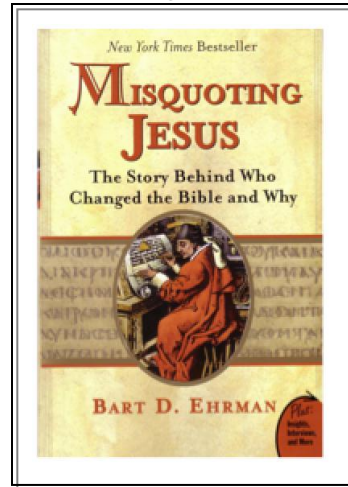


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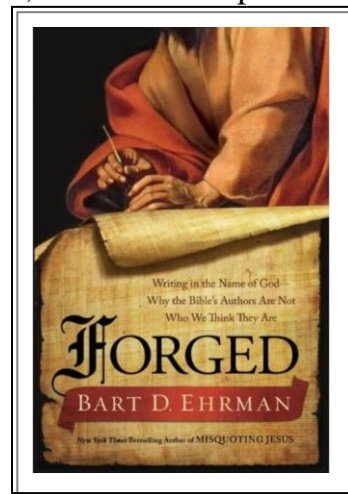
THE ACCURACY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

New Testament Survey – Lesson 2 Part 1

Are you familiar with Bart D. Ehrman? He writes popular works on Christianity. You will find many of his books on the shelves of the local bookstore. In 2005, he published the popular *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*.¹ In his book, Ehrman spent the first few chapters acquainting the reader with basics of the task of trying to reconstruct the original, autographed Scriptures. He does a relatively good job at putting this task into layman's terms. From there, the book tries to live up to its alarmist title – the idea that Jesus is misquoted, that there was some deliberate effort to change the Bible from its “real” meaning into some agenda driven text. Ehrman grew to reject Scripture as divinely inspired, and it seems his goal in this book to both convince others of the rightness of his rejection, and to poison them to the idea that the orthodoxy of Christian faith had legitimate origins from the Biblical writers.



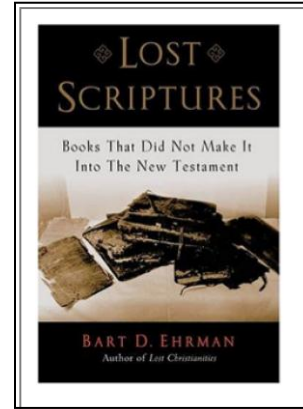
This is not Ehrman's only foray into the field. In 2011, he published the New York Times bestseller *Forged: Writing in the Name of God—Why the Bible's Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are*. In this book, Ehrman trumpets his conviction that the early church used deception to establish their version of “truth” (a term that has a peculiar usage with Ehrman). This book is written with maximum stun value for those who believe Scripture to be a divinely inspired communication from God to man. In it, Ehrman pokes at any who believe the books of the New Testament were actually written as proclaimed, a further effort to undermine orthodoxy as legitimately sourced from Scripture. He does not believe that any gospel was written by Matthew, Mark, Luke or John, nor does he believe Paul wrote Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy or Titus. He does not



¹ Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005)

believe Peter wrote either 1 or 2 Peter. He says the apostle John did not write any of the three epistles ascribed to him nor did he write the Revelation. Because he believes all of these writings are improperly ascribed to the individuals named above, Ehrman believes he is justified in calling these “forgeries,” a word he uses on almost every page of his 300 page missive.

Yet, another Ehrman missile at orthodoxy came in his popular work *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It into the New Testament*. In this piece, he asserts that there were early “Christians” who were writing books teaching that there were many gods (“One? Two? Twelve? Thirty?”) and more equally unorthodox ideas. Ehrman posits that these books hold just as much legitimacy to the title of “inspired” as the books of the Bible. He distinguishes the orthodox faith of today as the victor of those who outmaneuvered their adversaries in the power struggle he associates with the selecting of what books made it into the Bible and what books did not.



Ehrman has legitimate scholarly credentials. He claims to have come to an evangelical faith in his late teenage years, going first for three years to Moody Bible Institute before graduating from Wheaton with a degree in English literature. Going straight into graduate school, he earned a M.Div. and a Ph.D. from Princeton Theological Seminary. His studies included work under the supervision of the amazing New Testament Greek manuscript guru, Bruce Metzger. He cites his studies at Princeton as undermining his views on Scripture, and within fifteen years of graduating, considered himself an agnostic. Ehrman now teaches at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he holds the chair as the James A. Gray Distinguished Professor. Among his undergraduate courses, he teaches is a large “New Testament Introduction” class that typically numbers 300 plus students. Ehrman also holds scholastic credentials in the fields of the apostolic fathers and early church history. He is responsible for translating the Apostolic Fathers in Harvard’s Loeb Classical Library.

Ehrman is not a “hobby writer” who enjoys the benefits of superficial Internet research to fuel random thoughts he inputs onto a computer keyboard. He is a scholar who knows how to write with precision and responsible scholastic accountability. Of course knowing how, and doing it are two separate matters. Unfortunately, the book betrays a writing style more reflective of Ehrman’s undergraduate degree in English, than of his works of scholastic rigor. When recently taken to task by another scholar for failing to write responsibly, Ehrman has excused his errors explaining that he often writes popular books for broad

audiences without the detail or precision one might find in a scholastic work.² That absence of scholarly detail is lamentable in a book like the three referenced above (and a number of other works by Ehrman), because one is left with something quite entertaining and easy to read, something seemingly authoritative, yet ultimately books filled with hyperbole and exaggeration rather than proper citations, accuracy of language, and most importantly, a fair discussion of the facts. In that way, his books are a bit like reading an edition of *National Enquirer* or some other tabloid.

