



Jesus, Interrupted

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Interrupting Ehrman: another attack on the reliability of the Bible

Jesus, Interrupted: revealing the hidden contradictions in the Bible (and why we don't know about them)

Bart Ehrman

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Readers of *EN* may remember a previous article where I reviewed several books by Bart Ehrman.

I observed that Ehrman had previously been a professing evangelical, but thereafter became an agnostic with a strongly liberal agenda in regard to biblical criticism. Ehrman is a prolific writer, gifted to present his work in a very accessible way for readers who have little academic theological education. The problem for evangelicals is that this means he is popularising often hardened modernist biblical criticism. This latest book has already received considerable attention in America.

Ammunition for Islam

A further problem, as my previous review mentioned, is that Ehrman's works are utilised by Islamic polemicists in their attacks upon the Bible, as demonstrated by a cursory glance at Muslim polemical literature and websites. Indeed, his books are on sale in Islamic bookshops. Recently, at a meeting between evangelicals and Muslims, one Muslim in the audience referred to his writings in order to suggest that the biblical text was untrustworthy. It follows that in order to safeguard untrained members of our

congregations, we must be aware of the challenge that his writings present and be able to respond to them – because sooner or later ordinary people in the pew are going to approach their pastors with reports that Islamic missionaries have attempted to shake their faith with Ehrman's material.

Ehrman's new book once again shows that he is an impressive communicator, able to take often difficult and intricate issues and present them in an accessible and readable fashion for 'the common man'. In that sense, his defection to agnosticism and theological liberalism is a tragic loss to evangelicalism. Would that more evangelical scholars were possessed of his communication gifts! However, it must be immediately objected that it is most unlikely that any such scholar would be able to interest a major publishing firm to take on a work defending the Bible. The reason? There would be limited demand for it. The ordinary public has a craving for 'scandal stories' about 'the church', especially tales that involve 'conspiracies' – note the popularity of *The Da Vinci Code*. Even the sub-title of Ehrman's book hints at this – why indeed does the general public not know about 'contradictions' in the Bible – indeed, why are they 'hidden' (and by whom)?

Nothing new

It must first be observed that there really is nothing new in Ehrman's book; the points he raises have been made – and addressed – many times before. He acknowledges this on p.2: *'The perspectives that I present in the following chapters are not my own idiosyncratic views of the Bible. They are the views that have held sway for many, many years among the majority of serious critical scholars teaching in the universities and seminaries of North America and Europe...'* He repeats this point towards the end of the book (p.271). There he tells us that the 'views' to which he refers are inspired by *'the historical-critical approach to the New Testament...'* The outcome of liberal presuppositions when attached to this system becomes clear: one cannot speak of the underlying unity of the New Testament, because this is the product of reading the Gospels 'vertically' (p.21), 'from beginning to end',

i.e. from Matthew to John, whereas they should be read *'horizontally'* – essentially, comparing the same story in the different Gospels, which he claims reveals various *'differences and discrepancies'*.

Presuppositions

Because of the constraints of space, it is impossible in this article to address all the examples Ehrman quotes, but they have been addressed many times before – e.g. the purported differences between the cleansing of the Temple in Mark and John. Craig Blomberg's excellent book *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* can be recommended in this regard. Our point here is that Ehrman allows his liberal presuppositions to influence his treatment of the subject. His tone is somewhat condescending when he suggests that if one is *'creative enough'* one could *'figure out a plausible explanation for both accounts being right'* (p.22). This merely shows that Ehrman is determined to see the accounts as impossibly divergent, rather than to consider alternative proposals.

Ehrman makes similar points about the date of the Last Supper in relation to the Day of Preparation for Passover in Mark and John, the Baptism of Jesus, the death of Judas, the Resurrection accounts, etc. Again, there is nothing new here, and all these points have been answered many times. One problem with Ehrman's book – which probably would face any book of this nature – is that, in order to make issues accessible for the ordinary reader, the detailed examination that such points deserve is sacrificed. Indeed, to answer all of Ehrman's points in detail would probably require several volumes!

