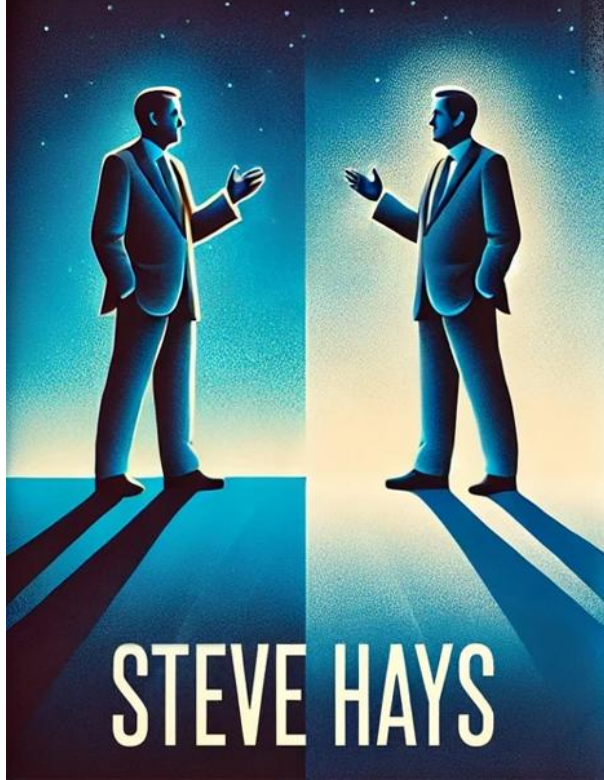


BART EHRMAN



STEVE HAYS

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Textual Transmission

Do all our MSS go back to a single error-ridden copy?

This is germane to Bart Ehrman's wildly unrealistic hypothetical (which he never documents, that I'm aware of) that all our extant Greek MSS might go back to a single error-ridden copy.

Trobisch attempts to circumvent the major crux of the issue by positing that seeking the original text is not about the individual books or their MSS so much as about the canonical text. As he states, "The history of the NT is the history of an edition, a book that has been published and edited by a specific group of editors, at a specific place, and at a specific time." He places this edition in the late 2C. As a result, one is seeking not the original text, but rather the original canonical edition, from which the later MSS can be traced as derivative. As interesting as canonical development may be, this too is not a solution to the question of the original text, as it begs the question of the prehistory of any book before it was 'canonized' and instead concentrates on the ordering and features of MSS that indicate their later editing, Stanley Porter, **HOW WE GOT THE NEW TESTAMENT: TEXT, TRANSMISSION, TRANSLATION** (Baker 2013), 28.

Do all our extant NT MSS go back to a single mid-2C exemplar?

I recently ran across this claim on Facebook:

It's pretty much accepted among mainstream scholarship that everything we have is derived from a single edition compiled around 150AD. Possibly by a single editor. I doubt that Ehrman contradicts that. Btw this scholarship is by David Trobisch.

I own two of his monographs on the topic. But I decided to run the claim by Larry Hurtado. Here's how our exchange went:

I recall you saying that David Trobisch's theory about the formation of the NT canon hadn't caught on in mainstream scholarship because ancient NT MSS don't exhibit the uniformity in the order of books that he attributes to them. Is that correct?

Not entirely. There are several reasons. NT writings initially circulated physically as individual works. Even after the four gospels were considered by many a closed circle, they still were copied as individual codices. No one thought of a NT in the second century except perhaps Marcion.

But, yes, we see different orders to NT writings once they began to be put together. E.g., P45 has the gospels Matt, John, Luke, Mark.

By God's singular care and providence

This is a sequel to my previous post:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2017/09/ehrman-on-nt-text.html>

Here's how another noted scholar responded to my question:

A huge majority of differences between the MSS we have are tiny and make no difference to the sense. Others are obvious mistakes that can be easily recognized. I would doubt there was ever a MS that was 100% correct, but so what? Most (or even all) of the published versions of my books contain some typos that no one picked up in the proof-reading, but I have rarely found one that would seriously mislead a reader. (If I had accidentally omitted "one" from that sentence, you would easily supply it.)

There are some verses of the NT where I think it is impossible to be sure of the original text. That doesn't really bother me. There are also verses where we can be pretty certain of the original text but where it is impossible to be sure what it means! So I do wonder whether Ehrman's argument is actually directed at Christians who think it important to be absolutely certain of the original words in every case. That is certainly not possible, but I don't think we need such a degree of certainty.

I think it is intrinsically very likely that at least in the case of the major books, many copies were made independently from the original "autograph" or from a

copy of it. Suppose Mark's Gospel was written in Rome. The church there would probably have several copies made to send to other churches. But then also Christians visiting Rome over the next few years would get copies made to take back to their own churches.

As you probably know, many works of classical antiquity have only survived in copies much later than the early NT MSS. I don't notice classical scholars regarding it as a big problem.

Ehrman on the NT text

Here's an exchange I recently had with a noted NT scholar:

As you know, a stock argument in Christian apologetics is to stress how well the text of the NT is attested compared to ancient writings generally. However, way back in 2005, Bart Ehrman produced an argument which, on the face of it, cuts the ground right out from under that appeal. And I've seen him repeat that argument in debates. He said:

Suppose, though, that the scribe got all the words 100 percent correct. If multiple copies of the letter went out, can we be sure that all the copies were also 100 percent correct? It is possible, at least, that even if they were all copied in Paul's presence, a word or two here or there got changed in one or the other of the copies. If so, what if only one of the copies served as the copy from which all subsequent copies were made — then in the first century, into the second century and the third century, and so on? In that case, the oldest copy that provided the basis for all subsequent copies of the letter was not exactly what Paul wrote, or wanted to write.

Once the copy is in circulation — that is, once it arrives at its destination in one of the towns of Galatia — it, of course, gets copied, and mistakes get made. Sometimes scribes might intentionally change the text; sometimes accidents happen. These mistake-ridden copies get copied; and the mistake-ridden copies of the copies get copied; and so on, down the line. Somewhere in the midst of all this, the original copy (or each of the original copies) ends up getting lost, or worn out, or destroyed. At some point, it is no longer

possible to compare a copy with the original to make sure it is "correct," even if someone has the bright idea of doing so.

Suppose that after the original manuscript of a text was produced, two copies were made of it, which we may call A and B. These two copies, of course, will differ from each other in some ways — possibly major and probably minor. Now suppose that A was copied by one other scribe, but B was copied by fifty scribes. Then the original manuscript, along with copies A and B, were lost, so that all that remains in the textual tradition are the fifty-one second-generation copies, one made from A and fifty made from B. If a reading found in the fifty manuscripts (from B) differs from a reading found in the one (from A), is the former necessarily more likely to be the original reading? No, not at all — even though by counting noses, it is found in fifty times as many witnesses. In fact, the ultimate difference in support for that reading is not fifty manuscripts to one. It is a difference of one to one (A against B). The mere question of numbers of manuscripts supporting one reading over another, therefore, is not particularly germane to the question of which reading in our surviving manuscripts represents the original (or oldest) form of the text. B. Ehrman, **MISQUOTING JESUS** (HarperCollins, 2005), 59, 128-129.

In my observation, I haven't seen Christian apologists adapt to that objection. They keep using the same appeal to raw numbers. It seems to me that there are several basic problems with Ehrman's argument, but I'd like your opinion on two related problems:

i) Ehrman's argument is hypothetical. But how realistic is that scenario? To my knowledge, Christians in the early church were highly motivated to copy the Gospels and other NT documents for personal use and general distribution. So what are the odds that all our extant MSS of the Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, or 1 Corinthians trace back to a single scribal exemplar? Wouldn't we expect our extant MSS to issue from multiple, independent streams of transmission?

ii) Over and above the abstract probabilities, can we tell, by comparing extant MSS of, say, Mark, whether they all trace back to a single scribal exemplar, or do they have dissimilarities which evidence different text types? Do they have kinds of dissimilarities which evidence different underlying exemplars?

To which he responded:

First, Ehrman's argument only cuts the ground from under those who must have a 100% accurately-preserved copy of the autograph. If you're willing to settle for a little less than that (and, really, you have no choice), then his argument is impotent. The facts remain that we have more copies of NT writings than for any other ancient texts, and that we have copies closer in date to the composition of their texts than for practically any other ancient literary text. So, we're in much better shape for doing NT textual criticism than for any other such task.

But, yes, Bart's scenario is probably a bit oversimplified. It's as, or more, likely that the Gospels were immediately copied multiple times, from these copies more made thereafter. Now, on the one hand, every copying is a possible occasion for errors and

intentional "improvements". So, multiple copyings = a wider scope for such things.

On the other hand, multiple and early copies mean that we have more of the evidence needed to detect such accidental and even intentional changes, and so correct them.

Letter boards

Suppose, though, that the scribe got all the words 100 percent correct. If multiple copies of the letter went out, can we be sure that all the copies were also 100 percent correct? It is possible, at least, that even if they were all copied in Paul's presence, a word or two here or there got changed in one or the other of the copies. If so, what if only one of the copies served as the copy from which all subsequent copies were made — then in the first century, into the second century and the third century, and so on? In that case, the oldest copy that provided the basis for all subsequent copies of the letter was not exactly what Paul wrote, or wanted to write.

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This is one of Ehrman's stock objections to the authenticity of the NT text, as we have it today. He repeats variations of this objection in his debates.

The argument appears to undercut the common apologetic appeal to the number of Greek MSS and even the antiquity of some Greek MSS. Although we have lots of MSS, if these derive from the same copy, that really counts as one rather than many. Likewise, although some of our MSS are very early, if they derive from the same defective parent copy, their antiquity doesn't make them reliable. I've discussed this before, but I'd like to say a bit more about the issue.

i) We've all seen letter boards. These are signs with movable letters. You have a box with magnetic letters of the alphabet. That way you can change the message on the sign when you have a new product or service to advertise.

We've all seen signs in which one or more of the letters dropped off. Sometimes the effect is comical. It changes the meaning of the message. However, it's usually easy to figure out the original message. If you know the language (e.g. English, Spanish), if you know the context, you can mentally reconstruct the intended message. This is something we all do. You don't need to have access to the original as a basis of comparison. Ehrman is overlooking really obvious counterexamples to his facile objection.

ii) Another problem with his objection is that we have four Gospels, not merely one. So he'd have to postulate that the chain of transmission was garbled, not just once, but independently for all four gospels.

iii) Ehrman has a "heads I win, tails you lose" approach to the Gospels. If they're different from each other, that's a contradiction! But if they agree, that's not independent multiple attestation. Rather, that just means Christians were telling each other the same stories, which eventually got written down. He's rigged it so that nothing can ever count as evidence for the historical Jesus.

The Urtext and textual criticism

Traditionally, the aim of OT and NT textual criticism has been to determine the original text (or autograph) of the canonical books. However, some contemporary critics have challenged the operating assumption. Take Bart Ehrman:

Assume, for a second, just for the sake of the argument, that chapter 21 and 1:1 — 18 were not original components of the Gospel. What does that do for the textual critic who wants to reconstruct the "original" text? Which original is being constructed? All our Greek manuscripts contain the passages in question. So does the textual critic reconstruct as the original text the form of the Gospel that originally contained them? But shouldn't we consider the "original" form to be the earlier version, which lacked them? And if one wants to reconstruct that earlier form, is it fair to stop there, with reconstructing, say, the first edition of John's Gospel? Why not go even further and try to reconstruct the sources that lie behind the Gospel, such as the signs sources and the discourse sources, or even the oral traditions that lie behind them? B. Ehrman, **MISQUOTING JESUS** (HarperCollins, 2005), 61-62.

There are many problems with that example:

i) Textual criticism is scarcely unique to the Bible. Producing critical editions of Shakespeare's plays involves the same notion—an original text.

ii) It's true that words like "original" or "autograph" are vague without further definition. These are terms of art in textual criticism.

iii) Ehrman's statement is silly and confused. It willfully confounds textual criticism with source criticism. But there's no good reason to conflate the two. A preliminary, unpublished draft is not a different edition of the same book, but an earlier compositional stage. The question at issue is not the stages of composition, or sources (if any) which may have fed into the composition, but the final product. Not a rough draft, but a final draft. The text that the Bible writer issued and intended for popular consumption.

iv) Here's how one textual critic defines it:

When we speak of the original text, we are referring to the "published" text—that is, the text as it was in its final edited form and released for circulation in the Christian community. For some books of the NT, there is little difference between the original composition and the published text. After the author wrote or dictated his word, he (or an associate) made the final editorial corrections and then released it for distribution. Philip Comfort, "Texts and Manuscripts of the New Testament," P. Comfort, ed. **THE ORIGIN OF THE BIBLE** (Tyndale, 1992), 183.

If that involves collaboration between the author and a scribe, we could dub the original or autograph the authorized text. Say a scribe takes dictation in shorthand. After he writes it out in longhand, the author reviews the transcript, edits it, the scribe then produces a final draft,

incorporating the corrections. If the revision meets with the satisfaction of the author, he signs off on that. If we postulate that the scribe is inspired, then that simplifies the process.

v) This is not an arbitrary definition. The books of Scripture aren't diaries. The author isn't writing to and for himself. Rather, he produces a text for wider circulation. The autograph doesn't consist of his notes, but the edition he intended for popular consumption and issued for general distribution. That's how it was meant to function.

vi) But suppose, for the sake of argument, that there was more than one authentic edition in circulation, or more than one authorized copy in circulation. Why does Ehrman think that would be a problem? They'd all be authentic literary products of the writer. All of them would meet with his approval. They'd all be authoritative. It's not as if the prologue and epilogue of John contradict what's in-between.

vii) However, we can approach the identification from the other end: Instead of asking, What *is* the original?, we can ask, What is *not* the original?

The traditional objective of textual criticism is to strip away changes in the text that were introduced by subsequent scribes. What is unoriginal, what is not the autograph, are changes or variations added to the text by someone other than the author or the author in collaboration with his amanuensis. That's a clear-cut distinction. A principled distinction, not an ad hoc distinction.

To take a secular illustration, consider an editor who tampers with **THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN** to

eliminate the racist slurs, without alerting the reader to his changes.

viii) I'd mention a further qualification. Some changes don't affect the sense. Suppose a 4C scribe spelled a few words differently than the author or his amanuensis. Recovering the autograph hardly requires us to recover the original spelling. It's the same word. I don't think there was standardized spelling back then. It would be mindlessly pedantic to insist that restoring the autographic text requires us to identify and "correct" changes that have no bearing on the semantic content of the text.

Chuck Hill on the original text

Bart Ehrman raises questions about the identity of the original text. How's how one scholar delineates the issue:

In *The Early Text of the NT*, you suggest that David Parker “gives the impression that concern for the original text is simply a religious phenomenon, driven by pressure from churches who desire an ‘authoritative text’” (p. 4). You point out, rightly in my opinion, that religious belief is hardly the only motivation for seeking a work’s original text. But what is the relationship between a high view of Scripture (as found, say, in the Westminster Confession) and the quest for the original text? Is such a view of scripture viable without the concept of a single original text?

Having a high view of Scripture, as you pointed out, is not the only motivation for seeking an original text. I don't know why anyone would make that assumption. But is a high view of Scripture viable without 'the concept of a single original text'? The short answer, I suppose, has to be 'yes', but it depends, of course, on what is meant by 'the concept of a single original text.' You can, of course, make a distinction between the original text (let's just define it as the text as it left the author's hands for the last time, with the author's intent for release) and the 'Initial text' or *Ausgangstext* (the text we reconstruct as the source of all the known readings). But even the 'Initial text' is a form of the text that originated with the author. Different compositional stages of a book (e.g., a book

before the author added a prologue, or decided to insert new material, etc.) are *not different editions of the book*, and it just seems like obfuscation to bring them into the picture.

The main, possible complication, I suppose, would be if the author did make a second edition (as some people have argued for the text of Acts). Let's say (for the sake of argument) Paul sent a letter to the Roman church and kept his own personal copy, then later modified his copy in some way, intending to make this revised copy the basis for copies that would be more widely distributed to the churches, perhaps along with a collection of his letters. In this case you could say there are two 'original', authorial texts of Romans, essentially two editions.

Each of these would have originated with the author with his intention to be 'released' or published. Each one, I think we would have to say, was inspired, written by Paul in the exercise of his apostolic ministry. So here we would have two 'originals'. In my opinion, the natural standard we would be seeking (if we could tell the difference) would be the final version that left Paul's control, as representing the author's final, intended 'original', even if it was not the 'original' original.

Or, let's say that the 'release' of a book like Revelation, or even one of the Gospels, for that matter, was marked by the sending out of several 'initial' copies as part of the release. What if there were minor scribal differences between them? In this case, presumably there was still one single master copy from which other copies were made, which would be the logical 'original'. But what if this, or any other, first exemplar itself

contained errors that were made and somehow not corrected, in the inscription process? Then the 'original' text, or the normative text, would presumably go back to the author's intention, no matter what happened between thought and words appearing on a page. This is why Warfield, in his book on NT textual criticism, identified the original text as the text intended by the author.

<http://evangelicaltextualcriticism.blogspot.com/2016/03/etc-interview-with-chuck-hill-part-2.html>

Porter on Misquoting Jesus

Commenting on Bart Ehrman's *Misquoting Jesus*, Stanley Porter says (among other things):

Ehrman notes, as I already mentioned above, that John Mill [c. 1645-1707] examined around one hundred manuscripts and found thirty thousand variants. Now, Ehrman notes, with over 5,700 manuscripts, we have somewhere between two hundred thousand and four hundred thousand variants. Or, as Ehrman likes to say, we have more variants than words in the New Testament. This sounds rather shocking; in fact, it is sensationally so. Mill had on average three hundred variants per manuscript. Is that a lot? Given that some of these are minor variants, others changes in word order, and others obviously slips of the pen, I think not. However, with roughly 5,800 manuscripts and, for the sake of argument, four hundred thousand variants (the largest number selected), this means only seventy variants per manuscript. With 5,800 manuscripts and two hundred thousand variants, that reflects only thirty-five variants per manuscript. So in fact, the situation with variants is getting better with the discovery of new manuscripts, not worse. Ehrman should be applauding rather than disclaiming. Another way to look at these statistics is to recognize that, on a conservative estimate, 80 percent of the text is established (some say 90 percent or more), regardless of the textual variants present in the manuscripts. If textual variants are distributed equally throughout manuscripts—they may or may not be, but there is no other way to examine this, and some of them, such as spelling, transpositions, and accidental scribal errors, almost certainly will be—this means that, if there are

four hundred thousand total variants, there are only eighty thousand in the part of the New Testament that is not established, or an average of only fourteen variants per manuscript in the disputed portion; or if there are only two hundred thousand total variants, only seven variants per manuscript in the disputed portion. This is manuscript production—remember, the copying of ancient manuscripts was done by hand—that nearly rivals that sometimes found today in modern print! Ehrman's comments, then, are a clear instance of unwarranted sensationalism. Of course, the way to treat variants is not simply to average them, but there is no need to sensationalize and exaggerate the situation so as to engage in fearmongering. After all, besides those mentioned above, many if not most of these variants will be unique variants, probably (on the basis of the distribution of dates of manuscripts, in which the vast majority are late) in later manuscripts, with little impact on the text; others will simply be the repeating of similar types of errors, again with little impact. This no doubt accounts for why in his treatment of the subject Ehrman returns to the same relatively limited number of examples of textual variants.