Before we examine some of Ehrman's claims and compare them to the facts, we should note one other aspect of his writings. Ehrman writes like a high school debater. Now this is not an insult; I respect and appreciate high school debate as much as anyone else, but high school debate is famous for cherry picking evidence to construct a case that sells an idea. Ehrman, I believe, is repeatedly guilty of that same thing. His carefully selected evidence and his carefully orchestrated arguments do not truly account for the landscape of facts available for consideration. It makes for a New York Times bestseller, but it does not make for solid and academically sound truth!

Our goal in this lesson is to take on the general attitudes as well as some specific arguments of Ehrman's and others who challenge the reliability and authenticity of the New Testament. Because this is a limited lesson in a series, we will not be able to effectively deal with all of Ehrman's material in one lesson. We will continue over the coming lessons to come back to points and issues relevant to Ehrman and other skeptics.

Our analysis in this lesson is not limited to whether New Testament books are forgeries, but we will also consider broader issues of New Testament reliability. Our reliability focus is divided into three areas:

1. How reliable is the text? (*I.e.*, since we do not have the original of any New Testament book, can we responsively say that our working text accurately reflects the original text?) This confronts Ehrman's *Misquoting Jesus*.
2. How reliable are the books? (*I.e.*, are they in fact forgeries deceitfully authored by some later person(s) with a hidden agenda?) This confronts Ehrman's *Forged*.

² <http://ehrmanblog.org/fuller-reply-to-richard-carrier>.

3. How reliable is the canon?³ (*I.e.*, do we have the right books in the New Testament?). This confronts Ehrman's *Lost Scriptures*.

Before delving into the text's reliability, it is useful to place up front the view of Scripture that drives these lessons. Ehrman claimed to have held an inerrantist/evangelical view of Scripture when he started his academic studies. Honesty about the truth, he asserts, was what drove him away from the evangelical camp, what he calls "the barren camp of fundamentalist Christianity" (where at Moody Bible Institute he was deprived of smoking, drinking alcoholic beverages, going to movies, playing cards, and dancing). As Ehrman recounts his story, his graduate studies led him to believe the Bible was "chock full of discrepancies" and was "a very human book." For him that contradicted the idea that the Bible was "divine truth." Years later, he left any affiliation with Christianity whatever, apparently over the problem of evil and suffering in the world, proclaiming himself an agnostic.

We readily acknowledge the label of "evangelical" in this study series. We do not, however, ascribe to Ehrman's view of what "evangelical" Christianity means, either in his view of its "barren" social camp or his dry view of what he thinks "inerrancy" of Scripture must mean. Inerrancy, as we use the term, is a robust view of Scripture that asserts Scripture is God's communication to man in the form and manner that God has chosen. It is true and valid in what it claims for itself, as it came forth in its original form. It is not simply man's musings about God, but it is God's communication to man. People, moved and inspired by the Holy Spirit, brought forth this communication from God, and in a magnificent process, God used humanity to produce a Scripture that has served to communicate God's messages for those wishing to receive it. Contrary to the thoughts of Ehrman who thinks that the Bible must be either divine or human, the Bible is *both* a divine book and a human book. We will see this on each level we consider, the accuracy of the text, the reliability of authorship, and the propriety of the canon.

ACCURACY OF THE TEXT - BACKGROUND

³ "Canon" – specifically the Christian canon – should never be confused with a "cannon." While it is sharper than any two-edged sword, it is neither a cannon nor a gun! The word "canon" refers to the collection of Scriptures that the church considers authoritative as the word of God. Where do we get such an unusual word? The roots of "canon" go back beyond Latin and Greek into early Semitic. In its earliest known form (*k-n-h*), the Semitic word meant a "reed" or "rod." The Greeks took this root and used the word as more a measuring rod (like a ruler or yard stick). The key to the Greek word was a reference to the measurements or marks on the ruler. The Latin version of the word was *canna*, from which we get the English word "cane." So the Christian "canon" is ultimately the collection of writings that the church uses as its measuring stick – its ruler—the defining reference for Christian faith and life. More commonly we call the canon our "Bible" from the Latin *biblia* for book.

Before delving deeper into this subject, we need to cover a few basics of the New Testament text. Since Alexander the Great had conquered much of the known world, including the area of Palestine, Greek became the standard language of commerce and educated people. While many Jews in the Palestinian area likely still spoke primarily Aramaic, and while Hebrew was still in use as well, many Jews throughout the diaspora likely used Greek as their primary language. As discussed in an earlier lesson, this was no doubt a principle driver in the translation and ready dispersal of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek (the “Septuagint”) in the centuries before Christ.

The New Testament was written in Greek, save an occasional Aramaic or Latin word or phrase (some scholars believe several portions of the New Testament may have originally been composed in another language and then translated into Greek, but we do not have any early manuscripts to verify that assertion). Over the next several centuries, the usage of Greek diminished, especially in the western section of the Roman Empire. Increasingly, Latin became the common (or “vulgar”) language of the people. In the late 300’s, the Bishop of Rome (Pope Damasus I) instructed Jerome (345? - 420) to work through various Latin translations of the gospels and put them into the “vulgar” Latin of his day (which is why the Latin version of the Bible is today called the “Vulgate”). After Damasus I died, Jerome was passed over for the post of next Pope, and so he moved to Bethlehem and continued working on translating the rest of the Bible into Latin, including translating the Old Testament out of its original Hebrew.

