

Misquoting Bart: The Story Behind Who Changed *Misquoting Jesus* and Why



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During the preliminary stages, the title envisioned for this essay has been the venerable saying “Physician, heal thyself!” (cf. Luke 4:23). It was intended to remind the reader of the embarrassing blunder made by those who want to do for others what they cannot or would not do for themselves. It became obvious, however, that since the NT verse incorporating the saying was preserved with textual variants, Professor Bart D. Ehrman might be offended if anyone would use in reference to him a maxim from a NT passage tarnished by text-critical issues. After all, as he himself would argue, since the verse has been preserved in an array of textual variants, the original form and meaning of the verse is now lost, and for all practical purposes so also its applicability. Therefore, the initial plan had to be abandoned, leaving behind the present title, which proved to be a more adequate alternative. The new choice, of course, mimics the title of Prof. Ehrman’s best sellers, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*,¹ (henceforth *MJ*) and, as a parody, captures the essence of my intentions for this article even better than the first proposal.

The questions posed in this exposition are rather simple: what would the results be if the guiding principles used by Prof. Ehrman in analyzing and assessing the manuscripts of the NT would be applied to his own writings? How would his writings measure up to the stringencies of the careful and exigent scrutiny with which he assesses the value and the reliability of the NT documents? What would be the lasting impact of his arguments and proofs regarding the NT documents if his own writings prove to be affected by the same sort of mistakes he exposes in the NT manuscripts? Should his arguments and conclu-

¹ Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2005).

sions be rejected with the same pontificating tone with which he dismisses the text and the message of the NT?

Two points of clarification are in order at this juncture, especially for the readers concerned with the rationale for choosing Prof. Ehrman as the target of this essay, or, alternatively, for those uncertain about the need or, indeed, the usefulness of yet another response to his writings.

First, then, why Prof. Ehrman and not another NT scholar? There are several reasons for this choice. At the outset, there is a personal dimension. The decision to write this piece came in the wake of the debate hosted by Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City on April 1, 2010, an occasion that brought face to face Prof. Bart Ehrman and Prof. Craig Evans to discuss the historical reliability of the Gospel accounts of the bodily resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.² This was the second time Prof. Ehrman participated in a public debate on our campus.³ Unfortunately, just as it happened on the previous occasion, the opportunity to ask questions from the floor was very limited. My questions had to find a different venue from the inflexible format of the debate. Consequently, I decided to ask them in writing.

Evidently, there are more important reasons to engage with Prof. Ehrman's ideas than this personal anecdotal one. To begin with, Prof. Ehrman is a well known NT scholar, with a track record of scholarly activity admired by his peers and unquestioned by any serious inquirer. From his lectern as well as through his writings he has influenced and will continue to influence many generations of students in the halls of academia and readers in the pews of the ecclesia.

Among them, there is a particular group targeted by his multifarious efforts: the readers of (Evangelical) conservative persuasion, whether students signing up for his classes at the University of North Carolina or honest intellectual inquirers engaging with his books. It is no surprise to hear Prof. Ehrman taking pride in the number of his victims or in the extent of the damage he intends to incur among the members of this segment of his readership.⁴ Not only a gifted teacher and speaker, he is also a captivating author who knows how to harness the power of media to disseminate his ideas. It would be wrong to label him an opportunist on a quest to make a name for himself through his best-sellers; rather, he is a militant academician who takes the loss of his own faith to its most natural and logical conclusion.⁵ Indeed, the transition from being a believer to being a "happy agnostic," as he would describe himself,⁶ is the experience that he wants to duplicate in his readers. This has become the virtual battle cry for his life and career.

² The debate is posted as a link on the webpage of the MBTS, www.mbts.edu.

³ The first debate took place in the Spring of 2009 between Prof. Ehrman and Mike Licona on the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus.

⁴ In the interview on NPR, *Fresh Air* with Terry Gross (aired Dec. 14, 2005 on KCUR 89.3 FM).

⁵ *Misquoting Jesus*, pp. 1–15; the autobiographical account forms the substance of the introduction in *MJ*.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 247.

Moreover, Prof. Ehrman was once on the evangelical side of the front where many of the Biblical battles are fought today. In the autobiographical chapter in *MJ* he shares the story of his genuine experience of new birth followed by the intense desire to become the voice of evangelicals in the respectable halls of academia.⁷ While his youthful plan ended up being derailed, it is important to realize that in the process Prof. Ehrman acquired a firsthand knowledge of the conservative position on these matters; he knows intimately the weak links and attacks them with ferocity. Consequently, he has become such a formidable antagonist of the conservative side that it would be no exaggeration to conjecture that whoever can answer Prof. Ehrman can withstand any other opponent. He thus became not only the ultimate foe, but also the ultimate summit to conquer for the evangelical apologist defending the reliability of the NT documents: one only needs to find counter-arguments to Prof. Ehrman to successfully debunk any other attacks on the matter.

Second, why the need for yet another answer to Prof. Ehrman? The primary target of this analysis, *MJ* was published in 2005 and it has already received its share of praise and criticism. While on the list of New York Times bestsellers, the book received the most scintillating reviews and accolades. The book was an event in itself, not least for the novelty of thrusting a book on textual criticism on the list of bestsellers. In the furor of excitement generated by yet another book seeking to demolish the foundations of Christian faith, one written by a former believer and an expert in the subject matter, somehow the content of the book, primarily the solidity of its arguments and its proofs were less seriously scrutinized. It seems that it was again the duty of the Evangelical scholars to look more carefully into the substance of Prof. Ehrman's book and assess its main argument and expose its superficiality and bias. Indeed, this has been done by a series of responses both at the scholarly level as well as the layman's. Notable among them are the rebuttals of Prof. D. Wallace of Dallas Theological Seminary, in an article-long review of *MJ* in *JETS*,⁸ and in one chapter of *Dethroning Jesus*, a book co-authored with Prof. D. Bock.⁹ Equally damaging review articles were written by Prof. C. Blomberg of Denver Seminary and Prof. Ben Witherington of Asbury Seminary.¹⁰ While not answering directly to Ehrman's charges on the validity of the NT documents, Craig Evans' *Fabricating Jesus*

⁷ Ibid., 5.

