

Misquoting Jesus: The Story behind Who Changed the Bible and Why

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Misquoting Jesus: The Story behind Who Changed the Bible and Why, by Bart D. Ehrman. New York: Harper San Francisco, 2005, x + 242 pp., \$24.95.

There has been a long-standing discussion in the world of textual criticism concerning the degree to which scribes intentionally altered passages of the NT to conform more closely to their own theological preferences. Ever since the well-known statement from Westcott and Hort that "there are no signs of deliberate falsification of the text for dogmatic purposes" (Introduction to the New Testament in the Original Greek [New York: Harper & Brothers, 1882] 282), there has been a steady chorus of scholars intending to show the opposite to be the case. The idea of theologically motivated scribal changes can be traced back to Kirsopp Lake and J. Rendel Harris and more recently to scholars like Eldon J. Epp and his well-known book, *The Theological Tendency of Codex Cantabrigiensis in Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966). Bart D. Ehrman joins this chorus in his recent book, *Misquoting Jesus*, and argues that scribes in the early church were not merely disinterested copyists who mechanically transmitted the text in front of them, but, in one sense, continued "writing" the NT text by changing it to adapt to the theological and social challenges of the day. Of course, Ehrman has written on this topic numerous times before—most notably in his more technical book, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993)—and it has become the most dominant theme of his academic career. Ehrman laments the fact that textual variants are often overlooked and discarded like scraps on the cutting room floor and argues that they should instead be viewed as a "window" into the history of early Christianity and the struggles and challenges it faced.

In contrast to many of Ehrman's prior works, *Misquoting Jesus* is written for a more popular audience and begins not with a survey of academic works on the subject but with somewhat of a personal "testimony" from Ehrman himself, cataloging his transition (or transformation) from naïve evangelical at Moody and Wheaton to enlightened scholar at Princeton Seminary. He describes how it was his early studies in textual criticism, and his subsequent awareness of scribal "mistakes," that first alerted him to the fact that his view of inerrancy might be flawed. Having finally admitted that the Bible has errors and mistakes, Ehrman said that the "floodgates opened," and he began to change his view of the Bible radically, concluding that the Bible was "a human book from beginning to end" (p. 11). Ehrman's personal testimony in the introduction, although interesting, strikes the reader as rather out of place for a piece of scholarship coming from the secular academy—after all, are not evangelicals prohibited from appealing to their personal experience in their scholarly works? Ironically, as Ehrman distances himself from his evangelical past, he actually engages in a sort of reverse-evangelism with the reader, hoping to convince any readers who are "literalists" (p. 14), "fundamentalist" types (p. 6), and "one-sided" (p. 13) that they should reconsider their view of Scripture and adopt his own. Ehrman's appeal to his personal journey, if nothing else, gets his agenda for this book squarely on the table: to use the field of textual criticism as a means to challenge the evangelical doctrine of Scripture.