In **MISQUOTING JESUS** Ehrman's sensationalism, besides a few incidental examples, begins with the story of the woman caught in adultery (Jn 7:53-8:11) and the ending of Mark's Gospel (Mk 16:9-20)...Ehrman is misleading on at least two fronts. First, he makes it seem as if many, if not most, of the textual variants are ten to fourteen verses in length, as these two passages are, when he knows better. In fact, most of the others that he discusses in the book are a word or a phrase in length. This latter length is far more

representative. Second, Ehrman gives the possible impression that the scribes, in changing the text, deleted two valuable early passages, when quite the contrary is true. Later scribes, for whatever motives, added later material, but material that on the best textual grounds was never originally there in the first place.

An examination of several of these other shorter examples, however, shows that Ehrman is on thin ice to claim that there is radical and gratuitous change of the text of the New Testament. I will not treat accidental errors, because to know that it is an accident assumes that we know what it is not to have the accident. In other words, where such occurs, the original is easily discernible. I will also not treat intentional changes where it is clear why the change was made—for historical, theological, or factual reasons—but where the original or unchanged text is easily restored, or where the Byzantine tradition is the only one that supports it. S. Porter, **HOW WE GOT THE NEW TESTAMENT: TEXT, TRANSMISSION, TRANSLATION** (Baker, 2013), 65-69.

Copies of copies

As part of my ongoing review of Bart Ehrman debates, I'm going to comment on a few positions Ehrman staked out in his debate with James White:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5K-AOfj1Ayg>

1. Ehrman said: let's say Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians, and they got a copy, and then somebody made a copy of that original, and then made a couple of mistakes, then somebody copied that copy made a few mistakes, then original was lost and the first copy was lost, and that all other MSS ultimately derive from that third copy. The original wasn't copied any more, the first copy wasn't copied any more, the second copy was copied twice, and both of those were copied five times...so they all go back in a genealogical line to the third copy rather than to the original. All you can reconstruct is what was in the third copy.

The claim is that we can't recover the original text because we hit a wall. We can't go behind the earliest extant MS, or the extant MS with the fewest intervening links in-between the copy and the original autograph. We can't go back any further than the extant MSS. So we can't get back to the original.

I'm not a textual critic, but on the face of it, Ehrman's contention is obviously and demonstrably false. For instance, I read lots of articles, books, and book reviews. Sometimes I run across typos. Now all I have is my copy of the book or article. I don't have anything to compare it to. I don't have direct access to the author's original.

Yet when I encounter typos in the text, I normally I have no difficulty going behind the text to reconstruct what he meant. If he (or the publisher) used the wrong word, that mistake is generally obvious. Moreover, it's generally obvious what word he intended to use in its place. If you know the language, you can usually figure that out. You can infer the original word.

And it's not just me. Some book reviewers do the same thing. Near the end of the review they may list notable typos in the book. Not only do they flag the mistakes, but they have no hesitation correcting the typos. They will confidently say the book mistakenly used this word when the right word is such-and-such. Ironically, reviewers have done that in reference to Bart Ehrman's own publications. Now all they have to go by is the text before them; a single text. Yet they can go behind the errant text to say what word the author meant to use. This is just routine. I could give many examples from online book reviews.

2. In the debate, Ehrman repeated his stock objection that if God wanted to give us his words, why didn't he preserve his words? He then spelled out his alternative. How did he think God could and should have gone about that? He didn't propose that God ought to make every scribe infallible. He didn't propose automatic writing.

Rather, he said God could have preserved the original autographa. And that would give later scribes a standard of comparison.

i) Well, let's consider that scenario. The problem with Ehrman's suggestion is that it's too compartmentalized. When you propose these counterfactual scenarios, it's hardly enough to say, why did God do this instead of that, and leave it there. That's only a beginning. You can't stop

there. It's not just a matter of changing one variable, for these are not isolated variables. You must take into account everything that flows from this or everything that flows from that.

It's like asking, what if Hitler won WWII or the South won the Civil War? But a major point of those alternate historical scenarios is to explore the downstream consequences of damming or diverting the river upstream. What follows from the counterfactual? How would that alter the course of history?

ii) Apropos (i), if you know much church history, it doesn't take much historical imagination to generally predict what would happen if God preserved the originals indefinitely. For starters, these would become relics. Objects of veneration. You'd have pilgrimage churches where these relics were enshrined.

In addition, you'd have religious wars over possession of these relics. They'd be prized as talismans. Lucky charms for kings and conquerors, to ensure success in battle or ward off invaders.

iii) Whoever had custody of the relics would use for self-aggrandizement. Imagine how the papacy or the patriarchate of Constantinople would use them in self-promotion, as the keeper of the holy relics.

iv) In addition, having custody would result in restricted access. The keeper of the relics would determine who gets to see them—for a price!

v) Ironically, preserving the originals indefinitely would be an unparalleled opportunity to tamper with the text of Scripture. Due to restricted access, those in charge could

swap out the original and swap in a doctored version that contained readings which endorse the papacy, the patriarchate of Constantinople, or whatever.

Although having the originals would be useful to scribes early on, when the church was decentralized, yet over the passage of time, as ecclesiastical power becomes consolidated in "Apostolic sees," the originals would be weaponized to exalt Apostolic sees. This would be a mutual dynamic. Custody of the relics would expand the authority of the custodian, while expanded authority would further augment control over the relics.

3. Here and elsewhere, Ehrman keeps insisting that unless we have the autographa, we no longer have the words of God. But that confuses the medium with the message. That confounds God's word with a record of God's word. The word of God isn't the paper and ink, but the message. A MSS is just a storage and retrieval mechanism—like a CD. The same information, the same word of God, can be instantiated in various media. It can be written. Or spoken. Or digitized. Or memorized. In the latter case, the word of God is mentally rather than materially exemplified. God's word isn't lost whenever a physical record of God's word is lost.

(Peter J. Williams makes a similar point, although he uses different terminology to draw these distinctions.)

4. During the debate, Ehrman said that because some of Matthew's OT quotations don't exactly match the LXX or underlying Hebrew, in the extant samples at our disposal (e.g. MT, DDS), Matthew had a different form of the text.

But although it's possible that Matthew's quotations bear witness to a different textual tradition, surely that's not the

only explanation. He may simply be editing the passage to incorporate it into his narrative. An interpretive paraphrase. Combining two different passages. That sort of thing.

Inspiration and textual transmission

An objection to Scripture, popularized by Bart Ehrman, is the question: why would God inspire the authors but not inspire every subsequent scribe? Or as Ehrman puts it in one debate, If God inspired the Bible without error, why hasn't he preserved the Bible without error? It's an infinite regress argument. I've discussed this before, but I'd like to make some additional observations:

1. This is an armchair objection to duck the need to address the actual evidence for the Christian faith. An a priori diversionary tactic.

2. Suppose we had only one surviving Greek MS of the NT. That would simplify textual criticism in the sense of eliminating the problem of textual variants at one stroke. You can only have textual variants if you have at least two different MSS.

But we're obviously better off having many MSS. If we only had one, we wouldn't tell how representative that was. By having a large sampling, we have a much broader base of evidence. And even though that multiplies variants, it multiplies the number of witnesses to the original readings. Presumably, the original reading is contained in multiple sources.

3. The regress argument assumes a continuum where any cut-off will be arbitrary. An all-or-nothing approach. But that's very dubious.

Suppose a doctor writes a prescription. That includes the correct dosage. How much you should take how often.

Suppose the original prescription is lost. But that's a tradition regarding the correct dosage, based on that prescription. Collective memory.

Even though the original prescription is lost, it's certainly better to have a tradition based on the correct dosage than to rediscover the correct dosage through trial and error. If you have to figure it out by scratch, you may kill several test subjects before you hit on the right dosage. Some will die of overdose, some will die of underdose.

So it's useful to have the right standard as the starting-point, even if all we now have are copies.

4. It's fun for an unbeliever to taunt Christians with the question, "Why doesn't God inspire every scribe?", but there's no real thought that goes into that challenge. No consideration of what that would entail.

To simplify, suppose there are exactly 5000 ancient Greek MSS of the NT. Suppose the earliest dates to AD 150. And suppose all 5000 MSS are identical. But that postulate generates many conundra:

5. How would we verify that all 5000 MSS are identical? Can one scholar read 5000 Greek MSS and certify that they are identical? How would that work, exactly? How long would it take him to read through 5000 MSS? He begins with the first, reads it from start to finish, then puts that down and picks up the second, and so on and so forth. And as he reads each MS, he must mentally compare that with the others to check if there are any variations. Do we really think that after he finishes the 5000th MS, he's going to remember everything in the first, or second, or third? It's humanly impossible for him to remember and mentally compare the contents of 5000 MSS.

6. Suppose we create a division of labor. We divvy it up so that 50 scholars read 100 Greek MSS, then certify that these are identical. But that raises both similar and dissimilar problems.

i) Even if every set of 100 MSS is identical, that doesn't show that every set is identical with every other set. In every set of 100 MSS, each MS is identical with the other 99 MSS. But that doesn't establish that they are identical with the 100 MSS in a different set.

After all, there's no common frame of reference. Each scholar only read his set. He can't directly compare that to another set. He doesn't know what is in a different set.

ii) In addition (and this applies to 4-5 alike), the very act of reading and comparing MSS can introduce errors into the analysis. What are the odds that all the MSS are identical compared to the odds that a reader misread them, misremembered them, or misrecorded his findings?

7. Perhaps this would be more feasible in the computer age, but I'm not sure.

i) A computerized comparison requires each MSS to be digitized. If that involves someone manually inputting a MS into the computer, then he can accidentally introduce mistakes and variations in the process of transcription.

ii) Or if he scans a MS into the computer, I assume that requires sophisticated image recognition software. These are handwritten MSS. There's no spacing between words. The letters are irregularly formed. No two thetas or zetas are uniform. So the computer might misinterpret the data that's fed into it.

8. Suppose an unbeliever pushes the envelope by postulating that God inspires the readers. Hence, readers can verify that the 5000 MSS are identical. Or can they? You think they all look alike, but how do you know that?

This is like SF scenarios about alien telepaths. How do you know if what you see is real? What if the alien makes you think you see something that isn't there?

By the same token, how could you tell the difference between continuous inspiration and no inspiration? What if a reader is inspired to subconsciously correct a mistake, so that he never registers the mistake? He has no basis of comparison.

9. Conversely, suppose the 5000 MSS are demonstrably identical. But the fact (ex hypothesi) that they are identical with each other affords no evidence that they are identical with the lost originals. They might be identically erroneous. Identical with a defective exemplar.

10. Supposing the 500 MSS are identical, that would be highly suspicious. Evidence of massive collusion. The MSS had to be doctored to produce that artificial uniformity.

11. By contrast, when we have thousands of MSS with accidental mistakes, where each MSS has different mistakes or variants in different places, that paradoxically gives us confidence that this is a trustworthy historical witness to the originals, precisely because these amount to multiple lines of *independent* evidence. They weren't doctored to induce artificial conformity.

Debate Reviews

I forgot I had amnesia

I'm going to comment on Part 2 of the debate between Bart Ehrman and Richard Bauckham:

<http://www.premierchristianradio.com/Shows/Saturday/Unbelievable/Episodes/Unbelievable-Ehrman-vs-Bauckham-Part-2-Can-we-trust-eyewitness-testimony>

(I swiped the title of my post from a song by Win Corduin.)

1. I suspect Ehrman's influence is actually quite limited. Whose mind is he changing? He's not changing the minds of conservative Bible scholars—because they reject his definition of inerrancy. He's not changing the minds of moderate Bible scholars—because they reject his definition of historicity. Moreover, both groups are quite familiar with his stock examples. Both groups are quite familiar with the same data that he is. They arrived at their own explanations before he became a celebrity apostate.

Some liberal scholars agree with him, but he didn't change their minds. Rather, they already shared a similar outlook.

Apostates and atheists rubberstamp anything he says so long as he is bashing the Bible and Christianity. He could contradict himself, and they'd still root for him.

I think the only group he has much impact on are stereotypical young people growing up in intellectually lazy evangelical churches. They make easy targets.

2. Here's one of Ehrman's tactics: if his opponent happens to agree with him on the "phenomena" of Scripture, he acts as though they made a damaging concession. Problem is,

they don't think the phenomena have the same implications that he does.

For instance, one problem with the debate was failure to define a "story". Do Matthew and Luke change Mark's "story".

That's equivocal. For one thing, it fails to distinguish between the underlying event and narrating the event. Although there's only one event (in any given case), it's not like there's just one right way to describe the same event. To the contrary, there are different ways to accurately present or represent the same event.

Take the difference between expository documentaries, observational documentaries, linear narration, nonlinear narration, immersive journalism, &c. These can all be accurate depictions. Indeed, the multiplicity of viewpoints makes a variety of techniques more accurate.

3. Apropos (2), Ehrman said the Gospels are historically inaccurate because narrators provide the framework, which varies from one Gospel to the next. But that's equivocal. There's a difference between providing the framework in the sense of arranging scenes in a narrative sequence, and inventing a physical or temporal setting.

Ehrman said the Gospel biographies are not historically accurate in any modern sense of the term. Really?

What's the modern standard of comparison, exactly? For instance, I've seen hundreds—probably thousands—of documentaries in my lifetime. Is Ehrman denying that historical and biographical documentaries are selective? Use narrative compression? Nonlinear narrative (e.g. flashbacks)? Paraphrastic quotes?

There are different kinds of documentaries. For instance, you have expository documentaries with voiceover narrators. Both the narration and the narrative structure impose an editorial viewpoint. The genre may include reenactments to fill gaps in the record. They edit the raw material to form a logical rather than chronological progression that makes it flow smoothly, so that a viewer can follow the story more easily.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are observational documentaries, where unobtrusive cameras simply record what happens spontaneously, with minimal editorial intervention. Just let events speak for themselves. Presents material from the viewpoint of participants.

Is one more accurate than the other. Genre alone doesn't settle that question. Observational documentaries are more ostensibly lifelike. More realistic. More like verbatim quotation and strict chronology.

But that can be propagandistic. If subjects know they are being filmed, that affects how they behave. They may exploit that to influence the viewer through the image that participants consciously project. Rather than a director staging their actions, they stage their own actions to create a favorable impression. Conversely, the overtly interpretive nature of an expository documentary may be truer to events by evaluating events in light of the larger context and supporting evidence.

Ehrman has a positivist view of historiography. Just record things as they happened. But that's simplistic and misleading. On 9/11, airplanes flew into skyscrapers. Just showing what happened is barely informative. That fails to distinguish between an accident and a calculated attack.

What motivated the pilots? You have to go behind the events to explain *why* it happened. Ehrman has a bad habit of making oracular pronouncements that fail to consider obvious counterexamples to his confident generalities.

4. Ehrman labored to impugn testimonial evidence. But a basic problem with Ehrman's position is that even if, for the sake of argument, we say the Gospel writers had fallible memories, there's a big difference between the occasional memory lapse and systematically misremembering the life of Jesus. Unless the Gospel writers suffered from senile dementia, Ehrman cannot impugn the historical reliability of the Gospels by giving us cliches about how eyewitness testimony isn't "necessarily" trustworthy. His position requires a far more ambitious claim: observers consistently misremembered what Jesus said and did.

For instance, I've read reviews of biographies about C. S. Lewis which mention that Lewis is unreliable when it comes to dating events in his own life. biographers have to correct some of his dates. They go to great pains to work out a careful chronology of his life.

It would, however, be ridiculous to conclude that since Lewis misremembered *when* some events happened, that he misremembered *what* happened. Those are two very different things.

Indeed, it's often not a case of misremembering the date, but not remembering the date in the first place. If you didn't write it down or make a mental note, then it's not a case of forgetting or misremembering the date; rather, you never took notice of what day it was.

Later, you may attempt to reconstruct the date. But that's a different process. That's about attempting to remember

something else that happened around the same time, and using that as a frame of reference to fix the rough timeframe of the incident whose calendar date you can't remember directly.

5. Bauckham noted that witnesses may misremember the details of an accident because it was unexpected. To expand on what he said, they didn't see it coming. They were surprised. Unprepared. They only focus on the accident after it happens. After the initial shock wears off.

He also said most forgetting occurs in the first few hours or a couple of days after the incident. Memories that survive that window are likely to stick. Moreover, once we begin to rehearse what happened, it falls into a standard stable form.

We remember the gist rather than details. A persistent narrative core. He cited Synoptic parallels regarding Peter's denials, where the gist remains despite variations.

Regarding oral cultures, Bauckham drew a distinction between two different genres: stories that are meant to be entertaining, that have a new plot twist each time you tell it—and stories that try to faithfully preserve what happened. In addition, we need to consider what cultures bother to remember.

Bauckham says Gospel writers sometimes arrange material topically rather than chronologically. Mark has a whole series of miracles that happen one after another. That doesn't mean they all happened on the same day. That doesn't mean Mark is trying to put them in the "right" (i.e. chronological) order. Rather, he's grouping incidents by

topic. Sometimes the order is pedagogical rather than chronological.

Conversely, there are times when chronology matters. The baptism of Jesus needs to be at the beginning of his public ministry. By the same token, there's a natural sequence of events leading up to his death, in the final week of his life.

In editing Mark, Bauckham pointed out that Matthew and Luke feel freer to vary his plot than vary the sayings of Jesus.

He noted historians who vary their own accounts. To expand on his statement, Josephus has some overlapping material in the **ANTIQUITIES OF THE JEWS** and **THE JEWISH WAR**. The variations aren't due to oral tradition. It's the same author in both instances.

Bauckham doesn't think you can or should evaluate the historicity of the sayings by assessing them line-by-line, but by assessing the general reliability of the source. Bauckham dates Mark and Luke to the 60s.

6. Ehrman labored to use the Sermon on the Mount to illustrate the historical unreliability of the Gospels. How could anyone recall the Sermon on the Mount after hearing it one time 50 years ago?

Several issues:

i) He dates Matthew to 80-85. Of course, you have scholars who date it about 20 years earlier.

ii) Traditionally, Christians didn't assume that Bible narrators had to rely on their unaided memory of events.

Rather, they had inspired memories.

Of course, Ehrman rejects the inspiration of Scripture. Indeed, he's an atheist. However, since he's challenging the plausibility of the traditional view of Scripture, he needs to take inspiration into account for the sake of argument.

iii) His objection presumes the unity of the Sermon on the Mount. But you can affirm the inerrancy of Matthew or historical reliability of Matthew without assuming this was all said at one sitting. It could be a composite discourse. A compilation of independent sayings.

These independent sayings are individually memorable. Pithy sayings. Catchy phrasing. Memorable imagery. Memorable vignettes.

Moreover, Jesus would have occasion to repeat these sayings on multiple occasions. If Matthew's Gospel was written by an apostle, he'd have occasion to hear these sayings many times.

On this view, Jesus really did address a large audience on that occasion. Matthew is quoting things Jesus actually said at the time. But Matthew is taking the opportunity to piggyback other things Jesus said on other occasions. In addition to a core message, Matthew takes advantage of the situation to collate many independent sayings of Jesus and attach them to the original address. Grouping material makes it easier for his readers to keep track of the material. On that view, Matthew didn't have to absorb it all at one sitting. And that's perfectly consistent with the inerrancy of Scripture.

(Another view is that Jesus said it all at the same place, but not at the same time. That this was spread out over a few

days.)

7. More than once, Ehrman compared the canonical Gospels to the Gospel of Thomas. For instance, he said about half the sayings attributed to Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas are not at all like Matthew and Luke.

But that's very deceptive. That's not about "changing" sayings of Jesus, but *inventing* sayings of Jesus. Ehrman banking on the fact that the average listener knows next to nothing about the Gospel of Thomas.