⁸ Daniel Wallace, "The Gospel According to Bart: A Review Article of *Misquoting Jesus* by Bart Ehrman." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 49.2 (2006): 327–350.

⁹ Darrel Bock and Daniel Wallace, *Dethroning Jesus: Exposing Popular Culture's Quest to Unseat the Biblical Christ* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007). The book exposes a variety of popular attempts to undermine the historicity of the biblical portrait of Jesus Christ. The first chapter, taking on the allegation that "the original New Testament has been corrupted by copyists so badly that it can't be recovered" is primarily a refutation of *MJ*.

¹⁰ The two reviews can be found at the following internet addresses: Craig Blomberg at <http://www.denverseminary.edu/article/misquoting-jesus-the-story-behind-who-changed-the-bible-and-why/>, and Ben Witherington at <http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2006/03/misanalyzing-text-criticism-bart.html>.

brings also invaluable insights into the faddish interest of some NT scholars, Prof. Ehrman included, in giving the non-canonical writings an equal voice in shaping our understanding of the historical Jesus.¹¹ The layman reader is served very well also by Timothy Paul Jones' book size response in *Misquoting Truth: A Guide to the Fallacies of Bart Ehrman's 'Misquoting Jesus'*.¹²

I believe each one of these publications exposes the inadequacy of the arguments adduced by Prof. Ehrman, the spin with which he handles the data, the repeated offence of leaving aspects not mentioned when they go against his theory, and, ultimately, the straw man argument that he endeavored to transform into a real and substantial debate. This article will not rehearse the responses therein. Strictly speaking, most of the core facts marshaled by Prof. Ehrman are true: no original documents of the NT have been preserved; the text of the NT is the result of a critical collation of readings preserved in manuscripts; the manuscripts that survived, either complete or fragmentary, differ from one another; scribes did make changes unintentional or otherwise. However, the implications of these data are nowhere as radical or as incriminating as Prof. Ehrman makes them to be.

In what follows, the response to Prof. Ehrman comes from a novel angle that has not yet been brought into the dialogue; in fact, it is a surprising one, as the following story will underscore. I believe it can add a new dimension to the battery of counter-arguments to Prof. Ehrman's case against the reliability of the NT documents. Here is the background to the story, to put things in perspective.

I. A STORY OF EDITORIAL MISTAKES

In the summer of 2009, I was preparing notes for a seminar on the reliability of the NT documents to be presented at an apologetics conference in Romania, my native country. Since most of the work was to be accomplished away from my desk, I made a copy of the relevant pages from Prof. Ehrman's *MJ*, whom I have chosen, for the aforementioned reasons, as the main opponent in my presentation. Working through the material I spotted an editorial mistake. At first I did not give it any thought; it was the kind of mistake that careful reviewers would undoubtedly detect and alert the editorial team so that the subsequent editions would fix it. In time, however, I realized the importance of this mistake in building a counter argument to Prof. Ehrman's position. By then, however, the copies have already been discarded, and I had to embark on the tedious process of finding again a defective copy of *MJ*. Once I was able to document the blunder again, I realized that, ironically, the editorial mistake could be used to create an argument with boomerang effect on the main thesis of Prof. Ehrman's book. That indeed is the case if the measuring stick designed by Prof.

¹¹ Craig A. Evans, *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008).

¹² Timothy Paul Jones, *Misquoting Truth: A Guide to the Fallacies of Bart Ehrman's "Misquoting Jesus"* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007).

Ehrman to evaluate the reliability of the NT documents is applied to his own writings.

At the outset, however, it might be useful to summarize Prof. Ehrman's position on such matters. While his position surfaces frequently throughout most of his books, there are two titles in particular that set it forth in most clear and direct way.

The first, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, (henceforth *OCS*) is a scholarly work of the highest caliber, a quintessentially academic book.¹³ It is not a study intended for the reader at large. The title and especially the subtitle divulge his thesis, namely, theological controversies—especially the Christological controversies—have altered and shaped the content of the earliest Christian documents of the emerging NT canon. According to Prof. Ehrman, in the historian's quest for the original Christianity, the NT manuscripts that survived can no longer be considered a reliable guide in reconstructing the original documents, the autographs, since they are full of theological alterations that show a bias toward a particular form of Christianity. They are the results of innumerable interferences of well intentioned scribes ever so eager to alter the text in front of them to correspond to the ideas of the emerging orthodox Christianity.

Prof. Ehrman's thesis is not new: it goes back to at least W. Bauer's epochal study,¹⁴ acknowledged, augmented, and refined in *OCS*. The approach of his inquiry, however, is quite novel. Prof. Ehrman focuses on the scribal additions to, subtractions from, and alterations of the NT text. He contends that the scribal activity responsible for the preservation and transmission of the NT did more than just preserve the documents; it *orthodox-ised* them, relentlessly purging them of unorthodox ideas, and adjusting their readings to the theology of what would eventually emerge as the orthodox Christianity. The textual footprints of anti-adoptionist, anti-separationist, anti-docetic, and anti-patristic positions, the more important of early Christological debates, are traced down in the variant readings of NT key passages. According to Prof. Ehrman, these textual variants are the result of scribal activity designed to promote the orthodox view.