Although *Misquoting Jesus* is divided into seven different chapters, Ehrman's actual argument can be best conceived of in three parts. Let us address these three parts, one at a time. First, Ehrman begins his critique of the NT by arguing that the scribes of early Christianity—the first three centuries to be exact—were not in a position to make reliable copies, since they were not professional copyists but simply literate believers (some even illiterate!) who were willing to give it a try. Moreover, argues Ehrman, scribal activity in general was "maddeningly slow and inaccurate [and] that the copies produced this way could end up being quite different from the originals" (p. 46). Two responses are in order here. (1) If the overall transmission of manuscripts in the ancient world is as Ehrman describes, then one wonders how all of ancient history is not thrown into obscurity and uncertainty. Indeed, if manuscript production was such a "hit and miss" affair, we have no grounds to think that any account of ancient events should be received with any confidence—not to mention the very ancient testimonies that Ehrman appeals to in order to show that scribal activity was uncertain (testimonies which themselves are preserved in manuscripts!). Of course, Ehrman does not question the authenticity of these testimonies, because it is clear that he only desires to call into question the value of Christian manuscripts. (2) In order to argue selectively against Christian manuscripts, Ehrman must show that Christian copying was worse than most, which he has tried to do by arguing that Christian scribes were non-professional (even at times illiterate) and therefore prone to mistakes. At this point, Ehrman leans heavily on the study of one of his own Ph.D. students, Kim Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). However, Haines-Eitzen has been critiqued for drawing a false dichotomy between formal scriptoria and haphazard/non-professional copying, as if these were the only two choices on the table. Even if there were not formal scriptoria in the second century (and we are not sure), there are substantial indicators that an organized, structured, and reliable process of transmission was in place amongst early Christians. For example, scholars have long recognized that the virtual unanimity throughout all of early Christendom in its use of the codex (as opposed to the roll) reveals a striking degree of structural unity. Moreover, scribal features such as the *nomma sacra*, which are also found in virtually all early Christian manuscripts (even second-century copies), show "a degree of organization, of conscious planning, and uniformity of practice among the Christian communities which we have hitherto had little reason to suspect, and which throws a new light on the early history of the church" (T. C. Skeat, "Early Christian Book-Production," in *The History of the Bible* [ed. G. W. H. Lampe; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969] 73). Recent books, such as David Trobisch's *The First Edition of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), have also continued to discuss these features and the remarkable degree of uniformity within early Christian scribal activity. Incredibly, such textual evidence is simply ignored by Ehrman (and downplayed by Haines-Eitzen) in order to bolster the claim that Christian scribal activity was unreliable.

Ehrman's second overall argument (spread through a number of chapters) is that the manuscripts themselves are so chocked full of scribal mistakes and inconsistencies that they cannot be trusted. The reader senses Ehrman's excitement about being able to cite such large numbers of textual variants, and it seems that he is expecting that his readers will be stunned by these figures ("some say there are 200,000 variants known, some say 300,000, some say 400,000 or more!"; p. 89). He even appeals to John Mill's 1707 edition of the Greek NT (more

particularly, its critical apparatus) in which Mill catalogued thirty thousand textual differences with the various manuscripts in his possession. Ehrman proceeds to emphasize further the "problem" of textual variations by providing a brief history of textual criticism in chapter 4, highlighting how various scholars struggled over the years to find a way to recover the original text of the NT. Again, several comments are in order. (1) Ehrman's use of numbers here is a bit misleading because he never makes it clear to the reader that the vast, vast majority of these textual differences are typical, run-of-the-mill, scribal variations that do not affect the integrity of the text in the least (misspellings, word order changes, omitted words, etc.). Indeed, once a person realizes that such changes are a normal part of the transmission of any historical document, then they cease to be relevant for the discussion of the NT's reliability (lest all antiquity slip into obscurity). Such variants should be expected in historical documents, not put forth as scandalous. Yet this is precisely the point Ehrman refuses to make clear to the reader. (2) Ehrman's numerical barrage also does not take into account the vast number of manuscripts we possess. Obviously, if we only possessed say, five manuscripts of the NT, then we would have very few textual variants to account for. Yet, we have over 5000 Greek manuscripts alone (not to mention the various versions), more than any other document of antiquity. Thus, a pure numerical count of variants is misleading: of course they will increase, because the number of manuscripts is vastly increased. In many ways, therefore, Christianity is a victim of its own success. While the vast number of manuscripts should be positive historical evidence and indicative of the NT's authenticity, Ehrman, somehow, turns the tables to make it evidence for its tendentious character—a remarkable feat, to be sure. Unfortunately, the person left in the dark here is the average reader. On p. 87 Ehrman even acknowledges this point (originally made by Bentley years ago) but never offers a response to it. (3) In addition to these considerations, Ehrman also does not mention that the vast majority of these textual variants are easily spotted and easily corrected. Indeed, the entire science of textual criticism (of which Ehrman is an obvious proponent) is committed to this very task. However, Ehrman almost gives the impression that 400,000 variants exist, and we have no idea what was original and what was not, throwing the entire NT into utter obscurity. That is simply misleading. In this regard, Ehrman wants to be able to have his text-critical cake and eat it, too. On the one hand, he needs to argue that text-critical methodologies are reliable and can show you what was original and what was not, otherwise he would not be able to demonstrate that changes have been made for theological reasons (as he argues in chap. 6). Yet, on the other hand, he wants the "original" text of the NT to remain inaccessible and obscure, forcing him to argue that text-critical methodologies cannot really produce any certain conclusions. Which one is it? This entire method of argumentation is not designed to bring clarity to the issue, but to muddle it, so that the confused reader will succumb to the doubts that have been raised and concede the NT cannot be trusted. (4) Ehrman's appeal to Mill's study also proves to be somewhat misleading. The "thirty-thousand" variants that Mill discovered include comparisons not just amongst Greek manuscripts he possessed, but also comparisons with citations from the Church fathers and copies of the NT in other languages. However, it is well known that comparing Greek manuscripts with manuscripts in other languages, and citations from the Church fathers, is not the same as comparing Greek manuscripts with one another. Translation from one language to another brings in all sorts of variations (just observe the differences in our English translations of the NT), and the Church fathers are known for loose citations of the NT, for citations from