The Gospel of Thomas isn't comparable to the canonical Gospels. The document is just a collection of sayings with no narrative context. According to Simon Gathercole, it was written sometime between 135 AD and c. 200 AD. Cf. S. Gathercole, **THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS: INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY** (Brill, 2014), 121,124.

It borrows from Matthew, Luke, Romans, and Hebrews (120). So this is not an independent historical source.

Moreover, we only have fragments in the original Greek (Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 1). The full text is preserved in a 4C Coptic translation. Gathercole says "Clearly the Coptic is not a straightforwardly literal translation that would enable us to reconstruct the Greek behind it" (19); cf. S. Gathercole, *The Composition of the Gospel of Thomas: Original Language and Influences* (Cambridge, 2012).

Let's take stock. Consider how duplicitous it is for Ehrman to bring this up. He alleges that the Synoptic Gospels are historically unreliable because they were written some 50 years after the event. In other books and debates he questions the textual authenticity of the canonical Gospels.

Yet he's now citing an apocryphal Gospel that at a low-end estimate was written at least a century after the event. And at a high-end estimate, 170 years later! Moreover, we must rely on a loose, Coptic translation from the 4C for the full text. So this is filtered through a translation. And, of course, the MS attestation for the Gospel of Thomas is far inferior to the canonical Gospels. His comparison commits a whole litany of double standards.

8. Ehrman said the Challenger disaster happened on Jan 28, 1986. He uses the Challenger disaster to illustrate how reliable memory is, yet he recites from memory the exact date of the incident.

Indeed, throughout the debate, he cited from memory his recollection of memory studies about the unreliability of memory. He said he'd read hundreds of books and articles on memory studies. That's a lot to remember. So he had to rely on his unreliable memory of memory studies to demonstrate that memory is unreliable. But if memory is unreliable, why should we trust his summary of the evidence?

Ehrman is a NT textual critic by training. That's a very dry discipline. It requires you to memorize tons of arcane minutiae. How can you be a textual critic if memory is so fickle?

9. Memory isn't any one thing. When we discuss the reliability of memory, we need to draw many distinctions. For instance:

'Propositional memory' is '*semantic memory*' or memory for facts, the vast network of conceptual information underlying our general knowledge of the

world: this is naturally expressed as 'remembering *that*', for example, that Descartes died in Sweden.

'Recollective memory' is '*episodic memory*', also sometimes called 'personal memory', 'experiential memory', or 'direct memory' by philosophers: this is memory for experienced events and episodes, such as a conversation this morning or the death of a friend eight years ago.

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/memory/#VarRem>

10. Ehrman cited studies of students who misremembered details of the space shuttle Challenger disaster.

i) I resisted the impulse to Google it in order to refresh my recollection. So here's my 30-year-old recollection of the Challenger disaster:

I remember that morning switching on the TV and seeing footage of a rocket rising, then exploding. I remember the shocked, almost speechless reaction of the TV reporter.

It's possible that I saw it live, or maybe a replay. I'm guessing the latter.

I then had to drive a relative to a hair appointment. That's all I heard about the incident until I came home and saw the evening news, hours later.

I myself didn't think it was a huge deal when I first saw it. Sure, it was tragic for the astronauts, but accidents kill hundreds of people everyday.

I don't recall the number of astronauts. I believe it was between 5 and 10.

One of the astronauts was a woman. A school teacher.

I recall reporters who said her students were watching the liftoff live, and remarked on their reaction when they realized that their teacher went up in smoke.

I remember social commentators saying that for the younger generation, this was equivalent to the JFK assassination: Where were you when it happened?

I recall lots of subsequent news coverage about the investigation into the accident. I remember a Congressional hearing where Richard Feynman testified and performed a simple demonstration about what went wrong. He put rings in a glass of clear fluid and they began to disintegrate. Something like that.

I remember allegations that NASA administrators knew the O-rings were a design flaw, an accident waiting to happen (mechanical failure), but they refused to delay the launch.

ii) In general, I don't think the Challenger disaster is a good test of memory. What makes it memorable? For whom is it memorable?

You can have the same number of people killed in a freeway pileup. You can have hundreds of people killed in an airplane crash.

Is it the incident itself that was so memorable, or did the sustained coverage make it memorable?

Do people remember the incident itself, or coverage of the incident—including the personal interest story about the

teacher who was killed, the scandal involving NASA administrators, &c?

The coverage can change how they remember it. That doesn't necessarily mean they misremember it. It changes the emphasis. Changes what they remember. That isn't inaccurate. Rather, that's additional information.

NASA has, or used to have, a certain iconic significance in American culture. So that hyped the coverage.

I think it was more memorable to a certain age group because they had nothing bigger to compare it with. By contrast, I was in my mid-20s when it happened. I lived through some harrowing coverage of the Vietnam War. The assassinations of JFK, Bobby Kennedy, and Martin Luther King.

In addition to public events, my grandmother had died three months after I graduated from high school, some 8 years prior. From a personal standpoint, that was far more memorable to me than the Challenger disaster. I don't wish to sound cruel, but by the time the Challenger disaster rolled around, I was already somewhat jaded.

Tarry in Jerusalem

Last night I was watching the recent debate between Mike Licona and Bart Ehrman:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qP7RrCfDkO4&feature=youtu.be>

In this post I'm just going to comment on some of Ehrman's allegations. Ehrman is a tedious debater because he recycles the same objections year after year, from one debate to the next. In this debate he used many of the same examples he cited in his written debate with Licona. Likewise, he used many of the same example he cited in his 2005 book **JESUS INTERRUPTED**. Ehrman rarely revises his examples and objections in response to correction. Rather than transcribe or summarize when he said in his recent debate with Licona, it's simpler to quote the same objections in written sources:

<https://thebestschools.org/special/ehrman-licona-dialogue-reliability-new-testament/ehrman-major-statement/>

<https://thebestschools.org/special/ehrman-licona-dialogue-reliability-new-testament/ehrman-detailed-response/>

1. Verbatim Recollection

In the Gospel of Matthew we have the famous "Sermon on the Mount." It is one of the best known and most beloved set of ethical teachings the planet has ever seen. It takes up fully three chapters of the Gospel (it is not found in any of the other three). But Matthew

was writing his account some 50 years or so after the sermon was allegedly given. How would he know what was said?

Give it some thought. Suppose you were supposed to write down a speech that you yourself had listened to a while ago. Suppose it was a speech delivered by a presidential candidate last month. If you had no notes, but just your memory—how well would you do? Or suppose you wanted to write down, without notes, Obama’s first “State of the Union” address? That was only seven years ago. How well would you do? How well would you do with the first “State of the Union” address delivered by Lyndon Johnson? My guess is that you wouldn’t have a clue.

i) For starters, I doubt that Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount at one sitting. It would be impossible to a listener to absorb that density of the material. Rather, I suspect the Sermon on the Mount is a composite speech. Some of that was spoken on that occasion, and some of that was spoken on other occasions.

ii) I don't assume that the Gospels are the product of what the authors could naturally remember. Rather, their memory is enhanced by inspiration.

2. Synoptic/Johannine Christology

In John, however, Jesus’s preaching is almost entirely about his own identity. Here he makes the most breathtaking claims about himself, repeatedly claiming to be God, to the dismay of his Jewish listeners who regularly take up stones to execute him for blasphemy. You don’t find anything like that in the public ministry of Jesus in the other Gospels. But here in John, Jesus

says such things as “Before Abraham was, I am” (Abraham lived 1,800 years earlier! [John 8:58](#)); “I and the Father are one” (10:30); “If you have seen me you have seen the Father” (14:9). Here, Jesus speaks of the glory that he shared with the Father before the world was created (17:5).

These are spectacular passages, all of them. But did the man Jesus, during his life, actually say such things about himself? Here is a point worth considering. The other three Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, are all considered to be based on earlier sources. Scholars call these earlier sources Q (a source used by both Matthew and Luke for many of their sayings of Jesus), M (a source used just by Matthew), and L (a source used just by Luke). All of these sources were written much earlier than John, much nearer the time of Jesus’s public ministry.

So, here is the question. If the historical Jesus actually went around claiming that he was God on earth, is there anything else that he could possibly say that would be more significant? That would be the most amazing thing he could conceivably say. And if so, it would certainly be what someone who was recording his words would want their readers to know about him. If that’s the case, how do we explain the fact that such sayings are not found in any of our earlier sources?

That's a deceptive comparison. John is far more selective than the Synoptics. If you read an outline of John, he doesn't recount that many incidents in the life of Christ. Rather, he prefers to focus on the most dramatic episodes. He spends more time on fewer incidents. By contrast, the Synoptics spend less time on more incidents.

3. Tarry in Jerusalem

Let me explore briefly just one of those differences to show you why the accounts seem to be truly at odds with one another. Do the disciples meet Jesus in Galilee or do they never leave Jerusalem? In Mark's Gospel, the women are told to tell the disciples to go to meet Jesus in Galilee. But they never tell them. So, it's not clear what Mark thinks happens next: Did no one ever hear? Surely, someone heard, since Mark knows the story!

In any event, the women are told something very similar in Matthew, and there they do tell the disciples to go meet Jesus in Galilee. And the disciples go to Galilee (again, it's about over 60 miles, and they would have gone on foot). Jesus meets with them there and gives them their final instructions, and that's the end of the Gospel.

But how does that stack up with what we find in Luke's account? In this case, the women are not told to tell the disciples to go to Galilee...Jesus then appears to the disciples, shows them he has been raised from the dead, and gives them their instructions, which include the injunction that they are to "stay in the city" until they receive the promised Spirit from on high (24:49).

I am giving this relatively detailed summary in order to make a fundamental point. In Luke's version of the events, the disciples are told to stay in the city of Jerusalem and they do stay in the city of Jerusalem. Not for a day or two, but for weeks. This is where Jesus appears to them before ascending. But in Matthew's version, they leave Jerusalem and travel up to Galilee

(it would take some days to get there on foot), and it is there that Jesus appears to them.

So, which is it? It depends on which Gospel you read. Can they both be absolutely accurate? I don't see how. They are at odds on a most fundamental point.

i) Ehrman fails to distinguish between contradictory *commands* and contradictory *events*. Although contradictory events are impossible, contradictory commands are not impossible.

At most, this would be a case of Jesus giving a general command, then contravening his general command with an exception. It's not inaccurate for a historical account to record conflicting commands. If someone gives a command, then contravenes the initial command, an accurate account will record the original command as well as its abrogation or exception.

ii) And this isn't just hypothetical. For instance, God gives Abraham contradictory commands ([Gen 22:2,11-12](#)). Likewise, God appears to send mixed signals to Balaam ([Num 22:20-22](#)) and David (2 Sam 24). Each of these prima facie discrepancies takes place in the very same account by the same narrator. Back-to-back commands. A divine command permission followed by what seems to be an inconsistent divine reaction.

My point is not to explain these examples, but demonstrate that this phenomenon doesn't imply that the source is inaccurate. Ehrman's inference is fallacious.

iii) One way to understand what a statement was intended to mean is to consider the implicit point of contrast. The disciples didn't live in Jerusalem. They were in Jerusalem for

the Passover. Left to their own devices, they'd go home. Moreover, they had an additional incentive to go home because it was risky for them to hang around Jerusalem. The Roman and Jewish authorities had their eye out for the disciples.

In context, I take Christ's prohibition to mean, Don't leave on your own initiative. Put your own plans on hold. Wait for further instructions.

The 50-day interval leaves ample time for an excursion to Galilee. They were back in Jerusalem in time for Pentecost. They didn't have to be there the whole time to be there for Pentecost. And Jesus is at liberty to make an exception to his general command.

iv) And the larger point is that rather than returning home, they are required to preach about Jesus in the very city where he was persecuted and executed. That's provocative. That exposes them to danger. If they had their druthers, they've exit Jerusalem for their own safety. So they need to be commanded to resist that impulse.

4. Nativity chronology

Luke then indicates that eight days later, Jesus was circumcised and 33 days later, after Mary performed the "rites of purification" (this is in reference to a law in the Old Testament, Leviticus 12), they returned back to Nazareth.

In Matthew, Herod decides to kill all the children in Bethlehem because he doesn't want any competitors for his throne as "King of the Jews." But Joseph is warned in a dream and he escapes with Mary and Jesus to Egypt, where they stay until Herod dies. But if

that's right, how can Luke also be right that they stayed in Bethlehem just 41 days (eight days till the circumcision; 33 days before the rites of purification) and then returned to Nazareth? If Luke's right, then Matthew can't be, and vice versa.

i) The episode of the Magi took place over a year after the birth of Christ. So that's after the Lucan account. We need to draw a further distinction:

a) Luke doesn't say the flight into Egypt ever happened

b) Luke says the flight into Egypt never happened

(a) doesn't imply (b). Luke's silence doesn't contradict Matthew.

5. Census of Quirinius

The Gospel of Luke is quite explicit (see 2:2) that Jesus was born when Quirinius was the governor of Syria; this was also during the reign of Herod, King of Israel (1:5; and, of course, Matthew 2). But this is an enormous problem. Luke appears not to have known the history of Palestine as well as we might like. We know from clear and certain statements in Josephus (the prominent Jewish historian) and inscriptions that Quirinius became governor of Syria in 6 CE. But Herod died in 4 BCE, ten years earlier. Their reigns did not overlap. Luke has simply made a historical mistake. It's an anachronism.

i) Notice Ehrman's selective credulity and incredulity. He's credulous about Josephus but incredulous about Luke. Ehrman constantly says the Gospels are unreliable because they were written decades after the fact. Yet Josephus is

writing decades after the fact. Indeed, it's arguable that Josephus is writing some 30 years later than Luke. So even assuming there's a discrepancy between Josephus and Luke, why does Ehrman assume Luke made a historical mistake rather than Josephus? See how arbitrary Ehrman is when appealing to historical evidence?

ii) Our information for that period is scattershot. There are many gaps in our knowledge of the period.

6. Naming names

Using the right names has no bearing on whether the stories are accurate or not. It simply means that the storytellers knew what names they should use in telling their tales.

Yet out of the other side of his mouth, Ehrman keeps telling us that the Gospels are unreliable because they were written at a different time and place from the life of Christ. Well, he can't have it both ways. If the Gospels authors are that out-of-touch with Palestine during the life of Christ, then how can they be so accurate in this respect?

7. The genealogies of Christ

The easiest way to see the difference is to ask the simple question, Who, in each genealogy, is Joseph's father, patrilineal grandfather, and great-grandfather? In Matthew the family line goes from Joseph to Jacob to Matthan to Eleazar to Eliud and on into the past. In Luke it goes from Joseph to Heli to Mathat to Levi to Melchi. The lines become similar once we get all the way back to King David (although there are other

problems, as we'll see), but from David to Joseph, the lines are at odds. **JESUS INTERRUPTED** (37).

i) First of all, it's prejudicial and misleading to classify this material as genealogies. That has narrow, technical connotations for a modern reader that may be off-the-mark in reference to Scripture. In Scripture, genealogies have more than one function. It's not just to trace lineal descent.

For instance, the genealogies on Gen 5 & 11 function as shorthand history. They form a bridge between major events. The narrator doesn't wish to give a continuous history. He skips around. Genealogies are a way of filling gaps and preserving historical continuity without having to narrate the intervening events. They transition from one anecdote to the next.

In addition, the Table of Nations (Gen 10) doesn't have a single unifying principle. Rather, it's about ethnicity, geography, mother tongues, &c.

ii) Apropos (i), genealogies are a way to locate an individual within a particular time, place, or people-group. Biblical genealogies evoke Jewish history and world history. The genealogies of Christ aren't simply about lineal descent. In Scripture, ancestry is a broader concept. The genealogies of Christ identify Jesus with Jewish history and world history. Named individuals in the genealogies evoke particular periods in Jewish history and OT history. They trigger associations in the mind of a reader steeped in OT history. They situate Jesus in the history of his people (Jews), as well as world history (Gentiles). People he came to redeem. The relatives of Jesus needn't be linear ancestors to discharge that function.

Bock v. Ehrman

Recently I listened to Darrell Bock debate Bart Ehrman:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z3GZFQ6BZI4>

Bock did well given the constraints of the medium. Unfortunately, the exchanges were often inconclusive because Justin Brierley rushes the discussion along from one topic to another to fit within the allotted timeframe. I'd like to follow-up on some issues raised in the debate:

- 1.** Ehrman thinks many of the NT documents *must* be pseudonymous because the disciples were illiterate, uneducated Aramaic-speaking peasants. That, however, raises a host of issues:
 - i)** He mentioned the well-worn claim that the Greek in 1 Peter is too good to be written by someone with Peter's rustic background. But as Karen Jobes has demonstrated, that fails to distinguish between syntax and diction. Although the diction is sophisticated, the syntax is unsophisticated, and syntax is harder to master than vocabulary.
 - ii)** Presumably, Paul was quite capable of writing his own letters, yet he found it convenient to dictate his letters. If even a well-educated man like Paul used scribes, why not less educated Christian leaders?
 - iii)** Moreover, Paul's use of scribes implies the availability of competent Christian scribes in NT times.
 - iv)** Ehrman says dictating a text requires the same level of education as writing it yourself. But that's clearly false. Take

oral histories of emancipated slaves. These were uneducated speakers, but that hardly hindered them from giving interviews. Consider the WPA slave narratives. Their interviews were transcribed.

v) Apropos (iv), take Frederick Douglass. He had no formal education. Yet he taught himself to read and write.

vi) But let us grant, for the sake of argument, that Matthew, Peter, James, John, and Jude only knew Aramaic. In that event, suppose they had bilingual scribes. They spoke in Aramaic, while a scribe translated their statements into Greek.

Consider simultaneous translation. Take immigrant families where parents and grandparents barely know the language of the host country. At best, they speak broken English (or whatever). But their young kids quickly become fluent in the new language, and function as simultaneous translators for their parents. This also happens in more formal settings like the UN, or diplomatic meetings and press conferences between heads of state.

Moreover, in writing down what the speaker said, a scribe would have greater opportunity to consider the choice of words. Ask the speaker for clarification. The final product would be more accurate than simultaneous translation.

vii) In his book (**FORGED**, 76), Ehrman objects to this in part because 1 Peter quotes the OT from the LXX. But it's hard to see the force of that objection.

Suppose a scholar translates a book by Martin Hengel or Adolf Schlatter into English. When Schlatter or Hengel quote the Bible in German, will the scholar directly translate their

German rendering of Scripture into English, or will he substitute a familiar English version (e.g. NIV, ESV)? For an English-speaking audience, it would make more sense to use a familiar English version of the Bible.

In addition, Ehrman says that can't account for the "Greek rhetorical flourishes" in 1 Peter. But even if his objection held against 1 Peter, that can't be extrapolated to works like John's Gospel or 1 John. Do those exhibit the same "Greek rhetorical flourishes"?

viii) A potential objection to this theory is whether that's consistent with the verbal inspiration of Scripture. But since Ehrman rejects the inspiration of Scripture—there's no reason he'd object, in principle, to Peter or John speaking in Aramaic while a scribe turns that into Greek. In fact, Ehrman's own position invites that alternative explanation.

For Christians, this would require inspiration to extend to the scribe. But on the face of it, there doesn't seem to be any antecedent reason to preclude that possibility. It's no more effort for God to inspire two people than one person. To inspire the scribe as well as the speaker.

That's not ad hoc. Since dictation is a collaborative effort, having inspiration cover both parties to the transaction is reasonable.