Given the quintessentially academic nature of the first volume, a work with such an intriguing subject matter and indeed such a provocative title could not have been kept away from the public. As a result the best-seller *MJ* was born, a layman's alternative to *OCS*. In it Prof. Ehrman, the scholar, sets aside the academic jargon, the footnotes and the scholarly pedantry, and morphs into Ehrman the entertainer. The conclusions of the second volume, while substantially similar to the ones in the former work, were formulated in ever more radical terms.¹⁵

¹³ Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993).

¹⁴ Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (trans. Robert Kraft, et al.; ed. Robert Kraft and Gerhard Krodel; Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1971).

¹⁵ See a similar conclusion in *Dethroning Jesus*, 40–41.

Here then is Prof. Ehrman's main thesis with regard to the reliability of the NT documents.¹⁶ It will be stated first in its logical, sequential segments and then will be restated as the main argument developed in *MJ*. Afterwards, instead of answering it in the fashion it has been in the titles mentioned above, it will be put under the scrutiny of the same logical instrumentarium used by Prof. Ehrman in assessing the reliability of the NT documents.

The original NT documents have not been preserved. The NT we now possess is the result of a selective reading based on copies of preserved manuscripts. These copies differ significantly from one another. The differences are the result of scribal activity, some unintentional and inevitable, but others done with full knowledge and intention by scribes who wanted to protect the emerging orthodox form of Christianity. The number of divergencies is so great, compared with the number of words in the NT, that in many cases it is impossible to reconstruct the original. Since we do not know the original text, the message of the original text was likewise lost.

When the inbetween steps are glossed over, the essence of the argument can be reduced to the following: since we do not possess the NT original documents, and since the copies we do have diverge so much from each other, it is safe to conclude that we are oblivious with regard to the very words of the original text and hence we cannot know its original meaning. It is as if we would not have the NT in the first place.

If this is the position taken by Prof. Ehrman on the text of the NT, known to have an unrivaled wealth of manuscript attestation, what would happen if the same arguments would be applied to his own writings, and specifically to *MJ*? This constitutes the essence of the remainder of this article. Prof. Ehrman's syllogism will be used on his own writings, forging an argument of similarity based on the intrinsic correspondence between the two writings: the NT on the one hand, and *MJ* on the other. Obviously, there are important differences between these writings, not least their authors and the time and circumstances in which they were written. These differences will be taken into consideration at a later stage, without significantly affecting the substance of the counter-argument. Here are, in parallel alignment, a sequence of the most important aspects singled out by Prof. Ehrman against the reliability of the NT documents, applied respectively to his own writing.

Phase One:

Prof. Ehrman on the NT: The NT that we now possess is the result of conflating readings based on the manuscripts preserved, none of them being the original manuscript.

Radu Gheorghita on *MJ*: The *MJ* is preserved in a variety of editions, none of them being the original manuscript.

¹⁶ Comparable summaries can be found in the aforementioned books; see also the summary in *Misquoting Jesus*, 260–261.

We will return to the issue of original manuscript at a later stage in the argument. Suffice it for now to acknowledge that *MJ* was published in several installments. The first edition was published by Harper-Collins as hardback, with a copyright of the year 2005. Due to its market success, presumably, the hardback edition was printed several times before the volume phased into the paperback edition. Indeed, the same first edition was published later as a paperback, having the same copyright mark of the year 2005. This paperback edition is the latest one that was consulted for this article.

The four copies of *Misquoting Jesus* on which the following analysis and argument will be built are:

Copy I: First Impression 2005 (True First Edition)

Copy II: An edition of the same work published in 2006 by Continuum International Publishing Group under the title *Whose Word Is It?*

Copy III: Tenth Impression 2006

Copy IV: Third Impression 2007

The focus of our discussion will be on pages 12–14 of Prof. Ehrman's *Misquoting Jesus*.

Phase Two:

Prof. Ehrman on the NT: The NT manuscripts that survived have many textual differences between them and differ significantly from one another.

RG on MJ: There are various copies/impressions of *MJ*, and the copies (impressions) differ from each other.

One of the main causes of variants in *MJ* is caused by a mistake in formatting of a sort that introduces errors at the beginning and ending of pages. In Copy I, a quotation from Matt 24:32–34 straddles the end of page 12 and beginning of page 13 (Fig. 1). Then, the end of page 13 and beginning of page 14 are straddled by the familiar quotation: “God said it, I believe it, and that settles it” (Fig. 2).

come, and Jesus replies:

From the fig tree learn this parable. When its branch becomes tender and it puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also you, when you see all these things you know that he [the Son of Man] is

INTRODUCTION 13

near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place. (Matt. 24:32–34)

Fig. 2: Copy I (Bottom of 12, top of 13 [Matt 24:32–34])

them such a view might seem completely one-sided and unnuanced (not to mention bizarre and unrelated to matters of faith). There are, however, plenty of people around who still see the Bible this way. Occasionally I see a bumper sticker that reads: “God said it, I believe it,

14 MISQUOTING JESUS

and that settles it.” My response is always, What if God *didn't* say it?

- o What if the book you take as giving you God's words instead contains human words? What if the Bible doesn't give a foolproof answer to

Fig. 3: Copy I (Bottom of 13, top of 14 [God said it...])

But then, in Copy II, we see that the format has been changed so that the Matt 24:32–34 passage appears in its entirety at the bottom of page 12 (Fig. 3).