Sometimes Ehrman's non-believing presuppositions come through in his treatment of biblical material, e.g. his scepticism about the Star of Bethlehem. He wonders what kind of star could move *'slowly enough for the wise men to follow on foot or on camel, stops, starts again, and stops again?'* (p.52), and then asks: *'And how exactly does a star stop over a house? I tell my students to go outside on some starry night, pick one of the brightest stars in the sky, and figure out which house on their block it is standing over'*. He acknowledges that the narrative describes 'a

miraculous event', but wonders what kind of astronomical body the writer has in mind. Surely, the point is, we are not dealing with natural, but rather supernatural phenomena, so there is inevitably a measure of mystery that human finite scientific analysis cannot penetrate?

Anonymous Gospels?

At other points, Ehrman seems to have sacrificed scholarly discussion for either brevity or polemic. Note his claim that the Gospels are *'anonymous'* (p.102ff). Surely some reference to the writings of Hengel and Bauckham at this point would have been in order. In the latter's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (p.300ff), he notes that, in classical times, many ancient biographies were of the same structure as the Gospels in this regard, and that the initial circulation of such works would have been among *'friends or acquaintances of the author who would know who the author was from the oral context in which the work was first read'*. Given the evidence for the wide circulation of the Gospels among the first-century churches, it follows that the recipients were, indeed, aware of their authorship.

Indeed, Bruce Metzger, a lecturer at the very same Princeton Theological Seminary where Ehrman first moved away from evangelicalism, observed in his book *The Canon of the New Testament* (pp.301-302), *'In the book trade of antiquity the title of a roll that contained a single work would have its title written on a strip or tag ... of papyrus or vellum projecting from the back of the roll. Inside the roll the title was placed also at the end of the work. Usually the title is expressed in the simplest possible form: the author's name in the genitive case, then the title, followed (if applicable) by the number of the book'*. Yet Ehrman never addresses this point.

Moreover, what can we say about his assertion about the linguistic knowledge of Jesus and the Apostles (p.105ff): *'As Galilean Jews, Jesus's followers, like Jesus himself, would have been speakers of Aramaic. As rural folk they probably would not have any knowledge of Greek; if they did, it would have been extremely rough...'* Surely Hengel demonstrated long ago that Palestine had been extensively Hellenised as a consequence of Alexander the Great, and there is evidence of Jewish gravestones in Jerusalem with Greek

inscriptions, to say nothing of the fact that Simon bar Cochba was known to write in Greek. Galilee, bordering Gentile areas and with Greek-speaking cities adjacent, would have been especially open to dual use of Greek and Aramaic. In many societies bi-lingualism is the norm rather the exception, whatever the social standing of the populace.

Motives

What is Ehrman's motive in writing this book? He tells us that it is *'to make serious scholarship on the Bible and earliest Christianity accessible and available'* to ordinary people (p.271). The problem is that the only *'serious scholarship'* he makes accessible is of a decidedly liberal bent, with essentially little acknowledgement of *'serious'* conservative scholars and their works. Another goal seems to be to encourage pastors to convey the *'historical-critical method'* (as he sees it) in their *'adult education classes'* (note the US-reference therein) (p.272, cf. pp.12-16).

In a paradoxical way, Ehrman has a point here. As he observes, Sunday preaching is necessarily *'devotional'*, but, even in Britain, there are opportunities for theological instruction during the week. Generations of Scots, Welsh, Ulstermen, and English *'Dissenters'* were raised on the Shorter Catechism (and their Baptist / Independent variants), and Richard Baxter was famous for catechising his parishioners. Available resources exist for instructing church members in conservative scholarship on biblical canonicity, text, elements of early church history, etc.

Age of popular smears

The problem is not just that pastors are unwilling or unable to put them in place, as Ehrman thinks, but also that attendance at such events would probably be limited. Yet, living as we do in an age of popular smears against Christ and the Bible, such as *The Da Vinci Code*, and in many parts of Britain facing the challenge of Muslim mission which utilises the works of Ehrman and others to unsettle ordinary church members, such meetings are no luxury. Both *'pulpit and pew'* must start to take the issue of general theological / historical education more seriously, if we are not to lose another generation to unbelief. Ehrman's own tragic descent into agnosticism is surely a

warning of this.

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