Although Jerome’s translation was edited and changed over the years, the Vulgate became the official Bible for the Western church for over a thousand years. Ironically, while the church called forth Jerome’s translation in an effort to have the Bible in the everyday language spoken by the masses, over time it became an antiquated text that was a foreign language to most. Roman Latin had descended into languages (appropriately called “Roman-ce” languages after Roman Latin) like Spanish, French, and Italian.

With the Renaissance, the reformation movement, and Gutenberg’s movable type press, there became a renewed interest in translating Scripture into the modern languages used by the masses. Luther produced a German Bible. Calvin and the reformers in Geneva produced texts in several languages including English. In England, King James was the first monarch to authorize a translation of the Bible into English. While the King James Version (and those of other scholars in other languages) could be made by translating the Latin Vulgate into a modern language like English, it seemed more reliable to try to translate directly from Greek and Hebrew/Aramaic. One problem, however, was that the church had few good Greek manuscripts at its disposal. Over the centuries, they were not of much use to a Latin speaking faith that used the Vulgate.

Perceiving this need, one of Europe's most outstanding scholars named Erasmus (1469? - 1536) attempted to reconstruct a Greek text of the New Testament. In 1516, from Johan Froben's press at Basel, Switzerland, Erasmus published the first edition of a New Testament Greek text (with his own Latin translation side-by-side with the Greek). Luther used Erasmus's groundbreaking work for his German translation. The King James translators used a later edition of Erasmus's text edited by Robert Stephanus Estienne (1503-1559), who also added into the Greek text the chapter and verse designations we still use today.

Erasmus had a great chore before him. He was trying to prepare for printing a Greek text that closely mirrored the original writings of the New Testament. Of course, those original writings were long gone. He had before him only 6 Greek manuscripts, the oldest of which was 1100AD. Erasmus faced the difficult situation of deciding what the original Greek text said, when his copies of Greek manuscripts were made a thousand years after the originals. He did not have the original autographs; he did not have copies of those autographs. He had copies made from copies of copies of copies! Needless to say, with all those multiple copies made, lots of typo's (if we can call a handwriting error a typo) were present in the manuscripts.

Modern scholars do not consider Erasmus to have been a great "textual critic."⁴ By that, they mean he was not great at figuring out what the original Greek manuscripts of the texts actually said. In his defense, however, as we noted above, he had very few Greek manuscripts to compile his Greek edition of the New Testament, and those he did have were very late ones. Further, he did make some strong changes that he felt appropriate and which time has shown him to have called correctly.⁵ The mistakes he made are not surprising considering that the Greek scriptures had not been in use and were in slight demand for the preceding thousand years of the Western Church. Let us consider an example of where this makes a difference.

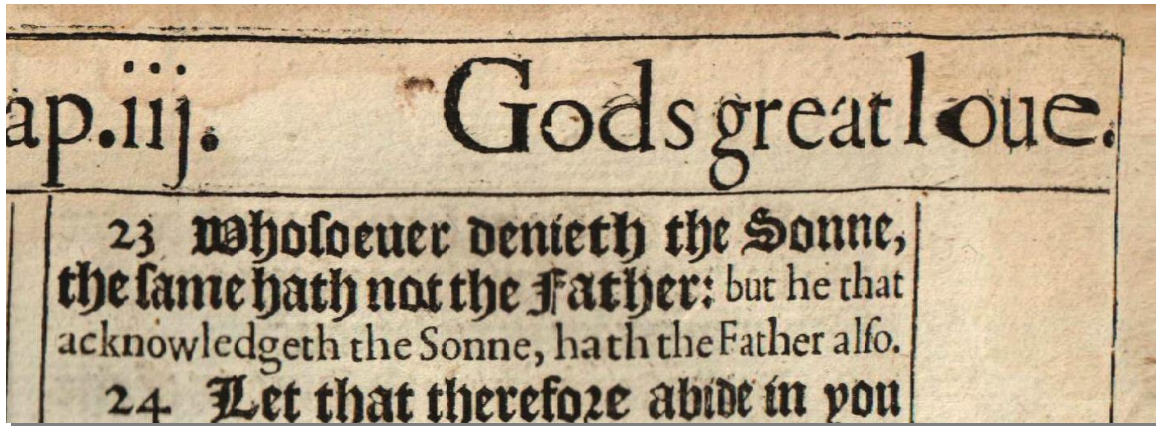
⁴ Greenslade, S. L., ed., *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, (Cambridge 1963), Vol. 3 at 10.

⁵ For example, the most famous proof text for the Trinity was found in 1 John 5:7-8. The full text that was in the Latin Vulgate can be translated as: "7- For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. 8- And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one." (KJV). Erasmus did not have the portion that set out the Trinity in verse 7 in the Greek manuscripts, and so he left it out of his Greek version. This caused an uproar and Erasmus pledged to replace it in his next edition if someone could show him a Greek manuscript that had the portion about the Trinity. Someone did give him a very late Greek manuscript found in Dublin, and Erasmus stayed true to his word adding the additional Greek. Most Bibles recognize that the phrases about the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit were adds not found in John's original epistle and have removed them. The English Standard Version simply reads: "7- For there are three that testify: 8- the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree."