memory, and for paraphrasing and conflating citations. Thus, again, the numbers are not all they appear to be. In the end, if one were to take into account just these considerations I have mentioned here—the nature of these variations, the vast number of NT manuscripts, the ability to decipher the original reading—then the ominous “problem” of textual variations put forth by Ehrman would quickly shrink down to its actual size. Then, with rhetoric aside, the remaining text-critical issues could be looked at fairly. When that is done, it is clear that textual variations, although an issue that needs to be addressed, by no means threaten the overall integrity of the NT text.

The third argument put forth by Ehrman—and the pinnacle of his thesis—is that scribes not only changed the text accidentally but changed the text intentionally for theological purposes. In short, this section (primarily contained in chap. 6) is simply an abbreviated summary of his *Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, as he goes through the various theological changes: anti-adoptionistic, anti-docetic, and anti-separationist alterations to the text. Although I am not convinced of all of Ehrman’s text-critical rationale here, there are good reasons to think that there were scribal changes within the textual tradition that reflected theological concerns—a point that has been noted by scholars for generations. However, the problem is not whether Ehrman is technically correct about this point but whether he draws the right conclusions from it. One suspects that Ehrman’s purpose in bringing up this fact is to continue to stir up doubt within the reader concerning whether the transmission process of the NT can really be trusted. Apparently, if it can be shown that some scribes were not always neutral, unbiased, non-emotional automatons, who mechanically transmitted text from one page to another (although I am not sure who really had this conception of scribes in the first place), then we are obligated to abandon any notion that the NT text was transmitted intact. However, there are several considerations that need attention here. (1) Once again, the numerical significance of these alterations is left unclear. Intentional theological changes make up very, very few of the textual variations in the NT and therefore, on a relative scale, have little significance for determining the overall state of the text. The vast majority of scribes, in fact, did not intentionally change the text whenever they felt like it. Here is where Ehrman’s numerical claims in the prior chapters work against him. If indeed, the number of textual variants is as high as he claims (400,000?), then theologically motivated changes make up such a slight portion of this amount that one wonders why they are being discussed in the first place. Not surprisingly, such a discussion of numbers is notably absent from this chapter, because they seem to work against Ehrman’s point, rather than for it. (2) In addition, the theological significance of these changes also seems overplayed by Ehrman. For example, are we really to believe that the integrity of the NT hinges on whether the text of Luke 2:33 says “his father and mother” or “Joseph and his mother”? Was not Joseph the legal father of Jesus? Is not the virgin birth elsewhere attested, even in the same Gospel (Luke 1:35)? Moreover, it is not even certain this is a theologically motivated change—could the scribe not merely have swapped two synonymous terms? How does Ehrman know the motive of the scribe with any certainty? Such a variant as Luke 2:33 may be interesting in its own right, but it surely has little to do with whether the message of the NT has been accurately handed down to us. (3) Even if one were to concede all of Ehrman’s individual arguments concerning these various textual variants, one wonders what such a study actually accomplishes. Certainly it does not substantively change the critical Greek text that we use in modern scholarship (or the churches), because Ehrman