Of course, an atheist will reject inspiration. But given a theological framework, that's not outlandish by any means. Indeed, it might even be necessary. Traditional formulations of inspiration overlook the role of scribes, but there's no a priori reason why scribes can't be included in the process.

ix) Another problem with Ehrman's objection is that even if the Greek in 1 Peter is too classy to be written by Peter bar

Jonah, the Gospel of John is written in very simple Greek, Mark is syntactically primitive, while Revelation has never been upheld as a model of Greek composition. In addition, Mark was an urbanite, not a peasant. Likewise, Luke was not a Jewish, Aramaic-speaking peasant. So Ehrman has to stretch his thesis to cover documents that are hardly analogous to 1 Peter.

x) Ehrman's appeal to Josephus is counterproductive. For Josephus only learned Greek later in life. If he can do it, why not one or more of the disciples or stepbrothers of Jesus?

2. Ehrman thinks writers resorted to pseudonymity to get their material accepted under false auspices. And he cite examples of 2C apocrypha.

i) That, however, courts anachronism. For instance, Ehrman thinks Matthew is pseudonymous. But that appeal may well be circular. Was a Gospel named after Matthew because he was famous, or was he famous because a Gospel was named after him?

Ehrman is viewing the reputation of the Apostles through the rear window of church history. They became famous. But can we use their posthumous reputation to explain pseudonymity? Put another way, how long would it take for them to become sufficiently famous and sufficiently revered that their name would facilitate acceptance of a document? For Ehrman's theory to work, we first need to abstract away the contribution which the NT had on their status. For you and me, it's the NT that makes them famous. But how well-known would Matthew be apart from the Gospel of Matthew?

ii) Presumably, early Christians were interested in documents by people who knew Jesus. To that extent, there'd be a built-in constituency for writings by the disciples or the stepbrothers of Jesus. Mind you, even that isn't straightforward. How did they know who his disciples or stepbrothers were? In 1C Palestine, some people would have firsthand knowledge of their identity. But outside that ambit, it would depend on the Gospels and Acts. So we're back to circularity.

iii) Furthermore, Paul didn't have that advantage. He had to work very hard to become established in the nascent church. In addition, he was a controversial figure with well-connected opponents (e.g. the Judaizers). How widely was his apostolic authority acknowledged in his lifetime?

So why would an author write under Paul's name? In hindsight, that might be an obvious choice. After all, Paul became the most influential theologian in church history. But, of course, we can't expect a forger to enjoy that opportunistic foresight. How late would Colossians, Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus need to be before Paul's reputation was sufficiently prestigious to name letters after him? Consider how Paul was challenged even in churches he personally founded and oversaw. You can't assume that his standing in the 2C is equivalent to his position a century earlier.

3. Ehrman says he operates with a "show me the evidence" condition. Sounds reasonable. Who can argue with that? But it depends on how we define evidence. Does he mean direct documentary evidence?

i) For instance, Ehrman is certain that stories about Jesus underwent extensive creative reformulation before they were finally committed to writing. But in the nature of the

case, how can there be direct documentary evidence for a theory of creative oral tradition?

ii) Sometimes the lack of evidence can be evidentiary. For instance, archeologists may determine whether or not a site was populated by Jews based on the presence or absence of pig bones. That's not documentary evidence. And that's not positive evidence. The assumption, rather, is that a kosher diet explains the absence (or paucity) of pig bones.

iii) Likewise, there's the role of inference in historical reconstructions. It "stands to reason" that certain things will be the case, even if there's no direct surviving evidence. If, say, 1C Palestine was under Gentile rule and occupation, with Greek as the lingua franca, we'd expect many Jews to know conversational Greek, and some to be able to read and write in Greek. That would be necessary for commercial and political transactions. Even if you have no specific evidence, the circumstances may demand it.

4. Ehrman says he applies the same criteria (e.g. theology, style, situation) to NT pseudepigrapha that Bock applies to NT apocrypha (e.g. 3 Corinthians). But that's disanalogous. One reason for excluding NT apocrypha is dating. If 3 Corinthians was clearly written sometime in the 2C, then it *cannot* be authored by Paul.

5. Ehrman says Josephus is the only 1C Palestinian Jewish author we know of writing literary Greek. But, of course, he can only use that claim to exclude NT evidence on pain of vicious circularity. For the NT is prima facie evidence to the contrary.

Moreover, it's not coincidental that Josephus and the NT survived. As sacred Scripture, the NT was preserved. Likewise, Christians took an interest in Josephus. Other

material didn't survive, not because there were no other 1C Palestinian Jews who might be literate in Greek, but because there was not the same incentive to copy their works for posterity.

Bart Blunderbuss

I've been on a Bart Ehrman kick lately. I didn't plan it that way. It began when I reviewed his debate with Tim McGrew. Then, about the same time, he and Mike Licona began a serial debate. So I decided, for the sake of completeness, to view and review some of his other debates. I'm going to comment on this one:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L7gmgdk9qG8>

Having now listened to several of his debates, I notice that Ehrman has a stump speech. He uses the same examples. He always raises the same objections. It's a cumulative case against the Christian faith.

1. In their third debate, Bart Ehrman and Craig Evans speak past each other. That's because, as Evans explains at one point, even when he agrees with Ehrman on the phenomena of Scripture, he disagrees with Ehrman's inferences and conclusions.

2. Differences

Throughout the debate, the plausibility of Ehrman's argument hinges on how he frames the issue. That tilts the scales.

i) One of Ehrman's fallacies is to posit that differences between two or more Gospels amount to discrepancies. If you listen closely, you will notice that he never gets around to demonstrating that these differences must be, or even probably are, contradictory. He simply ticks off a list of differences, then proclaims a contradiction. But in order to prove his point, he needs to show how they cannot be

reconciled. Mere addition or omission of details is not an indication that these are incompatible details.

ii) In addition, it's unreasonable to suppose that at this distance from events, we can always harmonize different accounts of the same incident. We weren't there. We didn't see or hear what happened. So we lack the overarching perspective to know how to piece together selective accounts. We don't know the original order. We don't know where the gaps are.

iii) Of course, it's easy to show that the Gospels contain discrepancies if you define a contradiction to mean two accounts can only agree if they are formally identical. Verbatim quotes. Strict chronology. No additions or omissions. But if that's his standard, then he needs to defend his standard. It's not something he's entitled to take for granted.

iv) He acts as though it's inherently suspect that one Gospel contains information, or more information, than another. But that's irrational. To begin with, it would be pointless to have several Gospels if each one covered the very same ground.

In addition, let's take a comparison. It's not unusual for histories and biographies written soon after events to be briefer than histories and biographies written a generation or so later.

Critical histories and critical biographies are often much longer, more detailed, than accounts written shortly after the events. Sometimes they run into multiple volumes. But that's not legendary embellishment. That's not a phone game. The fact that an academic historian adds so much new information doesn't mean he's making stuff up that

never happened, but supplementing previous accounts, based on additional evidence.

v) Suppose some members of my high school graduating class start a Facebook group. Suppose one of them asks us what we remember about a particular teacher or student. You will get a series of anecdotes from former classmates about the student or teacher in question. However, their stories may have little in common with each other. For instance, they remember the teacher said something striking in class one day, but other students may not remember because they didn't have the same teacher. Or they had her a different year. So they weren't in class that day. Or maybe they were in class that day, but they don't remember because they weren't paying attention. They were daydreaming, or gazing at a pretty girl.

Likewise, a student might remember something a classmate said or did one day when they were hanging out on the football field. But other students may not remember that because they weren't at that particular spot at that particular moment. If they were in the cafeteria or the gym, they weren't on the football field. If they arrived at the football field a minute later, they'd miss what was said or done.

You could have a collection of anecdotes about a particular student or teacher, which might never overlap. No two stories the same. But that's to be expected.

Or if two or more students did remember, they wouldn't quote the teacher verbatim. They'd quote the gist of what was said.

Likewise, this string of anecdotes wouldn't be in any particular order. These wouldn't be dated events. Although

students might remember what happened that day, that doesn't mean they remember what day it was. You can easily recall something occurring on a particular day without recalling the date. Without recalling if that was a little earlier or later than another incident you recall.

Suppose you ask each student what they remember about high school. Suppose they attended the same school during the same years. I think it would be striking how little their accounts have in common. Each student would have very compartmentalized knowledge. Depending on the size of the school, they might be superficially acquainted with all the teachers and students. Know them by name. Know them by sight. But different students would have different teachers.

Moreover, students would naturally break down into smaller groups. They'd only socialize with a handful of classmates.

Suppose you had a schoolyard fight. Suppose students gave accounts of the fight. Some students might be present when the fight broke out. Other students would arrive after it began, drawn by the commotion. A crowd attracts a crowd. Some students would have a better view than others. So you'd have different descriptions of what went down.

vi) For instance, Ehrman posts a discrepancy in the number of donkeys Jesus used during the triumphal entry. Was it one (Mark, Luke, John) or two (Matthew)? Well, the answer is that he only rode one (the colt), while the mare accompanied the colt. Yet that's only a discrepancy if Mark, Luke, and John intended to say there was only one donkey, in contrast to two. But Bart does nothing to demonstrate that Mark, Luke, and John intend to say one to the exclusion of two. In this and other examples, he needs to

show how one description was meant to be in opposition to another description.

3. Historical sources

Here's another example of how Ehrman tilts the scales by the way he frames the issue.

Ehrman said (in reference to the Gospels): if it's inaccurate in some things, how do we know it's not inaccurate in lots of things. If not 100% accurate, how do we know they are at all accurate. Why trust them as historical sources?

For someone who casts himself in the role of a historian, that's a wildly skeptical way of treating historical sources. Does he hold Tacitus or Josephus to that standard?

And not just ancient history. Take war memoirs by Sherman, Grant, Churchill, or Eisenhower. Would any war historian say that unless these are 100% accurate, there's no reason to assume they are at all accurate? Unless these are 100% accurate, they are untrustworthy historical sources?

Clearly, Ehrman has a double standard when it comes to NT narratives. He says he approaches the issue historically rather than theologically, but he's blind to his own residual conditioning. Ehrman is still approaching the Gospels theologically. He holds them to the standard of inerrancy (as he defines it). Unless the Gospels are inerrant, he deems them to be unreliable. But that's a theological criterion, not a historical criterion. And it's based on his very square notions of inerrancy and historical accuracy.

4. False dichotomies

Ehrman said, in reference to the allegedly lower Christology of the Synoptics (compared to John), that if Jesus went around Galilee and Jerusalem calling himself God, explain on historical, not theological grounds, how he managed to escape getting stoned to death for blasphemy.

Notice how he frames the issue by stipulating a historical explanation rather than a theological explanation. But what if that's a false dichotomy? Indeed, his disjunction is simply incoherent in this situation.

Suppose Jesus is God Incarnate. An omnipotent being would have no difficulty eluding death squads. He could not be cornered or executed unless or until he allowed himself to be taken into custody, or put to death. If the very question at issue is the deity of Christ, and the implications thereof, you can't logically exclude a theological explanation for his ability to elude lynch mobs. That follows from the nature of the ascription, if true. Ehrman must tacitly assume that Jesus wasn't God Incarnate. But isn't that a theological rather than historical judgment on his part?

Ehrman's dichotomy, which is question-begging even in general, becomes downright incoherent in this context. If the question at issue is whether Jesus was divine, and that's combined with the additional question of how he could escape stoning for blasphemy, then the true explanation may well be inseparable from his true identity. For instance, he could cause them to hallucinate, which would give him time to escape from their clutches.

5. Critical consensus

Ehrman said his position reflects the consensus view among critical scholars. The only people who say the Bible is inerrant are fundamentalists or conservative evangelicals.

But how can that be? Is everyone else apart from evangelicals not as intelligent? Are they blind? Demonically inspired? How is it that the only ones who think differently (the Bible is completely reliable) are evangelicals? That reflects a particular theological point of view. They take that position for theological rather than historical grounds. For theological rather than historical reasons. Their theological views require inerrancy. Otherwise, they'd agree with everyone else.

i) It doesn't occur to Ehrman that he's raising a circular and reversible objection. To begin with, that's an illicit argument from authority. It takes "critical consensus" as the standard of comparison. Yet that's the very issue in dispute.

ii) In addition, his objection amounts to a tautology: only inerrantists subscribe to inerrancy. Well, that's true by definition. But by the same token, only atheists subscribe to atheism. And Ehrman calls himself an atheist.

Likewise, are inerrantists like Gleason Archer, John Frame, Vern Poythress, Benjamin Warfield, Edwin Yamauchi, E. J. Young et al. not as intelligent? By the same token, are theists like Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Leibniz, Newton, Pascal, Edwards, Euler, Maxwell, Faraday, Riemann, Newman, Eccles, Gödel, Geach, van Fraassen, Plantinga, Dembski, Sheldrake, Don Page, John Lennox, Alexander Pruss et al. not as intelligent?

Atheism reflects a particular atheological point of view. That's not a historical viewpoint, but a philosophical viewpoint. Likewise, an atheist secularizes historiography. He makes methodological naturalism a presupposition of historiography. Yet that is not, in the first instance, a historical viewpoint, but a philosophical viewpoint. The resultant historical viewpoint is the consequence of his prior

commitment to secularism. Atheism requires methodological naturalism.

iii) Conversely, if the Biblical God exists, then the disjunction between history and theology is a false dichotomy—for if the Biblical God exists, then he is intimately involved in the historical process. There's no value-free position on historiography. To bifurcate history and theology is not to take history as your starting-point, but to take naturalism as your starting-point.

6. Textual transmission

i) It's revealing that while Ehrman appeals to critical consensus in attacking the inerrancy of Scripture, he doesn't appeal to critical consensus in attacking the text of Scripture. Presumably, that's because his skepticism regarding the text of the NT is unrepresentative of textual critics generally.

ii) Ehrman treats the transmission of the text as a purely naturalistic process. But Christians believe God preserved the text "by his singular care and providence" (WCF 1.8). We are blessed to have such early and abundant attestation for the text. Although Ehrman would dismiss that as a theological claim, it's a claim that enjoys corroborative evidence. Moreover, to deny the role of providence is a philosophical assumption rather than a historical assumption. Ehrman's position is just as value-laden as the Westminster divines.

iii) Ehrman said, If God inspired the Bible without error, why hasn't he preserved the Bible without error?

A problem with that objection is that it he just leaves it dangling there. But if you're going to press that objection,

then you need to ask yourself what that would involve. To change one variable changes other variables. It generates a domino effect. Moreover, the impact fans out over time, expanding exponentially. The farther into the future you move, the greater the change.

Compare it to a family tree. You begin with a couple. They have kids. Their kids have kids. And so on and so forth. What started with two branches out over time. If you were to change that initial variable, that would generate a different set of forking paths. When the timeline is changed, there are losers as well as winners. Some people miss out.

In addition to that general consideration, the need for textual criticism makes scholars extremely attentive to the exact wording of Scripture. That's a good thing.

iv) Ehrman complains about the number of mistakes in Greek MSS. But is that a weakness, or a strength?

a) When you have more MSS, you have more mistakes. But that's a side effect of having more evidence for the early text of the NT. Ehrman acts as though having more attestation for the NT text should make us less certain rather than more certain of the text. But that's a backwards way of viewing corroborative evidence. Having more lines of independent evidence ought to raise our confidence, not lower our confidence.

b) To say they contain mistakes takes for granted that we can identify the mistakes. These aren't undetectable errors, but easily recognizable errors. So how is that a problem? Moreover, for every MS that contains a mistake, you have several that contain the correct reading.

c) Ehrman is judging ancient MSS by the standards of the printing press or Xerox copies. But since we're talking about transcriptions that were copied by hand, you naturally have accidental scribal errors. They won't exhibit the uniformity of photocopies, because human scribes aren't machines. Their work product lacks that mechanical regularity. But there's nothing deficient about that.

d) Furthermore, it's a good thing. It means there was no centralized command-and-control in the early church. It wasn't possible for any particular faction to gerrymander the text of Scripture as it comes down to us. No collusion. No concerted effort to doctor the text of Scripture. No way to supplant the original text with something else.

v) Ehrman describes the chain of transmission this way: someone produced the original autograph of Mark. Then someone copied the original. Then someone else copied *that* copy. Then someone else copied the copy of the copy. Then someone else copied the copy of the copy of the copy. And so on.

Notice how Ehrman frames the issue. He presents it as though someone directly copied the original just once. Then the next person copies the copy of the original. And so on down the line. Hence, you have a chain of transmission like this:

Someone produces a single original autograph of Mark. A scribe then makes a single direct copy of the original. Call that A. The next scribe makes a copy of A. Call that B. The next scribe makes a copy of B. Call that C. And so on down the line.

So Ehrman depicts this as if you have a linear series or sequence, where each succeeding copy must be a

transcription of the immediately preceding copy. It can't go straight back to an earlier exemplar. No cutting in line! The way he lays it out, a 10th generation copy must be copied from a 9th generation copy, which must be copied from an 8th generation copy, and so on, up the line, going through one link at a time.

Now stop and think about how artificial that is. As long as the original autograph of Mark was available, there's nothing to prevent many different scribes from making direct copies of the original. So you wouldn't have one A, but many A's. By the same token, you'd have many B's. Rather than having nth generation copies, a scribe could skip over intervening copies to transcribe an A or B exemplar. There were many A's and B's in circulation.

Moreover, that isn't just speculation. Let's take some historical comparisons. As I understand the process, in a medieval scriptorium the monks copied Scripture, church fathers, &c, from editions in the monastery library. It's not as if Brother John copied the library edition, then Brother Bartholomew copied Brother John's transcription, then Brother Thaddeus copied Brother Bartholomew's transcription, &c. Rather, these are all first-generation copies of the same exemplar.

Likewise, suppose you were a medieval college student at the University of Paris, where Aquinas was your theology prof. Aquinas dictates a lecture to Reginald. (Reginald, was, in fact, a scribe assigned to Aquinas.) Reginald files that transcript in the library. Students then make hand copies of that transcript. It's not one student who copies another student, who copies another student, who copies another student. Rather, these are all first-generation copies of the same exemplar.

Why does Ehrman seem to think the process was any different for Christian scribes? Or does he know better, but he's attempting to hoodwink a lay audience?

7. Ehrman says that in the Fourth Gospel, Jesus, John the Baptist, the narrator all sound the same. That's because the author modified the voice of narrator to make them say what he wants them to say. He changed words of Jesus!

This allegation raises a range of issues:

i) Does John the Baptist sound the same? In [Jn 1:19-28](#), he's a dead ringer for the Synoptic John the Baptist.

ii) Since Jesus usually spoke in Aramaic, and the Gospels are written in Greek, there's a sense in which the authors never use the words of Jesus when they translate his statements into Greek. So, yes, you could say they "changed the words of Jesus". They substitute Greek words for Aramaic words. Greek synonyms for Aramaic originals. It isn't even possible to quote him verbatim if you translate his statements into a different language.

But there's no point acting as if that's a shocking admission. Jesus founded a missionary religion. He never meant for his message to be confined to an Aramaic-speaking audience. The key principle isn't to reproduce the *words* of Jesus, but the *sense* of Jesus.

iii) Regarding John's Gospel in particular, I think the reason Jesus and the narrator sound alike is because John, unlike the Synoptics, contains a lot of theological exposition. It will quote Jesus, then comment on his statement. Now, when you comment on what someone says, it's natural to use some of the same words and phrases in your exposition. If he expressed his ideas in certain words and images, then

it's only natural for your editorial reflections to adopt the same vocabulary. So I'd say the narrator echoes the voice of Jesus. That's why Christ's statements and John's editorializing seem to blend into each other, so that it's sometimes hard to discern when the quote ends and the exposition begins. For John takes his cue from Jesus. He continues in the same vein. When he expounds something Jesus said, he picks up on the same words and motifs.