If you open your Bible to 1 John 2:23, in the English Standard Version you read,

No one who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also.

If you were to read the same verse in the original King James Version of 1611, you would see,



We can put the letters into the form used today and more readily read the verse as,

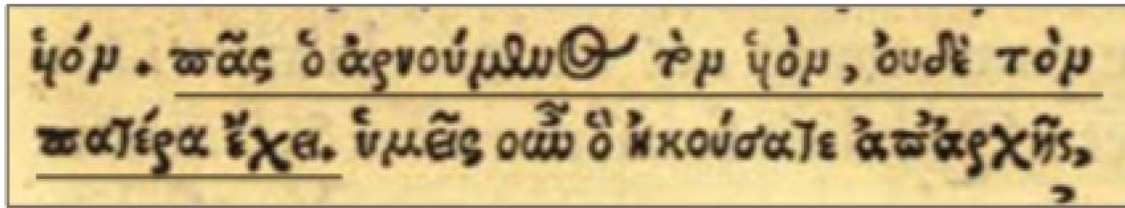
Whosoever denieth the Sonne, the same hath not the Father: *but he that acknowledgeth the Sonne, hath the Father also.*

Notice the different typeface in the original King James? This was not a typo. It was the way the King James Translators decided to communicate that the last half of the verse was not found in their Greek manuscripts (Erasmus/Estienne) they were using for translation. Based on non-Greek manuscripts, they believed the last portion of the verse was appropriate, but they wanted to indicate that the words were not found in the Greek.

Why was this last phrase in 1 John 2:23 missing in the Greek editions used by Erasmus? A glance at the Greek makes it pretty evident. To understand this, we need to know the Greek word order used in the full verse. As originally written, the verse said in Greek:

All who deny the Son, not the Father has
The one who acknowledges the Son, the Father has

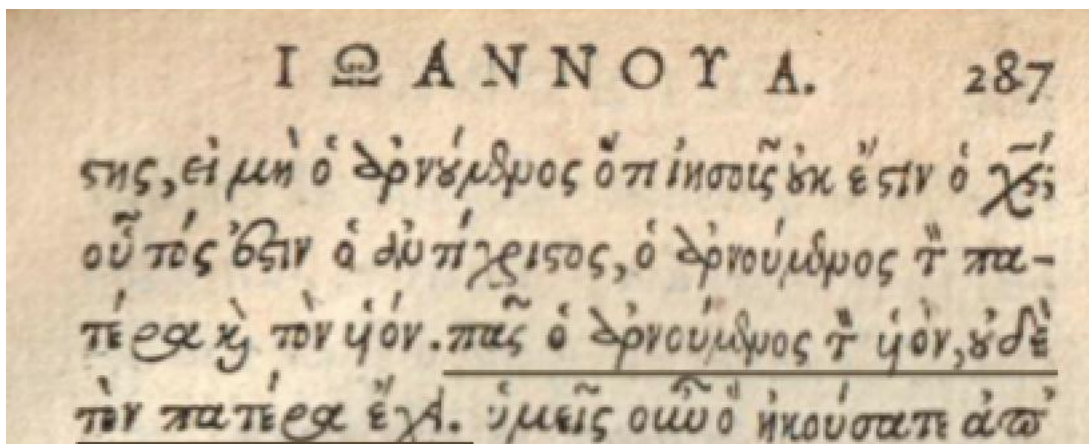
In Greek, the phrase “the Father has” is *τον πατερα χει*. We can see what happened if we look at Erasmus’s text:



Erasmus text of 1 John 2:23

We have underlined verse 23 of the text that reads, “πας ο αρνουμενος τον υιον, ουδε τον πατερα εχει” which is “All who deny the Son, do not have the Father.” Leaving out the phrasing on “the one who acknowledges the Son, the Father has,” Erasmus’s edition then continues with verse 24, “You therefore, let that which you heard from the beginning....” At some point in history, the people who had copied (or dictated for others to write) manuscripts had seen the phrase “the Father has” and his eye assumed he was on the second phrase. Because the phrases end identically, this caused him to leave out the clause “the one who acknowledges the Son.”

Now that versions were being printed, they still suffered from the same problems that handwritten versions did, namely, an error in one edition tended to get reproduced in other editions. We can look at the same passage in Estienne’s 1549 edition and see how he carried forward the error in Erasmus’s version:



Estienne text of 1 John 2:23

Some might ask, why did the King James translators know to insert in the rest of the verse? The answer is that they were not working only with the Greek text of Erasmus/Estienne. They also had the Vulgate and a number of other writings. Since Erasmus, the process has not stopped. Today, scholars still work on editing

together the best edition scholarship can offer that most closely resembles the New Testament original autographs. Unlike Erasmus and his 7 Greek manuscripts, today scholars have over 5,000! Additionally, they have early Greek writings of the church fathers that quote so many passages of the New Testament that textual guru Bruce Metzger wrote,

Indeed, so extensive are these citations that if all other sources for our knowledge of the text of the New Testament were destroyed, they would be sufficient alone for the reconstruction of practically the entire New Testament.⁶

Of course, with this many ancient hand copies now available, there are hundreds of thousands of variant readings. By this, scholars mean that among the 5,000 plus manuscripts (all but 70 or so are only partial manuscripts of pieces of the New Testament), there are hundreds of thousands of places where there is a variation in the text. This might make it seem like an impossible task to determine what the original text looked like. It is a point that skeptic Bart Erhman makes with regularity, both in his writings and in his oral presentations. In his dueling with Dan Wallace on the subject, Erhman said (and subsequently published):

- “Basically, we have something like 5,500 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament.”
- “Some scholars will tell you there are 200,000 differences, some will tell you 300,000 differences, some say 400,000. I don’t know. It’s something like that; between 300,000 and 400,000 would be my guess.”