From the fig tree learn this parable. When its branch becomes tender and it puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also you, when you see all these things you know that he [the Son of Man] is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place. (Matt. 24:32–34)

INTRODUCTION 13

What does this parable mean? Lindsay, thinking that it is an inerrant word from God himself, unpacks its message by pointing out that in the Bible the “fig tree” is often used as an image of the nation of Israel. What would it mean for it to put forth its leaves? It would

Fig. 4: Copy II (Bottom of 12, top of 13[Matt 24:32-34])

So far so good. The adjustment in placing the full quotation from Matt 24 at the bottom of page 12 in Copy II caused no problems in that edition, because the surrounding material was adjusted to accommodate the change as well. What happened next however resulted in a problem. Somewhere, somehow, someone, created Copy III by combining the page 12 of Copy I with page 13 of Copy II. The result is a hybrid in which the Matthew 24:32–34 quotation is cropped off right near the end of verse 33, with the rest of the passage not appearing at all (Fig. 4).

parable of the fig tree as an indication of when we could expect the future Armageddon. Jesus's disciples want to know when the "end" will come, and Jesus replies:

From the fig tree learn this parable. When its branch becomes tender and it puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also you, when you see all these things you know that he [the Son of Man] is

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Fig. 5: Copy III (Bottom of 12, top of 13 [quote cropped off]).

Phase Three:

Prof. Ehrman on the NT: If there is one divergence between the NT manuscripts, then there could be more than one. To put it in perspective, there are three times more divergences between manuscripts than there are words in the NT.¹⁷

RG on MJ: If there is one divergence between two printed editions of MJ, then there could be more than one. To put it in perspective, quantitatively their number is not as high as in the case of the NT manuscripts but there are several, none the less.

¹⁷ *Misquoting Jesus*, 90: "There are more variations among our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament," will be remembered for a long time as a formidable Ehrmanism.

As one would expect, the divergence at the top of page 13 signaled above might not be the only one. Indeed, it is not; there are several others, the most obvious being the one at the bottom of page 13. Since Copy III formats pages 12 and 14 identically to what Copy I had, reading the top of page 14 in Copy III gave me the sense of a *déjà vu* and alerted me first to another editorial mistake. Now words “and that settles it” from the phrase “God said it, I believe it, and that settles it,” appear twice! (Fig. 5).

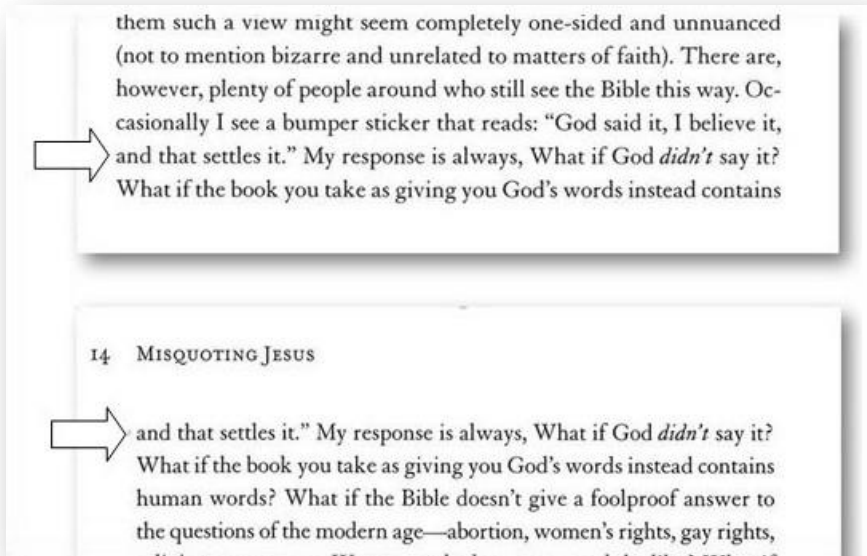


Fig. 6: Copy III (Bottom of 13, top of 14 [“that settles it”])

Happily someone noticed the editorial blunder so that we find it has been corrected in Copy IV so that now it is just the way it first appeared in Copy I. We may find it surprising, but in the same three pages we have been discussing a number of other interesting blunders occurred as well. On page 13 of Copy I, for example, the famous *Left Behind* Series is credited to Timothy LeHaye and Philip Jenkins. Problem is, Prof. Ehrman has misspelled the name of the first author of that series—it’s *Lahaye*, not *LeHaye*—and confused the second author with someone else. Philip Jenkins, who is the Edwin Earle Sparks Professor of the Humanities in history and religious studies at Penn State University as well as Distinguished Senior Fellow at the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor University, has written many interesting books, none of which, however, were part of the *Left Behind* series. LaHaye’s co-author’s name was Jerry Jenkins,

not Philip Jenkins. Happily, this error got fixed by the time our Copy II appeared (Fig 6).¹⁸

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Fig. 7: Page 13 (Copy I [above], Copy II [below])

A similar situation exists in relation to the spelling of prophecy teacher Hal Lindsey's name. In Copies I-III, Hal's last name is consistently misspelled as *Lindsay* instead of *Lindsey*. By the time Copy IV appeared the mistake was caught and corrected (Fig. 7).

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Fig. 8 Copy I (above) Copy IV (below)

Phase Four:

Prof. Ehrman on the NT: The divergences between various NT manuscripts are the result of scribal activity. While some of them are inevitable

¹⁸ In terms of the ongoing misspellings relating to Tim LaHaye's name, on page 110 of Copy I, we read how "the Hal Lindsays...and Tim LaHays...have had their prediccissors...". Both names are misspelled. *Lindsays* was later corrected to *Lindseys* and an attempt to correct *LaHays* was made by changing it to read *Lahaye*, which is correct enough on its own, but in the context it must read instead as a plural *LaHayes*. The latter misspelling was found in the most recent copies of *MJ* available at the 2011 San Francisco meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) and American Association of Religion (AAR). When the person minding the bookstall was asked whether corrections discovered would be passed on to authors or editors, the answer came back: "Probably not, unless they are *really* serious."

and unintentional, some changes were made intentionally and reflect the theological biases of the scribes.

RG on MJ: The divergence between the various printed editions of *MJ* are the result of editorial activity. While some of them are inevitable and unintentional, some changes *could have been made* intentionally to reflect the theological biases of the editors.

