



Bart Ehrman's "Misquoting Jesus": an analysis

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Analysis of Bart Ehrman: Misquoting Jesus and Evangelical Textual Criticism

Bart D. Ehrman is a world expert in the textual criticism of the New Testament who has recently written a best-selling book entitled Misquoting Jesus (HarperSanFrancisco, 2005). This lecture asks what it is that has made this book a best-seller.

Misquoting Jesus builds on Ehrman's earlier work in his book The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture (Oxford University Press, 1993). In both books Ehrman argues that early orthodox scribes changed the text of the New Testament in significant ways. It is, however, in Misquoting Jesus that he argues that because of the corruption that has gone on in the New Testament text, it is not possible to believe that the originals were verbally inspired by God.

This lecture considers Ehrman's arguments, presuppositions and rhetorical strategies and explains how an evangelical should go about addressing the issues raised by Ehrman or others from a similar perspective.

For further resources responding to Ehrman, scroll to the bottom of the page.

We will first consider weaknesses in the specific historical model that Ehrman presents.

First weakness: Ehrman's work builds on a specific model of the history of the early church in

which what was later recognised as orthodoxy was just one of many groups which, viewed synchronically, cannot be said to be true representatives of Christianity. This model was particularly promoted by Walter Bauer, but investigation shows that on a number of counts 'orthodoxy' was closer to what was believed in the earliest stages of Christianity than the beliefs of other groups.

Second weakness: Ehrman constructs conflicts behind variant readings and then posits this conflict as a historical absolute by which he judges which readings are original. In days when it is held to be hard to know what an author thought it is even harder to know the motivation behind a variant. Ehrman is aware of this, but his response to it is inadequate. It is also possible that many of the variants which he says arose by deliberate act arose accidentally.

Third weakness: Ehrman is inconsistent in his use of criteria by which to judge an earlier reading.

Fourth weakness: for Ehrman's thesis to be plausible he needs a high proportion of the ensemble of readings that he prefers to be earlier and he needs to have grounds for reasonable certainty that this is so. However, the ensemble of readings that he proposes as earlier has not been recognised by textual critics to be plausible as a whole.

Beyond these weaknesses in the historical model that Ehrman presents, there are weaknesses in his argument in *Misquoting Jesus*. *Misquoting Jesus* is a book that attempts to engage with a theological topic, one that has been important to Ehrman since his involvement in a group he describes as 'fundamentalist'. However, in his attempt to disprove the divine verbal inspiration of Scripture, Ehrman does not engage with any of the most intelligent representatives of this position.

He therefore sometimes ends up attacking straw men. His analysis includes a number of conceptual confusions concerning the use of terms like 'original', 'change', 'alter', 'Bible' and 'scripture'. In particular he alternates between material and immaterial definitions of textual entities without realising that he is doing so.

There is a further aspect of his work which we can

analyse: namely, his populist rhetoric. It is of course legitimate for a scholar to use popular forms of speech. However, it is arguable that Ehrman uses rhetoric misleadingly.

For further resources on this topic, see also:

Peter Williams' review of Misquoting Jesus.

Peter Williams' interview with Bart Ehrman.

Nick Perrin has written a response to Bart Ehrman's claims in his book Lost in Transmission.

Peter Williams sums up some of his thoughts on this topic following his interview with Ehrman in his blog entry Do we contribute to being misunderstood?

Many thanks to Dr Williams for providing these additional links.