Those facts are not disputed. Erhman’s problem is the conclusion he draws from the facts. Erhman thinks these facts deny God’s inspiration of Scripture. He asks it this way:

Moreover, why would one think that God performed the miracle of inspiring the words in the first place if he didn’t perform the miracle of preserving the words? If he meant to give us his very words, why didn’t he make sure we received them?⁷

If we were to put Erhman’s argument into standard logic form, he asserts the following:

⁶ Metzger, Bruce, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, (Oxford 1968), 2d. ed., at 86.

⁷ Stewart, Robert, ed., *Bart D. Ehrman & Daniel Wallace in Dialogue: The Reliability of the New Testament*, (Fortress 2011), at 14.

1. If God verbally inspired the Bible, then he would preserve the words from corruption.
2. The words suffered corruption.
3. Therefore God did not verbally inspire the Bible.

Erhman's logic, however, suffers in multiple ways. His first idea, that if God inspired the Bible then he would keep it from corruption, has no basis for fact or truth other than his own musings. The Bible never says it was going to be perfectly preserved, letter by letter and word by word. Certainly, church history has never said such. The historical record is replete with saints in the early church martyred and burned along with their copies of Scripture. Following his logic, he could similarly say, "If God performed the miracle of giving us his very words, then why didn't he perform the miracle of giving a copy of them to everyone?" This might be the way Erhman would handle things if he were God, but it is not God's way of handling things. As Paul reported to the Romans, God gave evidence of his presence in the creation and world around us. His oracles, his very words, he entrusted to the Jews.

For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made (Rom. 1:20).

... the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God (Rom. 3:2).

There is a fair implication in this text that the Jews had responsibility for the words of God. Inherent in such an entrustment is the idea that error-prone humans would make errors in their mission as entrusted stewards. The overriding principle of God is *not* that he would directly intervene in human copying to ensure every word is properly spelled and every letter properly written. His assurance is that his message, his revelation, would not be thwarted. Once God entrusted his oracles to the Jews, Scripture becomes both a divine book and a human book. This is the point Ehrman misses.

Ehrman wants God to act as Ehrman would, and that is not what God has done. We refer back to our definition of inerrancy. Scripture is inerrant in its original form in its communicating God's chosen message in the ways that God has chosen to communicate it. This is key: It is God's communication to man in the way God has chosen. It is true and valid in what it claims for itself, as it came forth in its original form.

What God has done, is provide in Scripture the words that,

... are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Tim. 3:15).

The miracle is not simply in the words. Nowhere does Scripture suggest we worship the text. For centuries, the text, in whatever state it was found, was barely readable by anyone, with illiteracy rates in the Middle Ages likely in excess of 95%. The miracle is in the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus. That is where salvation lies. The text bears witness to Christ. It is God's revelation to man.

Does that mean that God cannot use man in the transmission of his word? Does that mandate that God miraculously fix each typo when his word is transmitted? Is it impossible for a human to make a copy error because God must fix it or Scripture loses its authority and inspiration? Of course not! Neither God nor his revelation, is so limited and small! God is able to work through fallen man to secure his word and reach people with the saving message of Jesus' atoning sacrifice – even with man's typos and transmission errors.

ACCURACY OF THE TEXT – VARIANT READINGS

Now having said all that, it merits our best scholarly work to determine what the original words of Scripture did say! Should we find the hundreds of thousands of errors disturbing? Absolutely not! Did you notice in that last sentence I misspelled “absolutely”? Did it make you stumble in a quandary over what I meant or said? I suspect not! Among the 5,000 plus manuscripts of the Greek New Testament, most of the 300,000 or so “variants” are simply that – misspellings. This might have been from faulty eyesight of the scribe copying a manuscript. It might have come from faulty hearing, or from a spelling lapse in the scribe listening to dictation.⁸ It is not a hard chore for scholars to figure out the correct reading when two letters are simply transposed (*i.e.* transposed) or where there is some other misspelling.

Other errors came into the text because the mind can play games with a copying task, especially by candlelight and after long hours. A good example of that is the 1 John 2:23 passage discussed earlier. There, some time in the past, a copyist accidentally eliminated the phrase “The one who acknowledges the Son has the Father.” Subsequently, that errant copy was used for more copies and before long, an entire family of Greek manuscripts had lost the phrase.

⁸ Sometimes Scribes made copies by following an older document set before them. Other times, one person would read the text and scribe(s) would be writing from the dictation. This was especially useful when there might be a group of scribes making copies. One reader with one copy could get five copies made more quickly if reading the copy to five scribes simultaneously.

We also need to remember that the scribes did not have word processors at their disposal. If they left out a phrase, then they had to inscribe it into the margins of their text. That is also the place where the scribes might put notes! This is a likely way that the addition to 1 John 5 noted above in footnote 4 came about. A scribe could easily have considered the meaning of 1 John 5: 7-8 and made his own note in the margin. The passage would have read:

For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree.

The scribe on reflection might have thought, “those aren’t the only three who agree! They are earthly reflections of the heavenly three witnesses!” This scribe might have made the modification in his margin:

For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one.

And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one.