The formatting mistake relating to pages 12–13 in Copy III can be reasonably labeled as unintentional. However, this would be the case only if the readers assessing the mistake are willing to extend a level of common sense in processing the data, which is exactly the kind of courtesy Prof. Ehrman is unwilling to grant to the majority of mistakes made by the NT copyists. According to most tallies, that volume amounts to roughly 95% to 98% of all the scribal mistakes or differences between the manuscripts.

In the absence of such courtesy, one can easily fabricate various hypothetical scenarios in an attempt to prove that the changes to *MJ* were intentional. Here are several possibilities. Perhaps an editor, reading the last part of the quotation that did not make it on the top of p. 13, “[T]ruly I tell you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place,” wanted to avoid any embarrassment by including a quotation from Jesus that, to his knowledge, was not fulfilled as predicted. He simply cropped the last part out of the text. Alternatively, the end of quotation and, primarily, the NT reference (Matt 24:32–34) were not included because the editor knew that Prof. Ehrman does not consider the NT to be a historically reliable source. As editor, he read the manuscript carefully, and saw no reason to include an explicit quotation from the NT, which would make the book’s argument vulnerable to the same accusations leveled by the author against the NT.

Phase Five:

Prof. Ehrman on the NT: Due to the differences between various manuscripts, we do not know the original wording of the NT and hence we cannot be sure of its message.

RG on MJ: Due to the differences between the various editions of *MJ*, we do not know *with full certainty* the original wording of *MJ*, and we cannot be sure of its message.

Several reviewers of Prof. Ehrman’s work have signaled the inadmissible jump he made from the indeterminate meaning of a single verse—due to insurmountable text critical issues—to the indeterminate meaning of the whole passage, and implicitly of the entire NT. If that is an extrapolation allowed in the case of the NT, then it ought to be viable for the *MJ* as well. This will simply be the logical conclusion when one applies Prof. Ehrman’s argument on the unreliability of the NT documents to his own work. When measured with the same yard-stick the same arguments used by Prof. Ehrman to dismiss the reliability of

the NT documents and its message would necessarily dismiss the reliability of Prof. Ehrman's message in *MJ*.

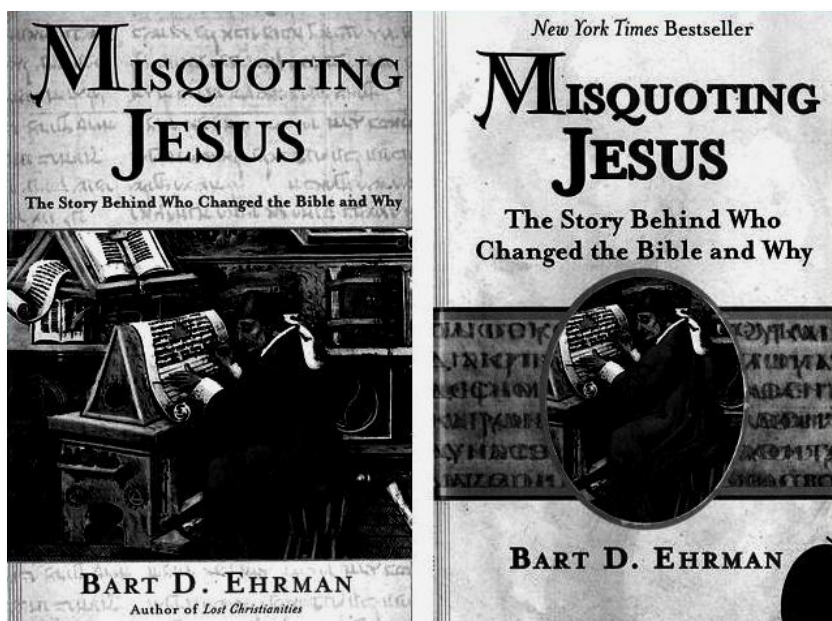
The readers of this article will undoubtedly realize that the above parallels between Prof. Ehrman's perspective on the NT documents and his own writings cannot be exploited too rigidly. There are indeed at least two important impediments before these similarities are endorsed.

First, it was evident throughout each phase that there is an enormous quantitative difference between the divergences found in the NT documents and the ones found between various editions of the *MJ*. There are only a couple or so in *MJ* whereas the NT has, according to Prof. Ehrman's estimate, 400,000 instances, roughly three times the number of words in the NT. Fair enough. Yet, when the quantitative aspects are pondered, consideration must be given also to the fact that *MJ* was written and published in the age of computers and digital processing, a time when an author is helped by an army of professional editors and proofreaders, all ensuring that the book goes from manuscript to publication without any mistakes. In this context one would expect to find only very few mistakes. The fact that even in this age of computerization mistakes still happen, only makes it reasonable to expect a considerably higher number of mistakes in the NT documents transmitted manually over centuries. As high as the number 400,000 appears to be, it is actually quite reasonable when one takes in consideration the time when they were produced, the kind of activity they reflect, and, foremost, how insignificant and inconsequential to the meaning of the text the greatest majority of them are.

Second, there is an even greater difference between the NT documents and *MJ* than just the quantitative dimension, as alluded to earlier. Of course, the reader might reject the above argument of similarity on grounds that the two writings are substantially dissimilar in several essential aspects. Unlike the NT, the author of the *MJ* is still alive and the original manuscript is, most likely, retrievable from his computer. Thus, any reader of *MJ* could theoretically get in touch with Prof. Ehrman and sort out the mistakes that eluded the editors, an endeavor impossible in the case of the NT documents. Fair enough, again. But what would happen if we would fast-forward to a time when both the author and the autograph of *MJ* would no longer be available? Would these not be two completely congruent situations? In 500 years, in the absence of the author and of *MJ*'s autograph, an anti-Ehrmanian would be able to make a case against *MJ* following the same logic as the one used today by Prof. Ehrman to dismiss the reliability of the NT documents. If the NT documents could be discarded on the basis of the differences between various copies, how could *MJ* withstand the test of time when it is vulnerable to the same accusations as the one it raises against the NT documents? To prove that the situations are actually quite similar, one only needs to reverse the clock and go back to NT times. If a time traveler would want to clarify any divergences between the NT manuscripts, he would only need to find the author and the writing's autograph, both available at that time.