argues that each of these variants were not original. Thus, even if certain scribes changed the text with such a motive in mind, we have enough manuscripts at our disposal, so that we can spot these changes when they occur and identify them as additions. Perhaps, then, Ehrman could argue that identifying such variants help us understand the nature of theological debates between Christians within early Christianity. However, do these variants actually tell us new information about these debates that we did not already know from the detailed patristic sources at our disposal? And if the point is merely to demonstrate that some scribes intentionally changed the text for theological purposes, then has that not already been accomplished in the prior work of Lake, Harris, or Epp? So, one wonders why Ehrman is so intent on bringing up this issue again and again. Perhaps it has less to do with its relevance for the integrity of the NT and more to do with its emotional appeal to the reader. After all, it is easy to see why the average reader, who does not have all the facts, would be bothered by the idea that scribes altered the text intentionally for dogmatic reasons. On the surface, this argument is quite effective at stirring up doubts. Whether it is effective at challenging the actual reliability of the NT, however, is another matter.

In the conclusion of *Misquoting Jesus*, Ehrman makes a final observation that is worth noting here. He observes that we ought not to be too judgmental of the scribes who changed the NT because, after all, everyone who reads the NT "changes" it by interpreting it within his own way of thinking. Thus, there is no "right" understanding of the text that is normative; meaning resides with the reader because "to read a text is, necessarily, to change a text" (p. 217). Here is where, I think, we get to the heart of *Misquoting Jesus*. The NT, according to Ehrman, lacks authority because of all the scribes that have changed it; but that is OK because it simply reminds us that we should not seek authority in a text anyway. Authority and interpretation reside with the reader. Readers can attach their own meaning to the world in which they live. Of course, if this were true, then one wonders why Ehrman wrote this book in the first place. If meaning truly resides with the reader, then why bother communicating through the written words of his own book? I imagine Ehrman would be rather displeased if readers took his words to mean anything they desired. No, Ehrman's own book shows that he assumes some agreed-upon reality with his reader where words mean things and texts can be understood-including his own. For Ehrman to argue that texts have no inherent meaning, while writing his own, makes one thing evident: the only text Ehrman wants to remain unclear is the NT itself.

In summary, *Misquoting Jesus* is an interesting look at the field of textual criticism through the eyes of a former evangelical who is convinced you cannot have textual variants and also an authoritative Bible at the same time. And that seems to be the crux of the issue for Ehrman. It is not so much, I think, the quantity of variants that is at issue (although that is part of it), but rather the existence of any variant at all. Ehrman declares in the conclusion: "If [God] really wanted people to have his actual words, surely he would have miraculously preserved those words, just as he miraculously inspired them in the first place" (p. 211). In other words, if God really inspired the NT there would be no scribal variations at all. It is this shocking admission by Ehrman that reveals the core problem with *Misquoting Jesus*. Ehrman is working with his own self-appointed definition of inspiration which sets up an arbitrary (and irrational) standard that could never be met. Does inspiration really require that once the books of the Bible were

written that God would miraculously guarantee that no one would ever write it down incorrectly? Are we to believe that inspiration demands that no adult, no child, no scribe, no scholar, not anyone, would ever write down a passage of Scripture where a word was left out for the entire course of human history? Or is God prohibited by Ehrman from giving revelation until Gutenberg and the printing press? (Yet there are errors there, too.) Would Ehrman have been more pleased if the NT were delivered from heaven on golden tablets and not through normal historical processes? I imagine he would then object to the fact that the NT does not bear the "marks of history." It seems clear that Ehrman has investigated the NT documents with an a priori conviction that inspiration requires zero scribal variations—a standard that could never be met in the real historical world of the first century. Ironically, as much as Ehrman claims to be about real history, his private view of inspiration, by definition, prevents there from ever being a NT from God that would have anything to do with real history. Not surprisingly, therefore, Ehrman's book "concludes" that the NT could not be inspired. One wonders whether any other conclusion was even possible.

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