Of course, a later scribe has no knowledge that this was an editorial add, because it might look just like an edit made to insert something accidentally left out. The phrase then gets continued in later manuscripts as a part of the text.

Well-intentioned scribes who likely thought they were correcting errors of others made some of the errors. In 398AD, Jerome was deep into translating the Bible into Greek. He replied to a letter from a friend, Lucinius, who had wanted a copy of Jerome’s work thus far completed. Jerome allowed the servants of Lucinius to copy his manuscripts, but sent them along with the warning that the scribes likely made errors! Jerome pointed out,

If then you find errors or omissions which interfere with the sense, these you must impute not to me but to your own servants; they are due to the ignorance or carelessness of the copyists, who write down not what they find but what they take to be their meaning, and do but expose their own mistakes when they try to correct those of others.⁹

One passage Metzger gives as an example of such an intentional change is found in Hebrews 1:3. One of our oldest Greek copies of the Bible is called “*Codex Vaticanus*” (“*Codex*” because it was in book form, “*Vaticanus*” because it was found at the Vatican when it was so labeled). In its original form, it likely

⁹ Jerome, *Epistle 71.5*, Translation by W. H. Fremantle as found in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, (Hendrickson 1994), second series Vol. 6.

contained all of the Septuagint, minus a few books of the Apocrypha. Most scholars date the original copy of the *Vaticanus* to around 350-400AD. It gives a different reading of Hebrews 1:3 than most other Greek manuscripts. *Vaticanus* reads,

He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature,
and he *revealed* the universe by the word of his power.

Most every other old Greek copy of Hebrews 1:3 reads,

He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature,
and he *upholds* the universe by the word of his power.

The change in the Greek is slight. “Revealed” is *phaneron* while “upholds” is *pheron*. The copyist inserted an “an” (αν), a minor mistake. Sometime in the centuries following the original transcription of *Vaticanus*, a scribe who saw the problem changed the word substituting the proper word φερων. A later scribe restored the original (and wrong) word φανερων scrawling in the margin, “Stupidest and wicked man, leave the original alone! Don’t change it!”

This excerpt from Codex Vaticanus sets out the marginal note of an 13th century scribe chiding an earlier scribe for changing a word in Heb. 1:3.

Stupid
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ACCURACY OF THE TEXT – EHRMAN’S COMPLAINTS

There are other ways the millennia-long transmission reflects human errors, but they are all fairly transparent or inconsequential. There are only a few errors that regularly appear and merit fuller consideration. At this point, scholars have reduced the serious areas of questioning about the original text down to less than ten. So what passages are used by Ehrman in support of his tabloid-esque title, *Misquoting Jesus, The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why?* They are not passages that live up to his billing of misrepresenting Jesus and changing the world’s perception of him. In fact, each passage might affect one’s reading and close study of that passage, and maybe of the implications for church history, but none affect the core message of Scripture. Let us briefly consider each, recognizing that we will go into more depth as we continue our New Testament study over the coming year.

1. John 7:53–8:12 – The woman caught in adultery.

This story is one of the most famous passages in John. It is a touching story of Jesus showing compassion on a woman caught in adultery, as he tells her harsh accusers, “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.” The accusers leave the scene and Jesus informs the woman that he would not condemn her (after all, he *was* the only one there suitable for stoning her – he was the one “without sin”). He instructs her to go and sin no more.

As touching as the story is, and as significant as some of the theology is, it is not found in the early and most reliable manuscripts. It starts making its presence known most pronounced in Greek texts of the 6th century, although it is present in Latin translation texts from the 5th century and Coptic translations in the 4th century. Several of the texts that do have the story place it in different places, some earlier in John, some later in John, and some even in Luke! Scholars are quick to point out, and are in general unity, that the style and vocabulary of this section are different than the rest of John.

Most Bibles accordingly make an appropriate footnote explaining the likely exclusion of this section. Notwithstanding its absence from the early texts, some scholars still believe it has authenticity. Among the arguments for its absence, is the fear that the story would be seen as an endorsement of adultery, and so early copyists removed it. Personally, the most compelling argument for inclusion is that when Jesus is quizzed over what the law of Moses demands for such a crime, his response is to bend and write in the sand. There is only one other time Scripture records God writing upon nature – the Ten Commandments (we do not count the writing on the wall in Daniel because the wall was not nature). If we remember that a major theme of John is the superiority of Jesus to Moses, then this

story fits theologically well. The Law of Moses, which is the subject of the accusers' question to Jesus, was really the Law of God delivered to Moses! God wrote the law, not Moses. In like manner, Jesus does not simply quote the Law of Moses. As a superior one to Moses, Jesus writes upon the sand – a simple reinforcement of the superiority of Jesus.

Whether the story was in the original of John or whether it was a subsequent add, it certainly conveys much of the Spirit of Jesus as well as his authority and quick wittedness in comparison to his accusers. These are not features of Jesus that are suddenly missing from the Bible if we remove this passage. The Spirit of Jesus, his authority, and quick wittedness are found on most every page of each gospel. God's word does not stand or fall on this story.

2. Mark 16:9-20 – The ending of Mark's gospel.

This ending to the gospel of Mark is plagued with problems both within the text and without. Within the text, the vocabulary and style of the ending differs noticeably from the rest of Mark. Similarly, the idea that a sign of belief in Christ would be snake-handling, might charm some, but does not seem to accord with general Christian orthodoxy found in the rest of Scripture. Externally, this ending is not found in hundreds of important manuscripts, including the two oldest Greek manuscripts used as baselines for the modern reconstruction of the Greek text.

