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LOSING CHRISTIANITY:
A NEW TESTAMENT SCHOLAR'S FALL FROM FAITH
(A REVIEW ARTICLE)

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Bart D. Ehrman. *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*. New York: HarperCollins, 2005. iv + 266 pp. Pbk. US\$14.95.

Bart D. Ehrman. *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. xv + 294 pp. Pbk. US\$19.99.

Academic authors often struggle with getting other scholars to read their works. New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman has achieved something very significant in taking extremely academic subjects, such as textual criticism and varieties of early Christianity, and turning them into bestsellers that have captured the public's imagination. Although *Misquoting Jesus* and *Lost Christianities* are separate books dealing with different issues, there is a common thread in the purposes of the author and so they will be reviewed together.

I will review *Misquoting Jesus* first, although it is the more recent book, as it is in the introduction to this book that Ehrman makes explicit the belief system that is the foundation for all of his recent projects. In this introduction, Ehrman presents a passionate and moving account of his conversion, first of all to evangelical Christianity, and secondly to agnosticism. After becoming a Christian as a young man, Ehrman began his theological education, developing a high view of Scripture in such conservative schools as Moody and Wheaton. However, it was while doing his doctoral work at Princeton that Ehrman came to

a crisis of faith. Encountering a difficulty in the Gospels that he was unable to resolve, Ehrman received the suggestion from his professor that perhaps Mark simply made a mistake. Ehrman accepted this explanation, then reasoned that if there was one mistake in the Bible, the trustworthiness of Scripture based upon the doctrine of inspiration crumbled in disarray. Ehrman has since become just as zealous for demonstrating the problems of traditional Christianity as he once was for defending its truth.

Misquoting Jesus is an examination and presentation of the issues concerning textual criticism. Ehrman is certainly qualified to speak on such matters, having studied under the late Bruce Metzger. Ehrman begins with a summary on the beginnings of Christian Scripture, including the emergence of Christianity from Judaism, the appearance of various genres in early Christian writings, and the development of the canon. Apart from any limitations that Ehrman might see in the original documents, it is the topic of the copying of the documents over the centuries that is the heart of this book. Ehrman provides a helpful study on the methods and issues surrounding copying, both in the Greco-Roman world and the early church, providing examples from the testimony of early Church Fathers. Not only can both accidental and intentional changes be demonstrated in many of the manuscripts of the New Testament, Ehrman also reveals the limitations of the printed Greek New Testaments as they began to appear in the sixteenth century. He provides a nice account of the various scholars who worked with the Greek texts in attempts to reconstruct the New Testament wording in a form as close to the original as possible.

The heart of *Misquoting Jesus* is the investigation of changes that have been made in the Greek texts by copyists throughout the ages. Although the majority of these changes were accidental, that is, common mistakes made by honest Christian scribes, Ehrman is particularly interested in the deliberate changes made as a result of theological and social agendas. Ehrman concludes by stating, "The more I studied the manuscript tradition of the New Testament, the more I realized just how radically the text had been altered over the years at the hands of scribes, who were not only conserving scripture but

also changing it.”¹ Ehrman implies that, because of these difficulties, our present New Testament is not a reliable representation of the original New Testament, much less an accurate account of the historical Jesus and the beliefs of the early church. All of this fits very closely with Ehrman’s own loss of faith as described in the introduction.

Ehrman should be commended for making such an academic subject an interest for so many people in the public. Ehrman has a lively and engaging writing style that draws the reader in, even when describing ancient copying methods or Reformation attempts at reconstructing the Greek New Testament. Ehrman obviously has a very strong interest in the material and an excellent grasp of the issues that make *Misquoting Jesus* an important book.

Unfortunately there are problems with *Misquoting Jesus*. Ehrman is unable to detach his presentation of issues regarding textual criticism from his own abandonment of the faith. Each chapter seems to be designed as an apologetic for skeptics like himself who have chosen to leave the Christian faith. Ehrman presents texts such as John 7:53–8:11, Mark 16:9–20 and the long version of 1 John 5:7 almost as the church’s attempt to pass forgeries as originals, even though most modern translations make it very clear that these were later additions. It would be wise for us to remember the words of Ehrman’s teacher Bruce Metzger who stated, “Lest the foregoing examples of alterations should give the impression that scribes were altogether willful and capricious in transmitting ancient copies of the New Testament, it ought to be noted that other evidence points to the careful and painstaking work on the part of many copyists.”² Unlike Metzger, who remained confident of our ability to reconstruct the earliest and most reliable form of the text, Ehrman

1. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 209. Note that Metzger only gave a page and a half to intentional changes in his classic treatment on textual criticism (Metzger, *Text of the New Testament*, 195-96).