8. Ehrman trots out differences in the post-Resurrection accounts. Here I'll make a specific observation. There are different ways of presenting the same event. They can be written from the viewpoint of the narrator, or they can be written from the viewpoint of observers. Unless the narrator is an observer, the narrative viewpoint is indirect. He's talking about what other people saw, from a third-person perspective. That's how the Synoptics present the first Easter. Keep in mind that even if the narrator is an eyewitness, he may assume a third-person voice when recounting events that include other people. That's a stock convention.

By partial contrast, John is more selective. And he chooses to narrate the first Easter through the eyes of two witnesses in particular: Peter and Mary Magdalene. That's more direct. He isn't just talking about what they heard and saw, from his vantage-point, but describing it from their own perspective, as they personally experience that event. And the Johannine narrator was, himself, a participant. John uses a few people as the lens, but relates more about their particular experience, whereas the Synoptics mention more witnesses, at the cost of saying less about how they individually experience the event. Both approaches are historical. It's analogous to the difference between direct and indirect discourse, viz. first-person speech and third-person narration.

9. Ehrman said: Was Jairus's daughter sick, but still alive when Jairus came to ask Jesus to heal her, as in Mark—or did she just die before Jairus came, so that he asked Jesus to raise her from the dead, as in Matthew? Hard to see how it could be both ways.

i) But that fails to draw a distinction between direct and indirect discourse. Let's take an example: Suppose someone said the narrator told Eve that she wouldn't die if she ate the forbidden fruit. But that's not true. The narrator didn't say that to Eve. Rather, the Tempter said that to Eve, and the narrator quoted what the Tempter said ([Gen 3:4](#)).

ii) On the one hand, there's whatever Jairus and his servants originally said. On the other hand, there's how the narrator quotes, paraphrases, or summarizes what was said. Jairus is addressing Jesus, but the narrator is addressing the reader. So these operate at different levels. Jairus isn't speaking directly to the reader. In Mark, you have two statements about Jairus by different speakers: Jairus and his servants. Due to narrative compression, Matthew simplifies a two-stage report as a one-stage report. The end-result is exactly the same. That's only a problem if you operate with Ehrman's boxy view of historical reportage.

iii) That, in turn, raises the question of what makes for an accurate quotation? Suppose a speaker misspoke. He failed to say what he meant. Should you quote him verbatim, or should you attribute to him what he intended to say? A verbatim quote is more accurate in reference to what he actually said, but less accurate in reference to what he meant to say.

Likewise, it's common for people to speak in incomplete sentences. That's because speakers often interrupt each other. They don't give the speaker a chance to finish his sentence. If you were quoting him, should you reproduce his broken sentences, or should you fill in what he meant to say (if you knew how he was going to end his sentence)?

By the same token, speakers often talk over each other. If you quote them, you have to sort that out. Since they were speaking at the same time, there is no one correct sequence. Even if you had a tape recording, it would be necessary for you to separate out the overlapping statements, and put one after another—although that's not how it happened in real time.

10. Ehrman dusts off the musty chestnut of the two genealogies in Matthew and Luke. I'll venture some observations:

i) These aren't straight genealogies. Both genealogies are intentionally selective. Both genealogies use numerology as a selection criterion. In Matthew, that's explicit, with his units of 14. And in Luke, 77 is the numerological principle. Cf. R. Bauckham, **JUDE AND THE RELATIVES OF JESUS**, chap. 7. In addition, some names in Matthew's list are double entendres, to trigger literary associations with more than one individual. Cf. V. Poythress, **THE GOSPELS AND INERRANCY**, 70-71.

ii) There's the question of sources. Matthew and Luke probably had incomplete genealogical lists to work from. And their edited versions are even less complete. So their genealogies are two steps removed from the complete

family tree of Jesus. That makes it difficult for us to collate the two.

iii) Keep in mind that Jesus wasn't born to famous parents. Rather, he made them famous. And he wasn't a famous child. Consider Jesse. No one would remember Jesse if he hadn't fathered King David.

Descendants of famous people may be prospectively famous or well-known. Their lineage is documented. By contrast, ancestors of famous people are retrospectively famous or well-known. As a result, their lineage may be undocumented or poorly documented. If people knew at the time that they'd have a famous descendent, then there might be a record of every link in the chain leading up to the famous descendent. But since that's only known in hindsight, the records may be fragmentary or nonexistent. Take Queen Elizabeth II. Even though she's one of the world's most famous individuals, and there are royal historians who expend enormous labors charting and retracing her lineage, they eventually hit a wall. That's because no one could know in advance that one of their descendants would be queen of England.

Unless Matthew and Luke knew by direct revelation the entire family tree of Jesus, they were only working with the links they had. That doesn't make their presentation erroneous, just incomplete. We can't fill in the gaps if we don't even know where they are. Not to mention the use of double entendres in Matthew.

Bart Ehrman v. Craig Evans

I was watching this debate between Bart Ehrman and Craig Evans:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ueRIIdrIZsvs>

If you go to cross-examination section (1:18-1:42), there's an interesting, extended exchange. I disagree with Craig's overall position. I certainly disagree with his position on John. However, Craig also scores a number of valid points against Bart.

But what's most striking is how presuppositional the debate ultimately is. Craig has Bart completely rattled. His approach throws Bart off balance, and Bart never regains his balance. It's a classic illustration of Kuhn's thesis of incommensurable paradigms. Craig is more sophisticated than Bart. His position is far more qualified. Craig's position just isn't vulnerable to the kinds of objections that Bart is used to raising. It doesn't give Bart any openings.

Bart finds Craig confusing and frustrating because Craig seems to simultaneously agree and disagree with Bart . What Bart fails to grasp is that Craig can agree with some of Bart's characterizations of the phenomena, but disagree with the implications of the characterization. He doesn't think they have the skeptical consequences that Bart imputes to them.

What's ironic is that both men view themselves as historians. Both men think they are approaching the text as historians. But Craig thinks Bart has hopelessly idealistic and artificial standards for ancient historical sources.

Bart thinks that to be accurate accounts, the Gospels ought to be like tape recorders and video recorders. Craig rejects that paradigm.

Moreover, as he points out, even if the Gospels were akin to tape recorders and video recorders, that record would still be inscrutable in some respects without a larger context. You need supplementary information.

Another difference is they disagree on how much historical information you can extract from the Gospels.

One ambiguity is that Craig says he's opposed to inerrancy (in his opening statement), yet when he distinguishes his position from inerrantists, he does so by denying that historical reliability requires verbatim quotation and strict chronology. Yet inerrantists like Darrell Bock, Craig Blomberg, Robert Stein, and Vern Poythress agree with him in that regard.

Ehrman's apostasy was nearly inevitable given his preconception of historical accuracy. His "horizontal" reading of the Gospels was always on a collision course with his preconceived notion of historical accuracy. Something had to give. He never questions his paradigm of historical accuracy, so what had to give was his faith in the Gospels.

In a sense he's right. If the Gospels are true, then we should be able to receive them *as is*, rather than filtering them through a sieve to see what remains.

Mind you, Ehrman doesn't approach the Gospels *as is*. He has his own filter in place—methodological atheism.

It may sometimes be impossible to harmonize the Gospels *as is*. But, then, harmonization typically tries to go

behind the text to the underlying event. A presupposition of harmonization is that two (or more) accounts don't already mesh as they stand.

That, however, is only a damaging admission if you have an unrealistic preconception of what historical writing is supposed to do. To begin with, Ehrman fails to make allowance for the difference between one medium and another; the difference between *seeing* an event and *verbalizing* an event. What we *see*, and how we *talk* about what we saw, are necessarily different. Any verbal description is likely to omit many background details. Many extraneous details. Words aren't images, or vice versa.

Conversely, the significance of an event may not be self-explanatory. For instance, the crucifixion of Jesus looks pretty much like any other crucifixion. You couldn't tell just by seeing the crucifixion of Jesus that there's anything special about this particular example. A theological interpretation is essential to supply the critical context.

Ehrman says we need to assess the Gospels, not by the conventions and standards of ancient historiography, but our own. What ultimately matters is what really happened.

Yet that's simplistic. Sure, what ultimately matters is what really happened. But for one thing, he collapses the distinction between interpretation and truth. You can't even get to the truth if you refuse to interpret historical narratives on their own terms. For you need to ascertain what the narrator meant. And in that respect, you need to identify his operating standards and assumptions.

Furthermore, you need to make allowance for his aims. When, for example, John says the disciples rowed about 25-

30 stadia ([Jn 6:19](#)), that's a round number—an approximation. It would be ridiculous to say that's wrong because John didn't use a laser distance measure.

Ehrman down for the count

I'm going to make some comments on the debate between Bart Ehrman and Tim McGrew:

<https://www.premierchristianradio.com/Shows/Saturday/Unbelievable/Episodes/Unbelievable-Bart-Ehrman-vs-Tim-McGrew-Round-1-Can-we-trust-the-Gospels>

<https://www.premierchristianradio.com/Shows/Saturday/Unbelievable/Episodes/Unbelievable-Ehrman-vs-McGrew-Round-2-Do-undesigned-coincidences-confirm-the-Gospels>

I don't normally comment on live debates because it's a nuisance to locate and manually transcribe the relevant statements. I may summarize or paraphrase what they said, although that will incorporate their own phrases. Anyone can listen to the debate for himself to get the verbatim account. It's well worth hearing the entire debate for McGrew's side of the exchange. I don't have much to add to part 1, so much of my comments will be about part 2. I'll begin by summarizing their exchange:

I. Recap

Ehrman asked McGrew if he was an inerrantist, thereby attempting to change the topic of the debate—which was about the reliability of the Gospels, not the inerrancy of the Gospels. McGrew refused to be pinned down. Later, McGrew said he rejects a "tape recorder" view of inerrancy.

Ehrman raised the issue of inerrancy because that's a presupposition which skews how we assess the historicity of the Gospels.

Ehrman says that when Pilate interrogates Jesus in Jn 18, no one else is in the room. Just Jesus and Pilate. So how did John know what was said? (Implication: he didn't know. He just made it up.)

Ehrman compares that to Charles Dickens reporting conversations that never happened. That hardly means he had special access to some sort of historical information about what David Copperfield actually said. Likewise, ancient historians (e.g. Herodotus) made up speeches. They do it because it helps the story along.

McGrew counters that Ehrman is overgeneralizing about ancient historians. McGrew points out that Ehrman is making unjustified assumptions about Jn 18. Undoubtedly guards were present. Likewise, since John had connections with the high priest, he might have been allowed in.

McGrew says nobody picks up **DAVID COPPERFIELD** looking for answers to those unresolved questions you had about **MOBY-DICK**. These are not anchored in the same independent reality. Therefore, you can't compare undesigned coincidences to fiction or oral traditions in general circulation.

Ehrman says John mitigates or exculpates Pilate because, with the passage of time, Christians were in heightened situations of antagonism with Jews, so they increasingly pinned the blame on Jews rather than Romans. That's why, in later sources, Pilate has to have his arm twisted. There's a trajectory from Mark through Matthew, Luke, and John, into the 2C, viz. Justin Martyr and the Gospel of Peter. By the mid-2C, Christians call Jews Christ-killers; by the end of the 2C, they accuse them of Deicide.

McGrew counters that Ehrman is cherry-picking the evidence to fabricate a trajectory. Ehrman is in the grip of a literary theory of development, a type of literary criticism that gives certain branches of NT scholarship a bad name.

Ehrman replies by asking who actually says that?

McGrew responds by quoting two Classicists: E. M. Blaiklock and John M. Rist.

Ehrman complains that you can quote people who are opposed to anything. Take Christ mythicism. So you must consider the source. Is the opinion justified?

Ehrman says we shouldn't use one author to explain what another author is trying to say.

McGrew says that's not a general rule of historical inquiry. He gives an example from the Battle of Midway.

Ehrman says it's not that historians must assume miracles never happen. Rather, they must bracket the question. Historians can't operate on the basis of supernatural assumptions. Doesn't necessarily mean Resurrection didn't happen, but as a historian you can't *show* it happened on historical grounds. Outside of people writing about the Bible, every other modern historian takes that approach. Would McGrew credit miracles in other sources of that sort?

McGrew says it depends on the quality of the evidence. Is it the same kind of evidence?

Ehrman mentions reported miracles associated with the founder of Hassidism.

McGrew counters that you need to distinguish stories that circulated within a sympathetic community from stories in the face of hostile authorities. Whether or not they were subjected to searching scrutiny from outsiders affects their credibility.

Ehrman denies that most early Christians were persecuted for sharing their faith. They weren't preaching that on street corners.

McGrew counters that, in fact, that's precisely the scenario we have in Acts: open-air preaching and official persecution.

Ehrman says only two Christian leaders were arrested (Peter, John) out of 8,000 converts. Early Christians in general weren't threatened with persecution, imprisonment, and martyrdom.

McGrew counters by citing the Neronian persecution, recounted by Tacitus.

Ehrman accuses McGrew of creating undesigned coincidences by picking a detail here and a detail there.

McGrew counters that Ehrman creates contradictions by picking a detail here and a detail there. Moreover, Ehrman disregards the larger pattern of undesigned coincidences.

Ehrman accuses McGrew of reprimating 19C apologetics.

McGrew counters by citing 20C exemplars like F. F. Bruce and modern commentaries.

II. Analysis

1. McGrew doesn't frame the issue in terms of inerrancy, both because that wasn't the actual topic of the debate, and because he approaches the Bible as a philosopher and historian rather than a theologian; because he approaches the Bible as an evidentialist rather than a presuppositionalist.

A document can be reliable without being inerrant. Indeed, we rely on secondhand information for most of what we believe, and our secondhand information is rarely inerrant. That's a deceptive diversionary tactic on Ehrman's part.

Of course, inerrancy is worth discussing and defending in its own right. But it's a different issue.

2. Ehrman acts as though his approach is neutral and objective, following the evidence wherever it leads—in contrast to McGrew's position, which is a foregone conclusion due to hidden presuppositions. But that just means Ehrman is oblivious to his own presuppositions. Take two examples:

i) Ehrman has a prior commitment to methodological naturalism. But that's a powerful presupposition which filters out a supernatural explanation in advance of the facts even if a supernatural cause happens to be the right explanation.

ii) Ehrman denied the possibility that Jesus could get away with cleansing the temple twice since he'd be arrested and executed the first time. But that treats Jesus as an ordinary human being. If, however, he's the omnipotent Son of God, then Roman soldiers would be impotent to intervene, unless Jesus allowed them to take him into custody. So Ehrman's

position in that regard depends on his unstated presupposition regarding the person of Christ.

3. Ehrman frequently said he agreed with McGrew's caveats. But that's misleading, because Ehrman acts as if that's a concession to Ehrman's position. But rejecting a "tape recorder" model of inerrancy is not a denial of inerrancy. Sophisticated proponents of inerrancy like John Frame, Paul Helm, Craig Blomberg, Darrell Bock, Robert Stein, and Vern Poythress don't operate with a tape-recorder model of inerrancy. Neither does the Chicago Statement on Inerrancy or the Chicago Statement on Hermeneutics. Likewise, to say that Gospel writers sometimes rearrange the order of events is consistent with how inerrancy is defined by conservative evangelicals.

4. Ehrman's theory about John wishing to exonerate Pilate because, by that time, Christians were shifting blame for the crucifixion from Roman authorities to Jewish authorities—or Jews in general—is odd.

i) To begin with, he downplays Jewish persecution of Christians when McGrew responded to Baal Shem Tov's reputation as a miracle-worker. It's hard to see how Ehrman can have it both ways.

ii) The problem with Ehrman's trajectory is that while Jewish persecution of Christians intensified for a time, Roman persecution of Christians intensified over time. That was already in case in NT times. You have the persecutions of Nero and Domitian. The book of Revelation bears witness to Roman persecution. And this escalates until Constantine decriminalized the Christian faith. For instance:

<http://www.denverseminary.edu/resources/news-and-articles/early-christian-martyr-stories-an-evangelical->

introduction-with-new-translations/

Therefore, by Ehrman's own logic, there's no reason NT writers would minimize or deemphasize Pilate's guilt or complicity in the death of Christ. Rather, there's evidence to the contrary. Moreover, official Roman persecution was clearly more threatening and more sustained than Jewish persecution.

5. Regarding the nature of "critical" NT scholarship, Ehrman said you need to consider the source. But McGrew didn't cite crackpots. Rather, he cited two respected Classicists. Let's give some additional examples:

From the early patristic period you learn a lot about the continuities and discontinuities of the Christian faith as it developed, and a lot about how the first readers of the NT books understood those books. This often creates important pathways back to the text. Seeing the early impact that Jesus and his message made in the Greco-Roman world can help correct the sometimes anachronistic suppositions we bring to the text. I think there is always a tendency for NT scholarship to get cooped up and even ingrown in its own debates.

<http://evangelicaltextualcriticism.blogspot.com/2016/03/etc-interview-with-chuck-hill-part-1.html>

Third, a really substantial proportion of the arguments the skeptics employ are very bad arguments. (For example: if one of the Gospels says that Jesus said thus-and-so, and if his having said thus-and-so was useful to the early church, then he probably didn't say thus-and-so.)

Fourth, the arguments of many of the skeptics have premises that are philosophical rather than historical--

that miracles are impossible, for example, or that it is methodologically essential to objective historical writing that it regard any miraculous narrative as unhistorical. These philosophical premises may be defensible, but they are rarely defended. And when they are--well, as a philosopher, I can testify that I have never seen a defense of them by a historical scholar that I would regard as philosophically competent.

Finally, the community of skeptical critics is entirely naive and unself-critical as regards its own claims to objectivity. Its members regard the New Testament authors and the students of the Bible who lived before the advent of modern scholarship as simply creatures of their time and culture; the idea that skeptical twentieth-century scholars might be creatures of their time and culture is an idea that they seem not to have considered.

<http://andrewmbailey.com/pvi/Skeptical.pdf>

I have few of the skills and little of the knowledge New Testament criticism requires...But I do know something about reasoning, and I have been simply amazed by some of the arguments employed by redaction critics. My first reaction to these arguments, written up a bit, could be put in these words: "I'm missing something here. These appear to be glaringly invalid arguments, employing methods transparently engineered to produce negative judgments of authenticity. But no one, however badly he might want to produce a given set of conclusions, would "cook" his methods to produce the desired results quite so transparently. These arguments must depend on tacit premises, premises the reaction critics regard as so obvious that they don't bother to mention them." Peter van

Inwagen, "Do You Want us to Listen to You?" C. Bartholomew et al. eds. **"BEHIND" THE TEXT: HISTORY AND BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION** (Zondervan, 2003), 127.

6. Regarding Ehrman's claim that we shouldn't use one author to explain another, that depends. Where possible, we should normally avoid using one author to determine what another author intended or had in mind.

However, in historical reconstructions, it is both legitimate and necessary to use one source to supplement another to help determine what the source is referring to. The historical, extratextual referent.

Ehrman himself attempted to do that when he tried to explain John's treatment of Pilate by placing that within an alleged trajectory of anti-Semitism in the early church.

7. Ehrman says historians must bracket the question of whether miracles happen.

i) But an obvious problem with that a priori stricture is that historians wish to determine what happened and why it happened. Historical causation.

