rule over chaos and the [underworld]. And look, from the cloud there appeared an [angel] whose face flashed with fire and whose appearance was defiled with blood. His name was Nebro, which means rebel; others call him Yaldabaoth. Another angel, Saklas, also came from the cloud. So Nebro created six angels – as well as Saklas – to be assistants, and these produced twelve angels in the heavens, with each one receiving a portion in the heavens.”

It further states,

“Then Saklas said to his angels, ‘Let us create a human being after the likeness and after the image. They fashioned Adam and his wife Eve, who is called, in the cloud, Zoe.’”

This contradicts the teaching in the Old Testament that God Himself created the universe. Then God created Adam from the earth, and his wife Eve from Adam.

The *Gospel of Judas* contradicts New Testament teaching as well. The Gospel teaches that the body is evil and that Jesus wished to escape His physical body. Jesus instructs Judas saying, “But you (Judas) will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me.” Jesus’ death through the assistance of Judas would liberate His spirit to unite with God. [\[8\]](#)

However, the New Testament teaches that Jesus did not wish to escape His body. In fact, Jesus taught that His resurrection would be a physical resurrection (John 2:19-22). In Luke 24:39, Jesus makes clear to His disciples that He has a physical body. “See my hands and My feet, that it is I Myself;

touch me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” In John 20 and 21, Jesus reveals it was a physical resurrection of the body that was on the cross. He invites Thomas in chapter 20 to touch His scars. If Jesus rose as a spirit, He would have been guilty of deceiving His disciples.

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul teaches a physical resurrection. He explains that Christ rose from the dead and over five hundred witnesses attested to the fact. He then explains that the resurrection body is a physical body but different from our earthly bodies. At the resurrection, Christians will have glorified physical bodies, a clear contradiction to Gnosticism that seeks to escape the impure physical body. Paul did not teach Christians to escape the body, but look forward to the resurrection of the body (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

## **Conclusion**

Despite the hype in the media, the *Gospel of Judas* does not affect the historical reliability of the Gospels nor does it pose any threat to the deity of Christ. This gospel cannot be considered inspired scripture like the New Testament books. It was written in the late second century and therefore, not written by an Apostle of Christ or a close associate. Its teachings contradict previous revelation of the Old and New Testament. It presents very little information that could be considered historical. The *Gospel of Judas* gives us more insight into early Gnosticism, that is all. It presents no historic facts of Jesus that affect the New Testament in any way.

## **Notes**

1. Dan Vergano and Cathy Lynn Grossman, “Long-lost gospel of Judas casts ‘traitor’ in new light,” *USA Today*, 7 April 2006.
2. Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer and Gregor Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas* (Washington D.C.: *National Geographic*, 2006), 5.



3. Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 119-141.
4. Pagels, 134.
5. Kasser, Meyer and Wurst, 4-5.
6. Ibid., 7.
7. [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barbelo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barbelo)  
Kasser, Meyer and Wurst, 43.

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