2. Metzger, *Text of the New Testament*, 206.

presents a pessimistic picture of a hopelessly corrupt text.³ While that may be one possible interpretation of the evidence, in other ways *Misquoting Jesus* is self-refuting. Throughout his book, Ehrman uses textual criticism to demonstrate what he believes to be the original form of the text. While he may be trying to shock readers with his interpretations, he is in fact demonstrating that text critical methods are sufficient to reconstruct the text. Ehrman never brings the fact that he makes these reconstructions to its logical conclusion: the fact that we have the quantity and quality of Greek texts to reconstruct the earliest New Testament texts with a high level of certainty.

Ehrman's *Lost Christianities* is written on a different subject, yet it also promotes his agenda of casting doubt on the trustworthiness of traditional Christianity. Ehrman begins with case studies of four representative examples of non-canonical books: the *Gospel of Peter*, the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, the *Coptic Gospel of Thomas*, and the *Secret Gospel of Mark*. Ehrman organizes these texts under the clever categories of the ancient discovery of a forgery, the ancient forgery of a discovery, the discovery of an ancient forgery and the forgery of an ancient discovery. By looking at these four very different texts, Ehrman gives a good sample of the type of issues encountered when looking at non-canonical writings. In the second section, Ehrman looks at some of the movements in the early church that were responsible for some of the writings of interest including the Ebionites, Marcionites, Gnostics, and the group that would become the Orthodox. The third part shows Ehrman's real purpose for writing *Lost Christianities*, and that is to demonstrate the early diversity of Christianity and all that was "lost" when the proto-orthodox "stamped out" rival groups and enforced their own version of Christianity.

One of the strengths of *Lost Christianities* is the same as that of *Misquoting Jesus*, and that is: Ehrman is a talented writer and

3. Metzger concluded his work by stating that, despite a number of difficult passages, "in very many cases the textual critic is able to ascertain without residual doubt which reading must have stood as the original" (Metzger, *Text of the New Testament*, 246).

he is able to present academic subjects with wit and style. He draws the reader in and one can easily imagine the debates and feuds that took place within early Christianity. *Lost Christianities* is a good introduction to a sampling of non-canonical texts and an interesting but short summary of the movements that existed in the first few centuries of the Christian era.

The problem with *Lost Christianities* is the same as with *Misquoting Jesus*. Ehrman's agenda of trying to discredit traditional Christianity overwhelms his treatment of the subject. Ehrman agrees with the current popular idea that the church did not *begin* with the orthodox church from which numerous heresies broke off, but rather, diversity marked the church from the beginning with the orthodox church only gradually overcoming the others.⁴ Of course there was diversity within the earliest church. One can find some variety of style and focus even within the books of the New Testament. However, there is not even a hint in our earliest texts of the radical theological diversity that we find among the Ebionites, Marcionites, Gnostics, and orthodox. Another problem is the claim that the orthodox form of Christianity was not the original form from which the other groups broke off. Even within our earliest texts, such as Paul's letters, we have claims of the divinity of Jesus, an idea that was foreign to the Ebionites. The entire New Testament has a heavy reliance on the Old Testament and has continuity with that redemptive history, but the Marcionites and Gnostics rejected the Old Testament background. There is a clear trajectory between the teachings of the New Testament and what became the orthodox Christian faith. Since the texts that support the other movements are from the late second century or after, it makes better sense to suggest that the proto-orthodox faith was original and the other movements were schisms from the original form of Christianity.

There is no doubt that Bart Ehrman is a major figure, not just in New Testament scholarship, but in public debates on religion. Ehrman is a talented writer who knows how to connect with his

4. For a helpful response to this idea see Bock, *The Missing Gospels: Unearthing the Truth behind Alternative Christianities*.

readers and how to present academic information that is both understandable and interesting. Unfortunately, both *Misquoting Jesus* and *Lost Christianities* are driven more by a desire for an apologetic for Ehrman's own de-conversion than a desire to present information. Ehrman has a strong agenda to try to discredit traditional Christianity, a task that these and subsequent books have attempted. Both books are worth reading, as much for what they say about current religious trends and debates as for information on the actual subjects.

Bibliography

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