If the Resurrection caused the empty tomb and subsequent appearances of Christ, if that event underlies the accounts in Mt 28, Lk 24, Jn 20-21, Acts 9, Rev 1, &c., then Ehrman is saying a historian should discount the very event that explains the historical outcome. He is saying historians should suppress probative evidence that doesn't fit with their naturalistic rules of evidence. But if the rules of evidence screen out true causes of historical effects, then the rules impede historical investigation. The rules misdirect the historian. The rules become false leads.

ii) As one philosopher observes:

Atheism which is held for some reason or reasons may, however, also be vulnerable to reports of putative miracles. A person who denies that a miracle-working god exists might find that well-attested, weighty reports of violations of natural law properly require him to review the force of his reasons for his atheism, or his belief that there is no miracle-working God, and to consider revising his worldview accordingly, especially where some point which those miracles would have in the purpose of the divine worker of the miracles can reasonably be suggested. His denial that there is a god who works miracles, is, presumably, either an empirically defeasible hypothesis or is proposed as a necessary truth for which supporting reasoning may be mistaken. (It is unlikely to be thought simply self-evident.) Either way, the emergence of putative-miracle reports which cannot satisfactorily be accounted for as a species of error puts a strain on this worldview. J. Houston, **REPORTED MIRACLES** (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 163.

Only what one might call a fideistic atheism which refuses to consider its rational credentials will refuse to countenance the possibility that a theistic explanation may account *better* for the range of phenomena, including some putatively miraculous phenomena, than atheism. Ibid. 166.

8. Ehrman accuses McGrew (and other Christian Bible scholars) of a double standard. But there are problems with that allegation:

i) Surely that's not confined to Christians. Would it not include some Orthodox Jewish historians or Muslim historians?

Ehrman's contention boils down to the tautology that supernaturalists allow for supernatural explanations while naturalists only allow for naturalistic explanations. But that, alone, is hardly a rational basis to disallow supernatural explanations unless methodological naturalism is underwritten by metaphysical naturalism. Otherwise, methodological naturalism is unjustified.

ii) In addition, there are cognate disciplines like anthropology that are open to paranormal explanations. Take academic anthropologists like Clyde Kluckhohn, Felicitas Goodman, Sidney M. Greenfield, and Edith Turner, or David J. Hufford (an academic folklorist), or M. Scott Peck (a prominent psychiatrist).

Based on their fieldwork, they seriously entertain the reality of paranormal events. At the very least, that's analogous to miracles and historiography.

9. Ehrman tried to put McGrew in a bind by citing Baal Shem Tov as a counterexample. For a refutation:

10. <http://christthetao.blogspot.com/2015/07/bart-erhman-finds-jesus-in-poland-baal.html>

11. Ehrman's treatment of persecution in Acts is decidedly odd.

i) For two reasons, it was logical for the authorities to initially round up Christian leaders:

a) That's a decapitation strike. The hope is that by eliminating the upper echelon, a budding movement will fall apart from lack of leadership in key positions.

b) It sends a message to followers. Making an example of the leaders serves as a warning to followers. An implicit threat that they will suffer the same fate unless they desist and disband.

ii) Of course, that tactic sometimes fails, in which case persecution expands and escalates. In fact, that's exactly what happens in the Book of Acts (e.g. [Acts 8:1-3](#); [9:1-2](#)). We have the same pattern in the Book of Revelation. And that continues until Constantine and Theodosius.

iii) Furthermore, the leadership is most salient to McGrew's argument since the disciples were eyewitnesses to the Resurrection. They had direct knowledge of the event, which they proclaimed in the teeth of persecution and martyrdom.

"I never claimed to be doing history"

I've seen village atheists misrepresent the position of Peter Williams in his recent debate with Bart Ehrman. They quote his statement out of context: "I never claimed to be doing history". But that grossly oversimplifies his stated position. You can misrepresent someone by quoting them verbatim if you quote them out of context. By quoting one snippet but disregarding the ways they qualify that statement. If you watch the entire exchange, his real position is far more nuanced than that bare snippet. Just watch the extended back-and-forth between 53-57 min. mark:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZuZPPGvF_2I&t=2173s

In addition, "history" is ambiguous. It can mean different things:

- i)** What *actually* happened in the past
- ii)** What *demonstrably* happened. What historians think happened. What historians think probably happened or probably didn't happen, what definitely happened and what definitely never happened.
- iii)** So "history" in the sense of (ii) comes down to the personal judgement of individual historians.
- iv)** Ehrman appeals to historical criteria, but criteria are value-laden and mirror the worldview of a given historian. For Ehrman, "history" is what's left over after you filter the historical evidence through the pasta strainer of methodological naturalism. But there's no presumption that we should operate with methodological naturalism unless

metaphysical naturalism is true. So that's a dishonest shortcut. To paraphrase Bertrand Russell, methodological naturalism has all the advantages of theft over honest toil.

Falling bodies

This is a quick afterthought to my Ehrman/Williams debate review:

<https://triablogue.blogspot.com/2019/10/ehrman-v-williams-rematch.html>

1. A few more reflections on the death of Judas. I'll edit this into my original post.

The description of events in biblical narration is generally quite sketchy, so there are many variations on how to visualize the an event happened.

i) Suppose you have a corpse that falls from a hilltop. The slope of a hill means that it's narrower on top but spreads out further down. Depending on the slope, a body could tumble down a hill. It's in one position when it begins the descent, but rolls over and over, picking up speed on the way down. It's in a different position when it reaches bottom.

ii) Or a corpse might begin the descent feetfirst in freefall for several yards, then strike the side of the hill one or more times. Bouncing off the hillside repositions the body.

There's nothing ingenious about these explanations. They're realistic, commonplace scenarios.

How far did Judas fall?

In his debate with Peter Williams, Bart Ehrman said (48 min. mark):

I would like to know a single case in history where somebody was hanged and he died by going head first and his guts opened up:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZuZPPGvF_2I

1. Ehrman has a simplistic notion regarding the role of evidence in historical reconstruction. Our evidence for ancient history is fragmentary. As a result, modern historians make educated guesses to fill the gaps. Imagine a modern historian trying to write a history of ancient Greece, Roman, or Egypt if he confined himself to direct evidence. That's not possible. The surviving records are too fragmentary. So when scholars reconstruct history, they must use their imagination to postulate scenarios that bridge the lacuna. They should, of course, admit that these are educated guesses. But there's nothing special about what Bible scholars do in that regard.

2. Matthew doesn't say where Judas hanged himself. Acts doesn't say where Judas hanged himself. It indicates where he landed. All it says (in Greek) is that:

He acquired a field from the reward of unrighteousness, and falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all his guts spilled out.

He may well have hanged himself in a different location above the Field of Blood, then his falling corpse landed in the Field of Blood. For instance, Mount Olivet has an

elevation of 2684 feet while the adjacent peak (Mount Scopus) has an elevation of 2710 feet. If, say, he hanged himself on the branch of an olive tree high on the hillside of Mount Olivet, it's easy to imagine the falling body splattering over the field when it hit the ground.

It's possible that the tree was dislodged by seismic activity ([Mt 27:51](#); [28:2](#)).

Verisimilitude

I'd like to expand on something I said about the recent debate between Bart Ehrman and Peter Williams:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZuZPPGvF_2I

- 1.** For many years, Ehrman's stock argument against the reliability of the Gospels has been his contention that they were authored by anonymous writers decades after the events who never lived in Palestine. But in the debate he suddenly shifted grounds. He said that even if they had accurate background knowledge of 1C Palestine, that creates no presumption that the accounts of Jesus are accurate.
- 2.** To begin with, I don't know what Ehrman is claiming. Is he claiming that the Gospels are intentionally historical, but the writers are simply clueless about the historical Jesus, despite their intentions to write an accurate biography? If so, why would their sources be accurate about little background details but wrong about the main events? Why would their sources preserve accurate background information but be unreliable about the main events?
- 3.** Apropos (3), it's unclear on Ehrman's reckoning how we could ever credit any ancient historical account. If incidental accuracy in details doesn't count as evidence for the general accuracy of the stories, then how, if at all, does Ehrman distinguish between legend and history? Doesn't his skepticism apply with equal force to Thucydides, Julius Caesar, Tacitus, and Josephus (to name a few)? Isn't the kind of corroborative evidence Williams marshals in **CAN WE**

TRUST THE GOSPELS the same kind of evidence historians use to verify ancient accounts generally?

4. For that matter, if he's that skeptical about ancient records, then he can't say the chronology in Lk 2 is mistaken, since he'd have to have confidence in other historical sources to use them as a standard of comparison.

5. Or is he claiming that the Gospels are intentionally fictional, but the Gospel writers sprinkled their stories with accurate background information to lend the stories verisimilitude? If that's what he's angling at, then one problem with his objection is that what he says about the authors is applicable to the audience. Verisimilitude is only effective if the reader is in a position to recognize the accuracy of the details. If, however, the Gospels were written decades after the fact by authors who never lived in Palestine, or knew people who did, then wouldn't the target audience for the Gospels be in the same boat? The audience would be just as uninformed as the authors. So how would they be in a position to appreciate verisimilitude? Wouldn't accurate background information be lost on them?

6. As I mentioned before, it would be dangerous to be a Christian back then. Why would the Gospel authors risk writing fiction that was so hazardous to their life and livelihood? If, on the other hand, they were writing historical biographies, then it would be worth the risk, given who Jesus is.

7. Ehrman kept defaulting to memory studies. But in his recent book, **CHRISTOBIOGRAPHY**, Craig Keener devotes a whole chapter to that issue (chap. 14). Likewise, Richard Bauckham's article: "The Psychology of Memory and the

Study of the Gospels." **JOURNAL FOR THE STUDY OF THE
HISTORICAL JESUS** 16 (2018) 1-21.

Right setting, wrong story

I'd like to revisit one issue in the recent Ehrman/Williams debate:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZuZPPGvF_2I

Ehrman dismissed the copious evidence provided by Williams on the grounds that even if the background information in the Gospels is accurate, that has no bearing on whether the accounts of Jesus are accurate. For instance, a columnist can get the background details right on a story but get the story wrong.

But there are some basic problems with that objection:

i) For many years, Ehrman's schtick has been to claim that the Gospels are unreliable because they were written by anonymous authors decades after the fact who never lived in Palestine, weren't eyewitnesses to the life of Christ, and knew no eyewitnesses to the life of Christ.

Now, however, Ehrman does an about-face. Williams marshals multiple lines of evidence to demonstrate that the Gospel authors either lived in Palestine or interviewed people who did.

So where does that leave Ehrman's original argument that the Gospel authors were out of touch with the facts on the ground? That they were too far-removed from the time and place to be in a position to accurately report what happened? Having lost the first football game, he moves the goalpost under cover of darkness to help his team for the rematch.

ii) Sure, it's possible for an eyewitness to willfully misrepresent what happened. But that's a drastic shift from the argument Ehrman has been hawking for years.

And there are problems with the new argument. If the Gospel authors were in a position to know what happened, why would they misrepresent events when they had so much on the line? It was very risky to be a Christian back then.

iii) In addition, Jesus has a polarizing effect on people. If, say, you witnessed him perform exorcisms or nature miracles, you're forced to draw some conclusions. You're forced to take sides. On the one hand, his enemies admitted that he did those things. They heard what he said and saw what he did, right before their eyes. So they couldn't remain neutral. They attributed his supernatural abilities to witchcraft.

But what would motivate the Gospel authors to misrepresent Jesus favorably if they knew what he did, even from their own firsthand observation or the eyewitness testimony of their informants?

iv) Ehrman posits that the sources for the Gospels passed by word-of-mouth through many links before the authors wrote down the latest oral traditions. But there's no presumption that that's the case.

If, however, traditional authorship is correct—and Williams provides some direct evidence as well as alluding to other evidence—then Matthew and John were eyewitnesses. For that matter, Mark was probably an eyewitness. He's a younger contemporary of Jesus living in Jerusalem at the time of Christ's public ministry.

Moreover, there's no presumption that Luke's sources involve a chain of transmission. He could easily interview eyewitnesses to the life of Christ. Many were still alive at the time he conducted his investigations. So there's no justification to stipulate a series of intervening links. The same holds true if Matthew, Mark, or John supplement their firsthand observation with testimony from other informants. The same holds true even if Matthew, Mark, and John weren't eyewitnesses.

Ehrman v. Williams rematch

I watched a recent debate between Bart Ehrman and Peter Williams:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZuZPPGvF_2I

1. I think Williams did very well. I agree with everything he said.

There are always missed opportunities in debates like this, in part because the topics keep shifting so that it's impossible to develop a line of thought. Hence, the debater has to make snap judgments about what to discuss. Many worthwhile lines of thought are left out because there's only so much he can discuss within the time constraints.

In addition, debaters play to their areas of strength, so there will be neglected lines of thought since that isn't their forte. Which is why the Christian side needs to be represented by debaters with a variety of skill sets.

Although I watched the whole debate from start to finish, I'm going to focus on Ehrman's presentation.

2. Modern readers below a certain age have grown up with televised news coverage. That puts the viewer in a position analogous to an eyewitness.

i) When you watch a televised recording of an event, you are not only seeing *what* happened—you are seeing *how* it happened. You're like a firsthand observer at the scene. And, of course, the proliferation of cellphone cameras has made that experience even more ubiquitous.

As such, saturation exposure to televised news coverage may condition or bias the modern reader when he studies biblical narratives. That's an artificial frame of reference to assess written accounts. Historical narratives, whether biblical or extrabiblical, *tell* you *what* happened rather than *showing* you *how* it happened.

ii) Apropos (i), this means that when attempting to visualize a historical account, the reader must mentally fill in the background details. All he's got is a verbal description. Compared to a televised recording, biblical accounts are very spare.

3. Apropos (2), this means that when it comes to historical reconstruction, a reader must use his own imagination to fill out the picture. Of necessity, he is mentally adding details not contained in the account. That's hardly unique to Scripture. That holds true for historical writing generally.

To an unbeliever, Gospel harmonization smacks of special pleading. But the Gospel harmonist isn't doing anything unusual. He isn't switching from one mode of reading the text to another. When he endeavors to harmonize apparent discrepancies, he's using the same approach he uses when reading accounts with no apparent discrepancies.

To a cynical unbeliever, this may appear ad hoc, but when we read historical narratives, and when we attempt to go from *what* happened to *how* it happened, every reader must postulate additional details not contained in the text. So there's nothing essentially sneaky or strained about what Christian readers are doing. That's a perfectly normal and necessary way to process historical narratives, whether or not they exhibit apparent (or real) discrepancies. Ehrman is very naive in that regard (among others).

4. Ehrman cites the death of Judas as a showcase example. There are striking differences in how Matthew and Acts report this event. But even in that respect, it's equally striking that both accounts say the death of Judas occurred at the same place (the "Field of Blood"). If, however, these are independent legends, then how do you explain that parallel? It only makes sense if both accounts have a common source in a common event. Judas did indeed die at that location.

5. Ehrman makes a big deal about Judas falling "headlong" (in Acts). I think the point Ehrman is driving at is that, from Ehrman's perspective, if Judas hanged himself, his feet would point to the ground, so that if for some reason he fell, he'd maintain the same position on the way down. If he fell feetfirst, the body would land feetfirst rather than headfirst.

But if that's what Ehrman has in mind, notice that both sides are attempting to visualize the logistics of the two accounts. Ehrman, no less than Williams, is postulating conjectural background details to create a mental picture of what the description implies or rules out.

6. Suppose Judas hanged himself on the branch of a tree on the ridge of a hill. There's nothing unrealistic about that scenario.

Suppose, in addition, Judas didn't simply fall from the tree. Suppose the rope didn't break from the weight. Rather, what if the body was pulled down.

By what, you ask? What about scavenger dogs? It's not unrealistic to posit scavenger dogs. We know they exist. Packs of dogs on the prowl for carrion. That happens.

If the dogs got on their hind legs, perhaps supported by the tree trunk or the corpse, grabbed the corpse by the armpit, and kept tugging, and if that dislodged the corpse, the corpse wouldn't just fall *down* but fall *over*. It wouldn't fall feetfirst but headfirst. For the very act of pulling it down would reposition the corpse.

(Incidentally, I once saw a nature show in which photographers hung meat from a branch to photograph the reaction of lions. The lions were very persistent in attempting to pull the meat down.)

The only remaining question is if it falls headfirst, does it land headfirst? I'm no expert, but when we watch swimmers highdive (10 meters), they dive headfirst and land headfirst. Their body doesn't change position in mid-fall.

From what I can tell, there's nothing unrealistic about my harmonization. These are things that naturally happen.

Sure, my reconstruction is speculative, but that's true for historical reconstructions in general. Ehrman's objection requires conjectural details to fill in the mental picture. To have a complete mental image of what the description implies or rules out, the reader must do that. And that's germane to so many of Ehrman's list of "contradictions."

7. Some other scenarios:

i) Suppose you have a corpse that falls from a hilltop. The slope of a hill means that it's narrower on top but spreads out further down. Depending on the slope, a body could tumble down a hill. It's in one position when it begins the descent, but rolls over and over, picking up speed on the

way down. It's in a different position when it reaches bottom.

ii) Or a corpse might begin the descent feetfirst in freefall for several yards, then strike the side of the hill one or more times. Bouncing off the hillside repositions the body.

There's nothing ingenious about these explanations. They're realistic, commonplace scenarios.

8. One problem with how he dismisses corroborative evidence Williams marshals for the historical accuracy of the Gospels is that Ehrman has backed himself into a position that he can't credit the historicity of the Gospels even if they *are* historically accurate. As Williams pointed out:

In order get the story wrong you'd have to have a different mechanism of information—so it's like they've gone to the effort of doing research to get all the context right and then you're going to say they were casual about the stories; and for that you need to have some sort of system of selective corruption of information that corrupts the most important stuff and leaves all the trivial stuff in place.

9. Ehrman rattles off names like Milman Parry and Albert Lord to demonstrate that oral tradition undergoes creative change.

i) But a problem with his comparison is that scholars like Milman Parry, Albert Lord, and John Miles Foley were examining the role of creative change in epic poetry. Yet the fact that epic poetry may undergo significant change in the process of transmission from one bard to another is not directly comparable to historical narratives. He's drawing

fallacious extrapolations from one genre to a very different kind of genre.

ii) In addition, it's demonstrably false that oral tradition can't preserve factual information intact:

<https://triablogue.blogspot.com/2016/09/the-longevity-of-oral-history.html>

10. Ehrman posits that the sources for the Gospels passed by word-of-mouth through many links before the authors wrote down the latest oral traditions. But there's no presumption that that's the case.

If, however, traditional authorship is correct—and Williams provides some direct evidence as well as alluding to other evidence—then Matthew and John were eyewitnesses. For that matter, Mark was probably an eyewitness. He's a younger contemporary of Jesus living in Jerusalem at the time of Christ's public ministry.

Moreover, there's no presumption that Luke's sources involve a chain of transmission. He could easily interview eyewitnesses to the life of Christ. Many were still alive at the time he conducted his investigations. So there's no justification to stipulate a series of intervening links. The same holds true if Matthew, Mark, or John supplement their firsthand observation with testimony from other informants. The same holds true even if Matthew, Mark, and John weren't eyewitnesses.

11. Evidence for harmonization. That's not an evidentiary question but a logical question. It doesn't require any evidence to demonstrate how two accounts are possibly consistent.

12. Ehrman said:

What would it take, if you're already committed to the idea that there can't be any mistakes, then how would you be open to the idea that there might be a mistake. It's doing theology, it's not doing history. History isn't done by coming at it with a theological presupposition about what had to happen. You look at the evidence. You don't approach it by saying this has to be right. If you're going to do proper history you can't allow your presuppositions about God to affect the outcome. You're saying Christian history isn't the same as history. If you go to a history department there are criteria.

i) One problem is Ehrman's fallacious argument from authority. But that's just an observation about the sociology of history departments at secular universities.

ii) We all evaluate historical claims based on our plausibility structures. We come to historical claims with views about what we think the world is like. What's possible or impossible, realistic or unrealistic. What's antecedently probable or improbable.