Without this ending, Mark seems to end rather abruptly:

And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

This is not the way any other book in the Bible ends. It is not a natural ending. Likely because of this, the manuscripts have a number of alternate endings for Mark. The verses 9-20 are just one of the endings found in these manuscripts.

The presence of multiple endings, the difficulties of accepting this ending, cause most scholars to think that this is a supplemental effort to bring Mark to a more logical close. Does its presence or absence change God's gospel message? By not clarifying this, has God given us an inadequate or incomplete picture of Christ? Of course not! The only place it might conceivably make a difference is to the handful of Appalachian churches that practice snake handling to show their faith!

3. Mark 1:41 – Was Jesus angry or compassionate?

In Mark 1, a leper comes to Jesus to be healed. Kneeling before Jesus, the leper says, "If you will, you can make me clean." Jesus' response is one of compassion,

if you read a translation like the English Standard Version, or one of anger, if you read the New International Version. Here are the two side by side:

Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, "I will; be clean." (ESV)

Jesus was indignant. He reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" (NIV)

Faced with this, three questions quickly arise: Which reading is "right"? Why was there a change? And what difference does it make?

Questions one and two are frequently grouped together. Which reading is right is hard to determine simply by studying the various manuscripts. Early manuscripts are attested to both. The thinking of many scholars, and likely those who translated the NIV, is that a scribe would more readily change a text that said "Jesus was indignant" or "angry," to one that said he was "moved with pity" or "compassion." Hence, these scholars choose the manuscripts that give the word "indignant." Those scholars who translate the word as compassion, note that many more early manuscripts actually say "pity" or "compassion," and so they translate it accordingly. These scholars also point out that the main early manuscript supporting "angry," (Codex Bezae) is one that frequently has variant readings with the more normative texts.

For those who think the original had Jesus angry, but was changed to make him compassionate, they note that the two Greek words are different enough to convince them the change was no accident, but rather think it the work of a well-intentioned scholar. The participle used for "moved with pity" is *σπλαγχνιςθεις*. The participle for "being angry" is *οργισθεις*. Interestingly, the two Aramaic words that might have been used by the witnesses to the event are very similar (*ethraham* = to have pity and *ethra'em* = to be enraged). This leads some to believe the variant reading could have been introduced by the translator of the events into Greek.

The more compelling of the questions, however, is the "So what?" question. What difference does it make? The answer is that it really makes no difference at all. You can remove the passage altogether and still find the Bible teaching that Jesus could be both angry and compassionate. If he was angry in the story of the leper, then it could easily be his anger over disease in the fallen world, and how it ruins the lives of so many people. He did, after all, weep over the death of Lazarus, even though he was about to raise him from the dead! Just two chapters later in Mark 3:5, we read about Jesus being angry, and Mark 3:5 uses the same Greek root for anger as Mark 1:41!

And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was restored.

This passage gives further support to the many manuscripts that attest to “compassion” in the Mark 1:41. If a scribe truly thought it important to save Jesus’s reputation by changing “anger” to “compassion” in Mark 1:41, then why did he fail to make the same change just 37 verses later?

4. Luke 22:39-46 – Did Jesus sweat drops of blood?

In Luke’s story of Jesus praying on the Mount of Olives before his arrest, there are two verses that read:

And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him. And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground (Luke 22:43-44).

Scholars are divided over whether these two verses were in the original. The Revised Standard Version left them out, most modern versions include them but with a footnote that they are omitted in many manuscripts. The manuscripts without the verses are widely diverse manuscripts of early date. In some of the manuscripts that do include the verses, there is the ancient equivalent of an asterisk indicating they were not considered original.

Still, these verses are referenced by some early writers in the church (Justin, Irenaeus, and others, so whether the verses were actually in the original, most scholars readily accede the story is quite old.

Does the inclusion or exclusion of these two verses change the Christian faith or understanding of Jesus or the gospel message? Not at all! Like so many others, this is just not a radical change in the perception of Jesus and the story. That is not to say that Luke’s message might not lose a certain emphasis or gain another based on the inclusion of the verses. Ehrman does a good job of pointing out that without the verses, the chiasmic structure of the story places the emphasis on the prayer of Jesus, whereas including the agony changes the emphasis to Jesus in agony. Still, this is not a radical departure from anything in the gospels. Jesus was in agony, as is apparent from other accounts. Jesus was also faithful in prayer and willingly went to the cross, as is evident from the other gospels. In short, these two verses are not “make or break” passages that indicate God abandoned his words!

5. Hebrews 2:9 – Did Jesus taste death apart from God or by God’s grace?

In Hebrews 2:9 in the ESV we read:

...we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

The issue here is slight. The question on this passage is whether the original transcript said, “so that *by the grace of* God he might taste death for everyone” or “so that *apart from* God he might taste death for everyone.” The Greek words are slight in their differences. The Greek for “by the grace” is *χαριτι*. The Greek for “apart” is *χωρις*. Most translations say “by the grace of God” because almost all the ancient manuscripts say that! The alternate reading is found in quotations from some early church fathers, but it is not found in any manuscripts until the tenth century. Accordingly, this passage does not even merit a footnote in the English Standard Version about the possible different reading.

Both readings of the verse are theologically true. It is by God’s grace that Christ tasted death for everyone. Christ also cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” indicating a death apart from God. Like the other passages raised by Ehrman, this one amounts to very little.