II. IN PLACE OF A CONCLUSION

There could be no better way to conclude than to highlight another blunder made by the editors of *MJ*. I owe this observation to my colleague, Dr. Ron Huggins, who first pointed it out to me. I was unaware of the mistake since throughout the earliest stages of this investigation I had access only to the paperback edition of *MJ*. Dr. Huggins, however, was in possession of the hardback edition, and he observed that the Hebrew text on the cover was printed upside down. Here are the front covers of the two volumes:



Dr. Huggins wanted to hear Prof. Ehrman's take on this *faux pas* and inquired in an email whether the upside down printing of the Hebrew text on the cover was intentional or merely a printing lapse. Prof. Ehrman's answer came back promptly: "it's a blunder: but a terrific one, given the topic of the book!"¹⁹ A terrific one! While this incident might indeed amuse Prof. Ehrman, it seems to be the most revealing reason why the adage "Physician, heal thyself!" would apply so fittingly to this case. In other words, blunders and mistakes can happen in his books, without altering their message, but when they emerge in the NT documents, they significantly affect the ability to recover its original meaning. A more obvious case of double standards could hardly be found.

This study focused on the editorial blunders in *MJ* and concluded that, as far as the physical evidence is concerned, parallels can be drawn between the NT manuscripts and the differences between them, on the one hand, and the

¹⁹ Ehrman to Huggins (Nov 3, 2006).

various editions of *MJ* and their dissimilarities, on the other. While quantitatively there is an indisputable disparity in volume, qualitatively they are strikingly similar. As far as *MJ* is concerned, two editions have been identified and compared: the correct one and the defective one. Yet the divergence between them is not the only aspect that makes *MJ* comparable with NT manuscripts: there are also other minor imperfections in the book, both authorial and editorial. Here are some of them. The transliteration of the Greek text is inconsistent: sometimes the author opts for the corresponding Latin characters, but other times he makes use of the Latin characters that physically resembles the shapes of the Greek letters, but are not their rightful equivalents.²⁰ Mistakes crept in also in the Latin phrases employed, such as the typographical error in spelling *scriptuo continua* instead of the correct form *scriptio continua*.²¹ Beside these inaccuracies, there is the blunder with the Hebrew text on the front jacket.

What would the implications of all these editorial inadvertences be? How severe should the readers lambaste the author or the editor for them? Should the readers conclude on this basis that Prof. Ehrman's command of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew is inadequate, contrary to his own claim?²² Of course, not! But, if the readers were as unforgiving and averse in their assessment of *MJ* as Prof. Ehrman himself is in assessing the same phenomena in the NT documents, then these would be not only the legitimate conclusions but also the sole conclusions. Furthermore, just as Prof. Ehrman exaggerates the nature and the implications of the variations among the NT manuscripts, one can magnify the importance of the variations between various editions of Prof. Ehrman's book. The reader may conclude that *MJ* is a book full of mistakes; it has been published in many editions but there are enormous differences between them.

It becomes clear that, given the imperfections of the printed editions of *MJ*, every single argument used by Prof. Ehrman against the reliability of the NT can be turned around against his own writings. To assert that it is impossible to reconstruct with any certainty the original wording of the NT, and more importantly, that the original meaning of the NT has been lost because of imperfectly transmitted manuscripts has no scientific or historical justification; only an ideological one.

Silencing the voice of the NT on the basis of allegedly dubious manuscript support comes with a high price. If the author of *MJ* disallows the possibility of reconstructing the text and the message of NT from divergent manuscripts, then the NT is not the only writing affected; his books will be as well. Because of divergent NT manuscripts Prof. Ehrman does not grant the possibility of reconstructing the original text of the NT and recapturing its original meaning; by the same logic, the mistakes found in *MJ* would obliterate the main message of *MJ*, without the slightest chance of regaining it. It is as if *MJ* had not been written at all.

²⁰ *Misquoting Jesus*, 90–91.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 90.

²² *Ibid.*, 5.

Theme Classic: “The Inerrancy of the Original Autographs” (1893)¹



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OUR Lord and his Apostles looked upon the entire truthfulness and utter trustworthiness of that body of writings which they called “Scripture,” as so fully guaranteed by the inspiration of God, that they could appeal to them confidently in all their statements of whatever kind as absolutely true; adduce their deliverances on whatever subject with a simple “It is written,” as the end of all strife; and treat them generally in a manner which clearly exhibits that in their view “Scripture says” was equivalent to “God says.”

Following this example and teaching, the Westminster Confession of Faith calls “all the books of the Old and New Testament,” in their entirety, “Holy Scripture or the Word of God written” (I, 2), “all which,” it affirms, “are given by inspiration of God,” who is “the author thereof,” being himself “truth itself” (I, 4). Accordingly, it declares all these “books of the Old and New Testament,” in their entirety, to be “of infallible truth and divine authority” (I, 5), and asserts that “a Christian believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God himself speaking therein” (XIV, 2). For the further clearing of difficulties, the Confession distinguishes between translations of Scripture and the originals, and with reference to the originals between the transmitted and the original text (I, 8). Of translations, it declares that they competently transmit the Word of God for all practical purposes. Of the transmitted text, it affirms that it has been providentially kept so pure as to retain full authoritativeness in all controversies of religion. Of the

¹ *The Independent* 45.2312 (March 23, 1893): 2-3. Original style and spelling retained.

original text, it asserts that it was “immediately inspired of God”— a technical term in common theological use at the time, by which the idea of divine authorship, in the highest sense of the word, is conveyed. To this original text alone, therefore, it is to be understood, are attributed, in their fullest sense, the various “qualities” of Scripture which are ascribed to it in the Confession, on the ground of its being the Word of God— such as divine authority, perfection, perspicuity, entire trustworthiness, and the like.