Ironically, that's exactly what Ehrman is doing with his methodological atheism. He isn't confining himself to the raw evidence. To the contrary, he takes a position, in advance of the fact, that any divine explanation must be disallowed. He takes that position before he sees the evidence. So even if divine agency is a direct factor in some outcomes, Ehrman is always committed to a naturalist explanation regardless of whether that's the right explanation. He's saying the only proper historical explanations must be naturalistic explanations—even if that explanation is wrong.

iii) There's an interplay between evidence and plausibility structures. Up to a point, your plausibility structure ought to be revisable in light of evidence. Keep in mind, though, that there's an asymmetrical relationship between naturalism and supernaturalism in that respect. If your naturalistic plausibility structure is based on lack of perceived evidence for God, providence, or miracles, then it only takes some positive evidence to the contrary to falsify your plausibility structure.

It's much harder to come up with what would even count as conclusive evidence for God's nonexistence. Even if (ex hypothesi) God is generally inevident, it only takes a few good examples to disprove a universal negative.

Book Reviews

Job's ordeal

“God himself has caused the misery, pain, agony, and loss that Job experience...And to what end? For ‘no reason’—other than to prove to the Satan the Job wouldn’t curse God even if he had every right to do so. Did he have the right to do so? Remember, he didn’t do anything to deserve this treatment. He actually was innocent, as God himself acknowledges. God did this to him in order to win a bet with the Satan. This is obviously a God above, beyond, and not subject to human standards. Anyone else who destroyed all your property, physically mauled you, and murdered your children—simply on a whim or a bet—would be liable to the most severe punishment that justice could mete out. But God is evidently above justice and can do whatever he pleases if he wants to prove a point,” B. Ehrman, **GOD’S PROBLEM** (HarperOne 2008), 168.

This analysis suffers from several fundamental problems.

1. Ehrman states, in *objection* to the book, something that is, in fact, a *presupposition* of the book. Yes, Job is innocent. That’s a presupposition of his ordeal. To raise that issue in objection to the story when that very issue is a narrative presupposition of the story is simply obtuse. Job’s innocence is a central to the inner logic of the action.

2. Moreover, Job is innocent in very narrow or technical sense. He’s innocent in the sense that a man falsely accused of a crime is innocent. Although the accused is innocent in that *particular* respect, this doesn’t mean the accused is innocent in *every* respect. A man who’s guilty of

tax evasion may be innocent of identity theft, or vice versa. He's innocent on all counts as far as the *indictment* is concerned.

Job is an innocent victim in the qualified sense that there's no one-to-one correspondence between something he did wrong and the ordeal he is having to undergo. His specific ordeal is not the result of a specific sin.

Put another way, Job's ordeal doesn't reflect divine punishment. There's nothing punitive about his ordeal.

This, however, doesn't mean that Job is innocent in the broader sense. The Book of Job is clearly set in a fallen world. No one is sinless.

Because Job is a sinner, that creates a general liability to just suffering. God does Job no wrong by suddenly withdrawing the earthly blessings that Job had hitherto enjoyed, for Job was never entitled to all those blessings in the first place.

He didn't deserve health and wealth and friends and family. That's a consequence of God's merciful forbearance.

It's not as if these were ever *Job's* possessions. No, these were always *God's* possessions. *God's* bounty.

3. Finally, the point of Job's ordeal is not for God to win a bet with the devil. That's a very superficial reading of the book.

Ehrman is making a mistake that many readers make, which is to overlook the role of the reader himself. Who are the parties to a book of Scripture? In the case of a historical book, like Job, we think of the narrator as well as the

characters.

But there is also an unspoken party to the book. And that would be the reader. In the nature of the case, the reader stands outside the narrative. The narrator doesn't refer to the reader.

Yet the reader is the target audience for the book. The Book of Job is not a private diary. It's not for the author's eyes only.

It's a public document, for the benefit of posterity. The book is tacitly directed at the reader.

God isn't proving a point to *Satan*. He isn't even proving a point to *Job*. This isn't a gentlemen's wager between private parties. Rather, God is proving a point to the *reader*.

It's easy for the reader to forget that he is a party to the book he reads. We're on the outside, looking in. We don't see ourselves because we're looking at something else. Something on the inside.

But there's a window behind the window. God is watching us as we watch Job. For Job's story is a story within a story. The reader is also a character in God's overarching story.

God put Job through this ordeal so that God would then inspire an author to write that down for posterity's sake—so that God's people can learn from Job's ordeal. That's the point.

Ehrman illustrates, once more, the common link between theological incompetence and eventual apostasy.

The Bart Truman Show

Remember the opening scene in the Truman Show? Unbeknownst to him, Truman Burbank has been living his entire life on a sound stage. It's only when a stage light falls from the illusory sky that he begins to suspect that something may be amiss in Seahaven.

Bart Ehrman is one of those autistic individuals who discovers the existence of evil when he wakes up one morning at the age of 30 or 40. He then writes a book to share his novel finding with the rest of the world.

Did Ehrman never watch the evening news when he was growing up? Did he live in Seahaven all those years?

Ehrman tells us that at Moody Bible Institute "I worked hard at learning the Bible—some of it by heart. I could quote entire books of the New Testament, verse by verse, from memory," **GOD'S PROBLEM** (HarperOne 2008), 2.

A few pages later, he says, "For the authors of the Bible, the God who created this world is a God of love and power who intervenes for his faithful to deliver them from their pain and sorrow—not just in the world to come but in the world we live in now. This is the God of the patriarchs who answered prayer and worked miracles for his people; this is the God of the exodus who saved his suffering people from the misery of slavery in Egypt; this is the God of Jesus who healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, made the lame walk, and fed those who were hungry. Where is this God now?...If God intervened to deliver the armies of Israel

from its enemies, why doesn't he intervene now when the armies of sadistic tyrants savagely and destroy entire villages, towns, and even countries" (5).

Didn't Ehrman, back when he was committing entire books to the Bible, ever notice that God doesn't always deliver his people from pain and suffering? Yes, he delivered the Exodus generation. But what about generations enslaved before the Exodus? What about the Assyrian deportation, the Babylonian Exile, and the Roman occupation?

Yes, Jesus healed many people. But he didn't heal everyone. He didn't heal every Jew, much less every heathen. And what about all the sick people who lived and suffered and died before his advent? Did Ehrman never notice the Biblical refrain, "How Long, O Lord?"

And that's not merely an OT refrain. That's also a NT refrain. The Apocalypse ends on that refrain.

Ehrman is manufacturing an artificial tension between the past and the present. Scripture never fostered the false expectation that God's people will be immune to pain and suffering. Much less that God will spare every unbeliever from pain and suffering.

But since he brings it up, let's take the case of the Exodus. For one thing, this event was preceded by the ten plagues. God inflicted pain and suffering on the Egyptians to deliver his people from bondage. Some suffered more so that others would suffer less.

In addition, the Exodus was a very disruptive event. An event that resulted in massive dislocation.

Most of us have seen science fiction films or TV shows in

which a lover travels back in time in to save his beloved—in a hitech version of Orpheus. He preempts her untimely demise by changing the future. But he succeeds at a cost. In saving this one life, he erases the lives of millions or billions. By changing their future, they have no future. They never existed.

Suppose God had delivered his people just a generation earlier. One result is that many men and women would pair off with different men and women. Massive dislocation has an appreciable impact on mating patterns. You meet and marry different people.

Just consider the impact if all the immigrants who came to America remained in the old country. Pretty soon you'd end up with a different set of people—just like those science fiction scenarios in which a future race is wiped out by one man's intervention.

Now, I'm not saying that this is good or bad. Those who didn't make the cut are no more or less deserving than those who take their place. But it's a tradeoff. There are winners and losers. Whatever generation is the Exodus generation has a domino effect on the next generation—whether you move if forward or backward in time. If God intervened as frequently as Ehrman thinks he should have, Ehrman wouldn't even exist—or his sympathetic readers.

"Why are babies still born with birth defects? (5)"

Well, if a baby was born without a birth defect, would it be the same baby? To some extent we're the product of our experience. Our socialization.

Take someone born blind or deaf. He'd likely receive far more attention from his parents and siblings. People who go

out of their way to be nice to him. If he were normal, like the next guy, they'd ignore him.

Most of us have also seen science fiction films or TV shows in which a time-traveler is trapped in the past or the future. He was planning to explore the past or the future, but something went wrong and now he can't get back. For the first few months or years he desperately misses all the folks he left behind. He spends all his waking hours figuring out how to return to his own time.

But, eventually, he resigns himself to his fate. He makes a life for himself. Gets married. Has kids. Makes friends. He may still feel a tinge of homesickness every now and then, but he's made the adjustment. Made his peace. Found contentment and happiness.

Then, one day, he discovers how to get back. This is what he wanted more than anything. But now he can't bring himself to part with his newfound life and friends and family.

Suppose Ehrman had a child who was born blind or deaf. Would he regret having had that child? Would he be sorry that his wife didn't abort the baby?

Maybe he would. Historically, Christians have valued the disabled in a way that unbelievers have not.

"Where is God now? If he came into the darkness and made a difference, why is there still no difference?" (5).

In fact, the Christian faith has made a world of difference in those parts of the world where it's taken hold. Ehrman's problem is that he takes the difference for granted, because he's a beneficiary of the difference it's made. He didn't grow

up in a heathen home.

At the same time, the first coming of Christ was never meant to change everything overnight. Here is a man who's memorized entire books of the Bible, yet he doesn't know the difference between the first coming of Christ and the second coming of Christ. This is not heaven on earth. That awaits the Parousia.

And it's rather silly to complain that Christianity hasn't made more difference in the lives of those who repudiate Christianity.

"If people do bad things because God ordains them to do them, why are they held responsible?" (120).

That's a good philosophical question. But Ehrman acts as if he's the first person to pose it. It's been asked and answered many times before.

"Roasting in hell was, for me, not a metaphor but a physical reality" (127).

"Hell" is a physical reality, but "roasting" in hell is a metaphor.

"I came to believe that there is not a God who is intent on roasting innocent children and others in hell because they didn't happen to accept a certain religious creed" (128).

I often don't know if Ehrman misrepresents the Christian faith because he's an apostate, or if he's an apostate because he misrepresents the Christian faith.

Christian theology never took the position that God damns the innocent. Moreover, rejecting "a certain religious creed" is not a precondition of damnation. Generic sin will suffice.

"The serpent is not said to be Satan, by the way: that's a later interpretation. This is a real snake. With legs" (64).

Ehrman says that he "chose to go off to a fundamentalist Bible college—Moody Bible Institute" (1), and he's been rebelling against his fundamentalist education ever since. That's his frame of reference.

He continues to interpret the Bible as a fundamentalist. The only difference is that he no longer believes it.

Take the example of the serpent. When you use an English word to translate a Hebrew word, the English word will have its own connotations. But the Hebrew word has a different set of connotations. As one commentator points out:

"A more directly sinister nuance may be seen in Heb. nahas if it is to be connected with the verb nahas, 'to practice divination, observe signs' ([Gen 30:27](#); [44:5,16](#); [Lev 19:26](#); [Deut 18:10](#))...The related noun nahas means "divination" ([Num 23:23](#); [24:1](#)). Near Eastern divination formulae frequently include procedures involving a serpent," V. Hamilton, **THE BOOK OF GENESIS: CHAPTERS 1-17**, 187.

Several things to keep in mind:

i) All these references come from the Pentateuch, and the Pentateuch is a literary unit, so this is germane to the usage in [Gen 3:1](#). Cf. J. Currid, **ANCIENT EGYPT AND THE OLD TESTAMENT** (Baker 1997), chap. 8.

ii) Hence, the word doesn't only mean "snake." It's associated with other words which connote cursing or

hexing of fortunetelling. And in the “folk etymology” of Scripture, this probably means that we are to treat the name of the “serpent” as a pun.

iii) This play on words also dovetails with ANE ophiolatry and ophiomancy. This is a world with snake-gods. Pharaoh’s uraeus is a snake-god, and the confrontation between Moses and Egyptian magicians, changing a staff into a snake, and vice versa, was a direct challenge to Egyptian theology. Cf. J. Currid, **EXODUS: CHAPTERS 1-18**, 161.

Ehrman also alludes to the curse. But as another commentator explains,

“Serpents are often the object of curses in the ancient world, and the curse in verse 14 follows somewhat predictable patterns...Some spells enjoin the serpent to crawl on its belly (keep its face on the path). This is in contrast to raising its head up to strike. The serpent on its belly is nonthreatening while the one reared up is protecting or attacking,” J. Walton, **GENESIS**, 224-25.

Once again, we back in the world of ophiolatry and ophiomancy. Snakes stood for numinous beings, the way idols stood for gods and goddesses:

“In the ancient world the serpent became an integral part of religion. Sacred snakes and serpent gods were considered not only forces of death but also forces of life and fertility. In Egypt good snakes and bad snakes guarded sanctuaries and the mortuary temples, as the paintings in the tombs display. The pharaoh himself wore the image of the sacred cobra on his headdress. And in Canaan incense burners and other cultic implements were decorated with serpents, evening the Israelite period, indicating that many Israelites

got caught up in the veneration of the serpent," A. Ross, **RECALLING THE HOPE OF GLORY** (Kregel 2006), 110.

Finally, the Pentateuch has many angelophanies. So the identification of the serpent in Gen 3 with a fallen angel was not a reinterpretation of the text. The original text always had subtextual associations linking it with something above and beyond herpetology.

Since we are stepping back into a culture other than our own, we need to be sensitive to this cultural code language. Ehrman is tone-deaf to these textual and intertextual clues. That's because he wants to make fun of it rather than understand it.

"We don't even have to grapple with the animals we eat—heaven forbid that we should actually have to observe the butcher cutting up the meat, let alone watch the poor beast get killed, the way our grandparents did" (198).

Why is a man who believes in naturalistic evolution so squeamish about steak and lobster?

Ehrman is schizophrenic about what he demands from a theodicy. On the one hand, he tells us that *"other books are morally dubious, in my opinion—especially those written by intellectual theologians or philosophers who wrestle with the question of evil in the abstract, trying to provide an intellectually satisfying answer to the question of theodicy" (18)*. On the other hand, he tells us that *"in this book I've looked at a range of the biblical answers, and most of them, in my opinion, are simply not satisfying intellectually or morally" (74)*.

Naturally he brings up the Holocaust. Like every other atheistic book on the problem of evil, he stuffs it full of every cliché-ridden example he can Google, as if he needs to educate the reader on these well-known events.

Now, there's no doubt that the Holocaust was a paradigm of evil. Yet there's a sense in which human mortality is a serial Holocaust.

That's why these examples don't have much effect on me. Ehrman is trying to manipulate my emotions, but it doesn't work.

We expect people to die of "natural causes," so that doesn't make the headlines. But if an airplane crashes into a mountain, killing everyone on board, that makes headlines. When a lot of people die all at once, that's newsworthy.

Yet, if the airplane hadn't hit the mountain, everyone on board would have died sooner or later. A hundred years later, every passenger would still be dead, just as dead, whether by "natural causes" or pilot error. Dead is dead—whether it takes the form of a serial Holocaust or a concomitant Holocaust. A distributive Holocaust or a collective Holocaust.

In a sense, it's even worse when people die one at a time, one after another, rather than all at once. For they leave grieving survivors behind. And that's something we all live with. Whenever we bury a loved one, that's a Holocaust in miniature. And it adds up.

Does this trivialize the Holocaust? No. Rather, we trivialize death by natural causes.

And let's be brutally frank for a moment. We don't feel the same way about the death of a stranger that we do about someone we know and love.

More to the point, Ehrman's whole book, if true, is predicated on a falsehood. Why should we care about the pain and suffering of others? Why is empathy a virtue?

From the standpoint of evolutionary ethics, natural selection has programmed us to feel compassionate about our own kind because altruism confers a survival advantage on the species. But that's it. A form of biological brainwashing.

Natural selection programmed us to care for Cro-Magnon, but not for Neanderthal. Neanderthal was our rival. The enemy. The way a lion will kill the cubs of rival lion.

But now that we've evolved to the point that we're aware of our evolutionary conditioning, we're aware of the fact that social morality is an illusion. It's a way to perpetuate the human race. And yet the perpetuity of the human race is just a surd event in a surd universe. We reproduce because we can. We perpetuate the lifecycle like replaceable cogs on the treadmill of life. The machine can repair itself. Yet the machine serves no purpose. It's like a gas station in a ghost town.

That's what Bart Ehrman's worldview will buy you, adjusted for inflation. And the hyperinflation rate which atheism exacts on morality is ruinous.

Ehrman asks, "What else could I do? What can you, or anyone else, do when you're confronted with facts (or, at least, with what you take to be facts) that contradict your faith" (126).

The fact of evil is not a fact that contradicts my faith. To the contrary, my faith is predicated on the fact of evil. How could Ehrman commit the Bible to heart, but miss that fact—writ large on the pages of Scripture?

But Ehrman's problem is that he is now confronted by facts without values. In leaving the faith behind, he hasn't left the facts behind. The strident facts of pain and suffering remain. But they lose their moral dimension. Ehrman's world is a world of surfaces. Sense data. Nerve endings.

But there's no moral meaning behind the superficialities of pain and suffering. Matter is the only dimension. A one-dimensional world. Matter rearranging itself. That's the meaning of life and death.

There is no tragedy in Ehrman's skin-deep world. Just the illusion of tragedy programmed into us by natural selection.

Ehrman has some residual awareness of what his apostasy cost him:

"Another aspect of the pain I felt when I eventually became an agnostic is even more germane to this question of suffering. It involves another deeply rooted attitude that I have and simply can't get rid of...I don't have anyone to express my gratitude to. This is a void deep inside me, a void of wanting someone to thank, and I don't see any plausible way of filling it" (128).

However, he tries to extinguish this religious ember with the following rationalization:

"By saying grace, wasn't I in fact charging God with negligence, or favoritism?" (129).

Ehrman doesn't know the difference between justice and mercy. How could he memorize so much of the Bible, and never register the difference?

The fact that God is merciful to me rather than you is not a reason for me to be thankless. Rather, it's a reason for me to be humble.

The only Biblical answer he agrees with is the answer offered by Ecclesiastes. Unfortunately, this involves him in a fundamental misreading of the text. He fails to appreciate the allusions to the Fall in Ecclesiastes. He also fails to appreciate Solomon's distinction between empirical appearances and eschatological judgment. The final judgment lies in the future, which is unobservable—at present. So we tend to judge by appearances—which are pretty indiscriminate.

Sometimes Ehrman turns his guns on liberal theodicies:

"For Kushner, God is not the one who causes our personal tragedies. Nor does he even 'permit' them when he could otherwise prevent them. There are simply somethings that God cannot do...but for a biblical scholar like me, I have to admit that it still seems problematic. Most of the Bible's authors are completely unequivocal about the power of God. It is not limited. God knows all things and can do all things. That's why he is God. To say that he can't cure cancer, or eliminate birth defects, or control hurricanes, or prevent nuclear holocaust is to say that he's not really God—at least not the God of the Bible and of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Believing in a God who stands beside me in my suffering, but who cannot actually do much about it, makes God a lot like my

mother or my kindly next-door neighbor, but it doesn't make him a lot like GOD" (272).

Here he reads the Bible with a candor of a Calvinist since, as an unbeliever, he has nothing to lose. But he concludes his book with a Pepsi Generation bromide.

So, unlike Truman Burbank, Bart Ehrman never left the set of Seahaven. Like most apostates, he merely transfers his Christian idealism to another cause. He changes his voter registration from Republican to Democrat. Puts a "Visualize World Peace" sticker on the back bumper of his Volvo. Has fewer kids and more cats. Eats organic food. Volunteers to chair the neighborhood recycling committee. Buys a solar-powered basket rotator. Or carbon offsets. And kills time.