6. Miscellaneous “theologically altered texts”

After these major passages, Ehrman begins finding other passages with alternate readings and cherry picks them in an effort to substantiate his claim that religious doctrine and ideology shaped editing of Scripture rather than a strict adherence to the writings as originally produced. There can be no doubt that in the history of the church, alterations were made by some in an effort to clarify a position of orthodoxy in the face of anti-Christian ideology. The net effect is not some conspiratorial alteration of history that misquotes Jesus, however. Those alterations that are clearly alterations are fixed. Where there is a serious dispute, the translators drop a footnote and explain the differences among the manuscripts. None of these, however, amount to anything that changes orthodox Christian beliefs, Ehrman’s speculations notwithstanding.

What Ehrman does, is try to mind read the motives of the scribe who was making copies almost two thousand years ago, and project that onto cherry-picked historical heresies facing the early church. Ehrman weaves it together to read like a conspiracy, when what clearly happened is the church was careful to protect the apostolic tradition from heresy.

CONCLUSION

This lesson addresses the first part of three issues on the veracity of Scripture, that of the text itself. We will still process Ehrman's indictments against apostolic authority of the books, as well as the church's collection of the canon found in his other books. If reading this lesson is complicated and not a final answer, then readers are urged to find the more thorough and generally accepted core academic works on variant readings by Bruce Metzger and others.¹¹

As Ehrman brings his book to a close, he draws the exact opposite conclusion than is fairly produced by the evidence. Because Ehrman cites the 5,000 plus manuscripts with hundreds of thousands of differences, he instills fear that "the words of God are gone!" The truth is, that so many different manuscripts more readily allow scholars to figure out what the original words were! If we had only one of the manuscripts, we would have no different readings, but we would not have an accurate copy! The fact that we have so many, allows rigorous scholastic comparisons and study, which produces an amazingly confident text.

Ehrman then pushes his fearful conclusion further by telling his readers, they do not know *who* did the copying, *who* did the choosing, *who* did the translating, and so how could they *ever* rely on the Bible? Again, the truth leads to a very different conclusion. This information is readily available, all but the names of ancient scribes! The introduction to the English Standard Version, for example, provides the translators' philosophy, approach, the text used for sourcing and more. Additionally, the names of the translators, their qualification, and other identifying material are readily available. What is more, the ESV is only one of dozens of reliable translations published today, and the other ones also have identifying information about the committees that worked on the versions. These are reasons to compare translations, reasons to consider the philosophy and approaches of the translations, and even reasons to be careful about being dogmatic on verses that are still debated by scholars. But it is not a reason to panic and assume that the words of God are unavailable.

Here we come to a final note on textual criticism, especially as crafted by Ehrman. To the end of his book, Ehrman returns to his fallacious logic that if God verbally inspired a book, then God must keep the book verbally perfect. Ehrman continues to push that the book is either divine or human. There is no middle ground for

¹¹ See the Bruce Metzger book referenced earlier. For the listing of manuscripts that support one reading or another, a "critical Greek New Testament" is most useful. The United Bible Society puts out one originally edited by Kurt Aland and others. Because this is a bit clumsy and difficult to read without a decent dexterity of the Greek language, readers are urged to consult the more readable reference by Omanson, Roger, *A Textual Guide to the Greek New Testament*, (German Bible Society 2006), which is an adaptation of Bruce Metzger's *Textual Commentary*.

him. Human and divine both have a role in Scripture. It is not one or the other. God works through man. The church is the body of Christ. The church is not perfect, but the promise was (and is) that the Holy Spirit's involvement would bring apostolic recall to testify to events, would bring understanding, and would convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 14-16). We have this in Scripture, Old and New Testaments, as oracles of God, *entrusted to men*.

It seems that in his childhood, Ehrman missed the main message of the Bible. Ehrman closes his book lamenting,

For the only reason (I came to think) for God to inspire the Bible would be so that his people would have his actual words (page 211).

It is sad that this was his view. In truth, God's reasons for Scripture are so that people would know Jesus, know God, know sin, know redemption, have faith, have relationship, learn to live, learn to pray, learn to model Christ-likeness. The oracles of God entrusted to man have always been more than adequate for that, even with areas of challenge in textual criticism.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *"I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me. Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus..."* (2 Tim. 1:12-13).

Paul does not say, I know "what" I have believed. Nor does he say, "I know what I have read." He tells Timothy about his knowledge of Jesus. Paul regularly laid his life on the line, finally dying a martyr's death, out of his conviction over who Christ was, what Christ had done, and what Christ held in the future for Paul. We have Scriptures that fairly and accurately show Jesus as Christ, Savior of the world. We never need doubt because of an ongoing debate over a handful of verses in the text.

2. *"And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid"* (Mark 16:8).

This is the abrupt ending to Mark. We do not know how he truly ended his gospel, and may never know unless we find some more ancient and authoritative copy. But the ending of Mark, as abrupt as it is, is not the end of the story for anyone. The resurrected Jesus marks the beginning of the

story for the believer, who is delivered from fear to faith! In the resurrection, life has meaning and the future holds promise.

3. *“But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.”* (2 Tim. 3:14-15).

As Paul drew his last letter to Timothy to a close, he admonished Timothy to continue in living in the knowledge he had gained from Holy Scripture. These writings, even with variant readings (which were present in Old Testament texts at the time of Paul), were still, in God’s care, “able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” That is no less true today. Amen!