

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The heart of the book is chapters 5, 6, and 7. Here Ehrman especially discusses the results of the findings in his major work, *Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* (Oxford, 1993). His concluding chapter closes in on the point that he is driving at in these chapters: "It would be wrong... to say—as people sometimes do—that the changes in our text have no real bearing on what the texts mean or on the theological conclusions that one draws from them. We have seen, in fact, that just the opposite is the case."²

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

¹ *Misquoting*, 15.

² *Ibid.*, 208.

³ *Ibid.* These passages are especially discussed in chapters 5 and 6 in his book.

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

Regarding Matt 24:36, although many witnesses record Jesus as speaking of his own prophetic ignorance (“But as for that day and hour no one knows it—neither the angels in heaven, *nor the Son*—except the Father alone”), many others lack the words “nor the Son.” Whether “nor the Son” is authentic or not is disputed, but what is not disputed is the wording in the parallel in Mark 13:32—“But as for that day or hour no one knows it—neither the angels in heaven, *nor the Son*—except the Father.” Thus, there can be no doubt that Jesus spoke of his own prophetic ignorance in the Olivet Discourse. Consequently, what doctrinal issues are really at stake here?⁴ One simply cannot maintain that the wording in Matt 24:36 changes one’s basic theological convictions about Jesus since the same sentiment is found in Mark.

In other words, the idea that the variants in the NT manuscripts alter the theology of the NT is overstated at best.⁵ Unfortunately, as careful a scholar as Ehrman is, his treatment of major theological changes in the text of the NT tends to fall under one of two criticisms: Either his textual decisions are wrong, or his interpretation is wrong. These criticisms were made of his earlier work, *Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, which *Misquoting Jesus* has drawn from extensively. Yet, the conclusions that he put forth there are still stated here without recognition of some of the severe criticisms of his work the first go-around. For a book geared toward a lay audience, one would think that he would want to have his discussion nuanced a bit more, especially with all the theological weight that he says is on the line. One almost gets the impression that he is encouraging the Chicken Littles in the Christian community to panic at data that they are simply not prepared to wrestle with. Time and time again in the book, highly charged statements are put forth that the untrained person simply cannot sift through. And that approach resembles more an alarmist mentality than what a mature, master teacher is able to offer. Regarding the evidence, suffice it to say that *significant textual variants that alter core doctrines of the NT have not yet been produced*.

Finally, regarding 1 John 5:7-8, virtually no modern translation of the Bible includes the “Trinitarian formula,” since scholars for centuries have recognized it as added later. Only a few very late manuscripts have the verses. One wonders why this passage is even discussed in Ehrman’s book. The only reason seems to be to fuel doubts. The passage made its way into our Bibles through political pressure, appearing for the first time in 1522, even though scholars then and now knew that it is not authentic. The

⁴ See the discussion in the NET Bible’s note on this verse.

⁵ When discussing Wettstein’s views of the NT text, Ehrman argues that “As Wettstein continued his investigations, he found other passages typically used to affirm the doctrine of the divinity of Christ that in fact represented textual problems; when these problems are resolved on text-critical grounds, in *most instances references to Jesus’s divinity are taken away*” (*Misquoting*, 113 [italics added]). He adds that “Wettstein began thinking seriously about his own theological convictions, and became attuned to the problem that the New Testament rarely, *if ever*, actually calls Jesus God” (*ibid.*, 114 [italics added]). But these statements are misleading. Nowhere does Ehrman represent this conclusion as *only* Wettstein’s; he seems to embrace such opinions himself. But the deity of Christ is actually more clearly seen in the Greek text behind modern translations than it is in the KJV (see, e.g., D. A. Carson, *King James Version Debate* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979], 64)!

early church did not know of this text, yet the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451 affirmed explicitly the Trinity! How could they do this without the benefit of a text that didn't get into the Greek NT for *another millennium*? Chalcedon's statement was not written in a vacuum: the early church put into a theological formulation what they saw in the NT.

A distinction needs to be made here: just because a particular verse does not affirm a cherished doctrine does not mean that that doctrine cannot be found in the NT. In this case, anyone with an understanding of the healthy patristic debates over the Godhead knows that the early church arrived at their understanding from an examination of the data in the NT. The Trinitarian formula only *summarized* what they found; it did not *inform* their declarations.

In sum, Ehrman's latest book does not disappoint on the provocative scale. But it comes up short on genuine substance about his primary contention. Scholars bear a sacred duty not to alarm lay readers on issues that they have little understanding of. Unfortunately, the average layperson will leave this book with far greater doubts about the wording and teachings of the NT than any textual critic would ever entertain. A good teacher doesn't hold back on telling his students what's what, but he also knows how to package the material so they don't let emotion get in the way of reason. A good teacher does not create Chicken Littles.⁶

⁶ Although Ehrman's *Misquoting Jesus* may well be the first lay introduction to New Testament textual criticism, in the spring of 2006 a second book that deals with these issues (and many others) will appear. See *Reinventing Jesus: What The Da Vinci Code and Other Novel Speculations Don't Tell You* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006), co-authored by J. Ed Komoszewski, M. James Sawyer, and Daniel B. Wallace, for a more balanced treatment of the data.