Efforts are at present being made to undermine the historical truthfulness of the scriptural history, in the interests of a school of criticism whose view of the historical development of religious usages and doctrines in Israel is not accordant with that of the biblical writers. The Presbyterian Church has thus been forced, under the constitutional provision of its Form of Government (XII, 5), to remind the churches of its communion of their confessional doctrine of Scripture, which is being attacked and endangered by this advocacy of a historically untrustworthy Bible. In the course of the controversy which has arisen, the phrase which has been placed at the head of this article has somehow been forced to the front, and a strong effort is being made to make it appear the sole “bone of contention.” This is not at all the case. The present controversy concerns something much more vital than the bare “inerrancy” of the Scriptures, whether in the copies or in the “autographs.” It concerns the trustworthiness of the Bible in its express declarations, and in the fundamental conceptions of its writers as to the course of the history of God’s dealings with his people. It concerns, in a word, the authority of the biblical representations concerning the nature of revealed religion, and the mode and course of its revelation. The issue raised is whether we are to look upon the Bible as containing a divinely guaranteed and wholly trustworthy account of God’s redemptive revelation, and the course of his gracious dealings with his people; or as merely a mass of more or less trustworthy materials, out of which we are to sift the facts in order to put together a trustworthy account of God’s redemptive revelation and the course of his dealings with his people. It is of the greatest importance that the Presbyterian Church should not permit its attention to be distracted from this serious issue.

Nevertheless, altho the phrase “the inerrancy of the original autographs” is not an altogether happy one to express the doctrine of the Scriptures and of the Westminster Confession as to the entire truthfulness of the Scriptures as given by God, yet it is intended to express this doctrine, and does, in its own way, sharply affirm it; and the strenuous opposition to it which has arisen, has its roots in doubt or denial of this scriptural and confessional doctrine. It is important here too, therefore, that

the true issue should not be permitted to be confused by the skillful manipulation of a mere phrase. It has therefore seemed proper to call attention to some of the curiosities of the recent controversial use of this phrase with a view to keeping the real issue clear.

It is certainly a curiosity of the controversial use of a phrase, to see the Church's *limitation* of her affirmation of the absolute truth and trustworthiness of the Scriptures in all their declarations, to those Scriptures "as they came from God," represented as an additional strain upon faith. Would these controversialists have the Church affirm the absolute truth of scribes' slips and printers' errors? If we were to take some of them "at the foot of the letter," they would seem to represent it as easier to believe in the infallibility of compositors and proof readers than in the infallibility of God. Everybody knows that no book ever was printed, much less hand-copied, into which some errors did not intrude in the process; and as we do not hold the author responsible for these in an ordinary book, neither ought we to hold God responsible for them in this extraordinary book which we call the Bible. It is *the Bible* that we declare to be "of infallible truth"—the Bible that God gave us, not the corruptions and slips which scribes and printers have given us, some of which are in every copy. Yet a recent writer, with a great show of solemnity, calls upon the Presbyterian Church for "a frank and full disavowal," "of any intention to make the Inerrancy of the Original Autographs (as distinguished from *the Bible as it is*) a test of orthodoxy." But what is it that distinguishes "the Bible as it is" from the Original Autographs? Just scribes' corruptions and printers' errors; nothing else. And so this controversialist would have the Church "frankly and fully" disavow attaching more inerrancy to the Word of God, given by inspiration to men, than to the errors and corruptions of careless or bungling scribes and printers! Taken literally, this demand would amount to a strong asseveration of the utter untrustworthiness of the Bible.

It is another curiosity of the controversial use of a phrase, to find the Church's careful definition of the complete truth and trustworthiness of the Scriptures as belonging, as a matter of course, only to the genuine text [p. 3]² of Scripture, represented as an appeal from the actually existing texts of Scripture to a lost autograph—as if it were the autographic *codex* and not the autographic *text* that is in question. Thus, we have heard a vast deal, of late, of "the first manuscripts of the Bible which no living man has ever seen," of "Scriptures that have disappeared forever," of "original autographs which have vanished"; concerning the contents of which these controversialists are willing to declare, with the emphasis of italics, that they know nothing, that no man knows anything, and that they are perfectly contented with their ignorance. Now, again, if this

² Page number in the original article.

were to be taken literally, it would amount to a strong asseveration that the Bible, as God gave it to men, is lost beyond recovery; and that men are shut up, therefore, to the use of Bibles so hopelessly corrupted that it is impossible now to say what was in the original autographs and what not! In proportion as we draw back from this contention—which is fortunately as absurd as it is extreme—in that proportion do we affirm that we have the autographic text; that not only we but all men may see it if they will; and that God has not permitted the Bible to become so hopelessly corrupt that its restoration to its original text is impossible. As a matter of fact, the great body of the Bible is, in its autographic text, in the worst copies of the original texts in circulation; practically the whole of it is in its autographic text in the best texts in circulation; and he who will may to-day read the autographic text in large stretches of Scripture without legitimate doubt, and, in the New Testament at least, may know precisely at what rarely occurring points, and to what not very great extent, doubts as to the genuineness of the text are still possible. If our controversial brethren could only disabuse their minds of the phantom of an autographic *codex*, which their excitement has raised (and which, apart from their excited vision “no living man has ever seen”), they might possibly see with the Church that genuine text of Scripture which is “by the singular care and providence of God” still preserved to us, and might agree with the Church that it is to it alone that authority and trustworthiness and utter truthfulness are to be ascribed.

Another curiosity of controversy is found in the representation that the Church, in affirming the entire truthfulness and trustworthiness of the genuine text of Scripture, asserts that this text is wholly free from all those difficulties and apparent discrepancies which we find in “the Scriptures as we have them.” Of course the Church has never made such an assertion. That some of the difficulties and apparent discrepancies in current texts, disappear on the restoration of the true text of Scripture is undoubtedly true. That all the difficulties and apparent discrepancies in current texts of Scripture are matters of textual corruption, and not, rather, often of historical or other ignorance on our own part, no sane man ever asserted. We must not, indeed, confuse *real* discrepancies and *apparent* discrepancies, quoting Dr. Charles Hodge’s confession (Syst. Theol., I, 170), of his inability “to account for” some of the difficulties of the Bible, to justify our implication that they may very easily be accounted for—viz., as natural human errors in the genuine text of Scripture. The Church does indeed affirm that the genuine text of Scripture is free from real discrepancies and errors; but she does not assert that the genuine text of Scripture is free from those apparent discrepancies and other difficulties, on the ground of which, imperfectly investigated, the errancy of the

Bible is usually affirmed. The Church recognizes her duty to preserve the text of "the Scriptures of truth" committed to her keeping pure, and to transmit it pure to future generations; it is only that text that she trusts, and only on it will she hang the credit of her teachings. But she does not expect to be freed from the duty of studying this text, or from the duty of defending it against the assaults of unbelief. It would be a miraculously perfect text indeed with which imperfectly informed men could not find fault.

Still another curiosity of the present controversy is found in the constant asseveration which we hear about us, that the distinction drawn by the Presbyterian Church between the genuine text of Scripture and the current and more or less corrupt texts in general circulation, is something new. This is a rather serious arraignment of the common sense of the whole series of preceding generations. What! Are we to believe that no man until our wonderful nineteenth century, ever had acumen enough to detect a printer's error or to realize the liability of hand-copied manuscripts to occasional corruption? Are we really to believe that the happy possessors of "the Wicked Bible" held "Thou shalt commit adultery" to be as divinely "inerrant" as the genuine text of the Seventh Commandment—on the ground that the "inerrancy of the original autographs of the Holy Scriptures" must not be asserted "as distinguished from the Holy Scriptures which we now possess"? Or, that those who read in their copies at 1 Cor. 15:51 (as the possessors of one edition did), "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be hanged," would violently defend "the Bible as it is" against the claims of the genuine text? Of course, every man of common sense from the beginning of the world, has recognized the difference between the genuine text and the errors of transmission, and has attached his confidence to the former in rejection of the latter.

Richard Baxter was speaking no more for himself than for his whole age, and all the ages before him, when he defended the present position of the Presbyterian Church with such direct statements as these: "All that the holy writers have recorded is true (and no falsehood in the Scriptures but what is from the error of scribes and translators)"; "No error or contradiction is in it, but what is in some copies, by the failure of preservers, transcribers, printers and translators"; and many more passages of the same purport. In exactly similar manner Calvin and Luther repeatedly assign special difficulties to the corrupt form of transmitted Scripture as distinguished from the genuine text—no doubt sometimes without sufficient warrant; but that is so far from being the question that it is an additional evidence of their full recognition of the distinction in discussion. The fathers, because they were dependent on manuscript (as distinct from printed) texts, in which corruption was unavoidably greater, were even more free in assuming that difficulties which they could not explain

were due to corruption of text, rather than to lack of insight, on their part, and much more rather than to aboriginal error in Scripture. Augustine's statement fairly represents the judgment of the patristic age:

"I have learned to defer this respect and honor to the canonical books of Scripture alone, that I most firmly believe that no one of their authors has committed any error in writing. And if in their writings I am perplexed by anything which seems to me contrary to truth, I do not doubt that it is nothing else than either that the manuscript is corrupt, or that the translator has not followed what was said, or that I have myself failed to understand it."

From these facts alone, it is already apparent how seriously erroneous it is to say, as has been recently said, that the Westminster divines never "thought of the original manuscripts of the Bible as distinct from the copies in their possession." They could not help thinking of them. I fancy I see John Lightfoot's face, on some one making that remark to *him*, just after he had risen from the composition—say of his "Harmony, Chronicle and Order of the New Testament." And I should vastly like to read his account of the remark and of his answer to it, as he might write it to one of his friends—say to "the great Mr. Selden, the learnedest man upon the earth," or to "the all-learned Mr. Wheelocke, to whom nothing is too difficult or unattainable," or to "the admirable Dr. Usher, the magazine of all manner of literature and knowledge"—who was just then helping Walton in the preparation of his great polyglott. I should like to see how such a remark would affect Samuel Rutherford, while the ink was still wet on the pages of his controversy with John Goodwin on the very point of the relation of the inspired autographs to the uninspired but providentially cared-for transmission. Why, this was the burning question as to the Scriptures in the Westminster age. Nobody in that circle doubted the plenary inspiration and absolute errorlessness of the genuine text; the question in discussion was in what sense and to what extent could there be posited a divine superintendence of the transmission, and how far could the current copies and translations be depended on as vehicles of the Word of God. The Westminster men took high ground in the controversy; and their writings are full of the echoes of it.

It is, therefore, thoroughly misleading to represent the distinction made in the Westminster Confession between the "*immediate inspiration*" of the original text of Scripture and the "*providential supervision* of the transmission as either accidental or meaningless. The historical doubt really is not whether it may not mean less than is now attributed to it, but whether it must not mean more. And the declaration of the Presbyterian Church that her Standards teach that "the inspired Word as it came from God is without error," is a simple affirmation of the obvious meaning of

those Standards, and certainly is accordant with the teachings of the Bible and within the limits of common sense.

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