"Who Wrote the Bible?"

I'm continuing my review of Bart Ehrman's new book, **JESUS INTERRUPTED** (HarperOne 2009). In chapter 4 he has a skeptical discussion regarding the authorship of Scripture. Here are the highlights—or lowlights.

"But the reality is that eyewitnesses cannot be trusted to give historically accurate accounts. They never could be trusted and can't be trusted still" (103).

i) If true, then that would be most unfortunate for Bart Ehrman since he likes to regale his readers with stories about his student days at Moody, Wheaton, and Princeton. But by his own disclaimer, Ehrman can't be trusted to furnish accurate accounts of his personal experience at those institutions.

ii) Another casualty of this statement is the way it disarms him from attacking the Bible by opposing biblical accounts to extrabiblical accounts. For example, he assures the reader that the census of Quirinius (in Luke) is inaccurate because it (allegedly) contradicts our extrabiblical sources of information. But, of course, he must rely on the testimonial evidence of period historians (e.g. Tacitus, Josephus) to make that comparison. Yet if testimonial evidence is unreliable, then he loses his standard of comparison.

"A further reality is that all the Gospels were written anonymously, and none of the writers claims to be an eyewitness" (103).

i) That's an assertion, not an argument. And it disregards

evidence to the contrary. Cf. R. Bauckham, **JESUS AND THE EYEWITNESSES** (Eerdmans 2017).

ii) But suppose that every book of the NT was loaded with explicit, eyewitness descriptions of Jesus' teaching and deeds. How would Ehrman respond to that? Wouldn't he dismiss all such claims as pseudepigraphical? For somebody like Ehrman, the presence or absence of an eyewitness claim is just a diversionary tactic.

If the author of a NT document doesn't lay claim to eyewitness testimony, then Ehrman will dismiss its historicity since the author lacks firsthand information—but if the author of a NT document does lay claim to eyewitness testimony, then Ehrman will dismiss its historicity since the author must be a forger. Heads I win, tails you lose!

“Names are attached to the titles of the Gospels (‘the Gospel according to Matthew’), but these titles are later additions to the Gospels, provided by editors and scribes to inform readers who the editors thought were the authorities behind the different versions” (103).

i) That's an odd statement coming from a textual critic. To my knowledge, there's no textual evidence that the Gospels ever circulated anonymously.

ii) Actually, I think readers would naturally be curious to know who the author was.

iii) But let's assume for the sake of argument that the first gospel originally circulated anonymously. And let's assume Markan priority. Once more than was Gospel was in circulation, it would then be necessary to add titles to

distinguish them. Yet even by Ehrman's liberal dating scheme, all four Gospels were written in the 1C. So even if titles were added to the gospels at a later date, that could well be within the lifetime of the Gospel writers.

Indeed, if Mark was already in circulation when Matthew, Mark, and John published their respective Gospels, then wouldn't we expect them to entitle their own Gospels, to distinguish one from the other?

iv) Incidentally, Martin Hegel has discussed the originality of the superscriptions in his book **THE FOUR GOSPELS AND THE ONE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST** (Trinity 2000), 48-56, 78-106.

As usual, Ehrman disregards any counterevidence that's inconvenient for his own theory.

"Authors never title their books 'according to'" (104).

i) Is that a fact? Let's put this claim to a little test, shall we? I did a quick search of Amazon.com. Here's what I pulled up:

Books > "according to"

Showing 1 - 12 of 12,264 Results

ii) In chapter 6 of his book, Ehrman mentions some apocryphal gospels like the Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Peter, and Gospel of the Ebionites. But to judge by his statement on p104, he must think that all these apocryphal gospels originally circulated anonymously. Or does that only

apply to canonical gospels, and not apocryphal gospels? If so, then why so?

“Moreover, Matthew’s Gospel is written completely in the third person” (104).

i) Isn't that a stock convention of ancient historiography?

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2018/05/illeism.html>

ii) If Matthew were written in the first-person, don't you suppose Ehrman would be quick to dismiss that fact as a pseudonymic pose?

iii) A writer may also employ the same narrative viewpoint, whether first-person or third-person, for stylistic uniformity, rather than oscillating between one and the other.

“With John it is even more clear...Note how the author differentiates between his source of information...and himself [21:24]...“He/we: this author is not the discipline. He claims to have gotten some of his information from the disciple” (104).

Several problems:

i) Even if we deny the Johannine authorship of the Fourth Gospel, it could still be the work of an eyewitness. Ehrman is committing a non sequitur. You don't need to be the apostle John to be an eyewitness. And the Fourth Gospels contains some explicit eyewitness statements at strategic turning-points in the narrative.

ii) Even if we treat Jn 21 as an editorial postscript, that doesn't mean someone other than John wrote the first 20 chapters. More likely, this would be a posthumous obituary

or eulogy (like Deut 34)–occasioned by the death of John. I incline to the view that the postscript was occasioned by the death of Peter rather than John.

iii) However, there's no particular reason to treat Jn 21 as an editorial postscript. On the basis of period literary usage, Köstenberger shows how the third-person usage in 21:24 is probably a self-referential literary convention, and not an editorial addition. Cf. A. Köstenberger, "I Suppose" (οἶμαι): The Conclusion of John's Gospel in Its Literary and Historical Context," P. Williams et al eds. **THE NEW TESTAMENT IN ITS FIRST CENTURY SETTING** (Eerdmans 2004), 72-88.

As usual, Ehrman ignores counterevidence that's inconvenient for his position.

"How many could read? Illiteracy was widespread throughout the Roman Empire...Nothing in the Gospels or Acts indicates that Jesus' followers could read, let alone write. In fact there is an account in Acts in which Peter and John are said to be 'unlettered' ([Acts 4:13](#))–the ancient word for illiterate. As Galilean Jews, Jesus' 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, since they spent their time with other illiterate Aramaic-speaking peasants trying to eke out a hand-to-mouth existence," 105-06.

There's so much wrong with this depiction that it's hard to know where to begin:

i) For the sake of argument, let's grant all of his faulty assumptions. Suppose the disciples were illiterate. So what?

You don't have to be a literate to be an eyewitness. You don't have to be literate to remember what an eyewitness told you. And you don't have to be literate to dictate a book.

An illiterate writer might sound like an oxymoron, but it's not. Even ancient authors who knew how to write often found it more convenient to dictate their material to a scribe.

ii) Ehrman is willfully blurring the distinction between Jesus' disciples and NT writers. Take the Gospels.

a) There's no evidence that Matthew was an Aramaic-speaking peasant. Given his occupation as a tax-collector, we'd expect him to be a bilingual urbanite. After all, he had to work with the Roman authorities on a regular basis.

b) Mark was not an Aramaic-speaking peasant. He was an urbanite ([Acts 12:12](#)). Probably bilingual. Since his mother hosted a house-church, he wasn't a slaveboy. He came from a family of some means. As one scholar explains, "The description in Acts 12[:12] suggests a large house with a gateway (πυλον) which acts as a buffer between the inner courtyard and the rooms and the street," B. Blue, "Acts and the House Church," D. Gill & C. Gempf, **THE BOOK OF ACTS IN ITS GRAECO-ROMAN SETTING** (Eerdmans 1994), 135

c) Luke was not an Aramaic-speaking peasant. He was a Gentile, Probably a proselyte. As a physician, he was a well-educated man.

d) What about John? John wasn't merely an Aramaic-

speaking peasant, out in the sticks. He evidently maintained a residence in Jerusalem (Jn 19:27). And the über-liberal Bishop Robinson has made some of the following observations:

“Moreover the Zebedees were evidently not poor. Salome, if she was his wife, was among the women of Galilee who contributed to the support of Jesus (Mk 15:40f.) out of their resources (Lk 8:2f.). They owned their own boats (Lk 5:3), and employed servants (Mk 1:20)...Fishing on the Sea of Galilee was good business...Galilee supplied the whole of Palestine except the coast, as it does today,” J.

Robinson, **THE PRIORITY OF JOHN** (Meyer-Stone 1987), 116.

Robinson also marshals various lines of evidence to show that John was a kinsman of the high priest. Ibid. 63ff.; 121f. He's not a country bumpkins.

As usual, Ehrman ignores counterevidence that's inconvenient for his position.

iii) As another scholar points out,

“The impressive discoveries in Galilee in general and in Sapphoris in particular have forced New Testament interpreters to reevaluate several things. For one, it is no longer tenable to think of Jesus as having grown up in rustic isolation—as was fashionable to think for so long. Jesus grew up in a village within reasonable walking distance from a large urban center..

Furthermore, the great number of Greek inscriptions as well as Greek literary finds in the Dead Sea region has led many scholars to conclude that Greek was spoken

by many Jews in Galilee,” C. Evans, **FABRICATING JESUS** (IVP 2006), 113-14.

As usual, Ehrman ignores counterevidence that’s inconvenient for his position.

iv) Ehrman disregards evidence for Jewish literacy in Herodian Palestine and urban centers in the Roman Empire, viz,

Alan Millard, **READING AND WRITING IN THE TIME OF JESUS** (NUY 2000).

“Zechariah Wrote (**Luke 1:63**)” P. Williams et al eds. **THE NEW TESTAMENT IN ITS FIRST CENTURY SETTING** (Eerdmans 2004), 47-55.

<https://larryhurtado.wordpress.com/2018/11/01/literacies-in-the-roman-world/>

http://www.jgrchj.net/volume4/JGRChJ4-3_Poirer.pdf

<https://baptist21.com/blog-posts/2018/triumph-christianitys-reading-practices-faulty-assumptions-swept-biblical-scholarship/>

https://www.academia.edu/13211795/_Ancient_Literacy_in_New_Testament_Research_Incorporating_a_Few_More_Lines_of_Enquiry_TrinJ_36_2015_161-189

v) As for **Acts 4:13**, “It refers to one who is ‘without letters’—unschooled or lacking formal education (BDAG 15). It need not mean ‘unable to read’ but simply that the person lacks a certain level of skills. Kraus (1999) has a

careful study of both terms [agrammatoi...idiotai] in this phrase. In this context, it is religious instruction that is primarily meant," D. Bock, **ACTS** (Baker 2007), 195.

"As I've indicated, only about 10 percent of the people in the Roman Empire, at best, could read, even fewer could write out sentences, far fewer still could actually compose narratives on a rudimentary level, and very few indeed could compose extended literary works like the Gospels. To be sure, the Gospels are not the most refined books to appear in the empire—far from it. Still they are coherent narratives written by highly trained authors who knew how to construct a story and carry out their literary aims with finesse" (106).

Other issues aside (see above):

i) One doesn't need any formal education whatsoever to tell a good story. Appalachian hillbillies can be spellbinding storytellers. That's more a matter of natural talent, fostered by an oral culture. Not book larnin' required!

ii) Moreover, the Gospel writers aren't "constructing stories" from scratch, like a novelist. Rather, they're selecting and arranging major events in the life of Christ. Even if they were illiterate, it would be like oral history: dictating your life to a stenographer.

iii) The Gospels also reflect what we'd expect from the varied educational levels of their respective authors. For example, Luke has more literary finesse than Matthew, Mark, or John. And that's hardly surprising since he was, in all likelihood, better educated than the rest.

John is very subtle and sophisticated, but not the least bit

academic in tone. He uses simple diction, simple syntax, simple metaphors. Quite different from Paul, or the author of Hebrews.

iv) Fact is—in times where access to higher education was limited, you had a lot of very smart people around little or no formal education. I had a grandmother who, after a game of bridge, would phone a friend the next day and proceed to recount every card that was played. She was a small-town housewife. Her husband had a friend who, when he had to wait at a RR crossing for the train to pass, would later tell the passenger what was in every boxcar. He had total recall of the code numbers on the side of the boxcars, and what they stood for. I had an aunt with a natural knack for foreign languages. For example, she could master the African click languages—which is the despair of many a linguist. She happened to be a highly educated woman, but had she been born a century earlier, or born into an Indian lower caste, or into a strict Muslim culture, that that ability would never have been cultivated.

Back then you had men and women with extraordinary abilities who, due to limited opportunities, led very ordinary lives.

v) Then there's a little thing called inspiration. God can empower quite ordinary men to do quite extraordinary things. Martyn Lloyd-Jones mentions one such case:

“One night Humphrey Jones was speaking with exceptional power and David Morgan was profoundly affected. He said later, ‘I went to be that night just David Morgan as usual. I woke up the next morning feeling like a lion, feeling that I was filled with the power of the Holy Ghost.’ At that time had had been a minister for a number of years. He was always a good

man, not outstanding—in fact just an ordinary preacher. Nothing much happened as the result of his preaching. But he woke up that next morning feeling like a lion, and began to preach with such power that people were converted in large numbers followed by rejoicing; and additions to the churches followed. This went on for over two years; wherever this man went tremendous results took place...Such was the type of ministry exercised by David Morgan for about two years. What was the end of his story? Years later he said, 'I went to be one night still feeling like a lion, filled with this strange power that I had enjoyed for the two years. I woke up the next morning and found that I had become David Morgan once more.' He lived for about fifteen years afterwards during which he exercised a most ordinary ministry," **PREACHING & PREACHERS** (Zondervan 1972), 322-23.

God can do remarkable things with unremarkable vessels.

"Whoever these authors were, they were unusually gifted Christians of a later generation. Scholars debate where they lived and worked, but their ignorance of Palestinian geography and Jewish customs suggests they composed their works somewhere else in the empire..." (106).

This is just a bare assertion. Major commentaries on the four gospels by scholars like Blomberg, Bock, France, Keener, Nolland, and Stein refute these facile accusations.

Ehrman denies the Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians because its eschatology allegedly contradicts the eschatology of 1 Thessalonians:

“Paul goes on to reiterate what he had told them when he was among them (1 Thes 5:1-2), that Jesus’ coming would be sudden and unexpected, ‘like a thief in the night’ (1 Thes 5:2). It would bring ‘sudden destruction’ (1 Thes 5:3), and so the Thessalonians had to be constantly prepared so that it would not overtake them unexpectedly. If Paul mean what he said in 1 Thessalonians, that Jesus’ return would be sudden and unexpected, it is hard to believe that he could have written what is said in 2 Thessalonians—that the end is not coming right away and that there will be clear-cut signs to indicate that the end is near, signs that have not yet appear” (125).

That's discussed in standard commentaries, viz. Weima, Shogren, Fee,

“The author of 1 John doesn’t say anything about himself. The author could be almost any leader of the church near the end of the first century” (134).

i) This is patently false. The author explicitly identifies himself as an eyewitness to the historical Christ (1 Jn 1:1ff.).

ii) Moreover, based on style and content, 1 John clearly shares common authorship with the Gospel of John.

“What is certain is that whoever wrote 2 Peter did not also write 1 Peter: the writing styles are vastly different” (135).

But there’s a basic problem with this stylistic comparison. As one scholar points out,

“Of interest here is the fact that preformed material makes up at least one-third of II Peter and that other verses, although less easy to identify as such, may also represent traditional idiom (e.g. **II Pet 1:2,5b-7; 3:18**). That is, like other New Testament letters II Peter, although a carefully formed unity, is composed to a considerable extent from preformed materials that are somewhat reworked to for the purpose of the author,”

E. Ellis, **THE MAKING OF THE NEW TESTAMENT DOCUMENTS** (Brill 2002), 133.

But in that event, we wouldn't expect 2 Peter to be written in a Petrine style—whatever that is. Rather, 2 Peter would reflect the style of the secondary source material which Peter incorporated into his letter.

As usual, Ehrman disregards evidence that's inconvenient for his position.

“But again, how likely is it that a simple fisherman from rural Galilee suddenly developed skills in Greek literary composition?” (135).

Aside from the straw man depiction of Peter's background, this is one of those vague, impressionistic objections that fails to actually engage in the spadework of a detailed, comparative analysis. By contrast, let's consider some of what a real scholar has said on the subject:

“At the level of syntax, the Greek of 1 Peter arguably exhibits bilingual interference that is consistent with a Semitic author for whom Greek is a second language (see the excursus at the end of the book). This is perhaps the most telling feature of the Greek of 1

Peter, for a letter's syntax flows almost subconsciously from an author's proficiency with the language, unlike the deliberate structure, content, and ornamentation of a discourse...A comparison of 1 Peter with Josephus and Polybius clearly shows that its syntax is not nearly as 'good' as the classical writer Polybius, or even as good as the Palestinian Jewish writer Josephus, if 'good' is defined as the Greek style and syntax of a native proficient writer. Syntax criticism (see excursus) shows that the author of 1 Peter had not attained the same mastery of Greek that Josephus had in at least four areas...Since Semitic languages were limited to Palestine and adjoining areas in the first century, the author of 1 Peter was probably not a Greek or Latin-speaking Roman or a Christian elder in Asia Minor, as has sometimes been proposed," K. Jobes, **1**

PETER (Baker 2005), 7-8.

Like many men and women with Ivy League degrees, it takes a lot of formal education to be as ignorant as Ehrman.

The hidden contradictions of Ehrman

I'm continuing my review of Bart Ehrman's new book, **JESUS INTERRUPTED** (HarperOne 2009). Now I'll examine some the errors he imputes to the NT. In a subsequent post, I'll examine some of the errors he imputes to the OT.

Ehrman is banking on the fact that the average reader doesn't have access to good commentaries and other reference works. His presentation is deliberately one-sided. Also, the natural constituency for his material are fellow unbelievers. Because he's pandering to a sympathetic audience, he thinks he can get away with deception—and, to some extent—he's right.

For several reasons, I'm not going to discuss every single example. For one thing, life is short. I have other projects. Furthermore, I already discussed some of his stock objection in **THIS JOYFUL EASTERTIDE**. Finally, there's nothing he mentions that a good commentary wouldn't address.

But I'm going to examine some representative examples to illustrate how untrustworthy he is in presenting the evidence.

The Infancy of Jesus

"A careful comparison of the two accounts [in Matthew & Luke] also shows internal discrepancies...The wise men, who are following a star (presumably it took some time) come to worship Jesus in his house in Bethlehem... Joseph and Mary are still living in

Bethlehem months or even a year or more after the birth of Jesus. So how can Luke be right when he says that they are from Nazareth and returned there just a month or so after Jesus' birth?" (34).

Matthew doesn't say they were "still" living in Bethlehem, as if they were living there continuously.

"In Matthew's account they are not originally from Nazareth but from Bethlehem."

Matthew doesn't say where they're "originally" from. Moreover, it would hardly be surprising if Mary's hometown was different from Joseph's. They're husband and wife, not brother and sister.

"Even more obvious, though, is the discrepancy involved with the events after Jesus' birth. If Matthew is right that the family escaped to Egypt, how can Luke be right that they returned directly to Nazareth?" (34).

Because the flight to Egypt occurred some time after the return to Nazareth.

The Cleansing of the Temple

"The Gospel of Mark indicates that it was in the last week of his life that Jesus 'cleansed the Temple'... whereas according to John this happened at the very beginning of his ministry (John 2). Some readers have thought that Jesus must have cleansed the Temple twice, once at the beginning of his ministry and once at the end. But that would mean that neither Mark nor John tells the 'true' story, since in both accounts he cleanses the temple only once" (7).

i) It's possible that Jesus did it twice. As an omnipotent being, who's going to stop him from doing it a second time?

ii) There's a difference between the order in which John mentions an event and the order in which it happened. If John is dictating his oral history to a scribe, he may mention the cleansing of the temple because that's what he had on his mind on that particular day, when he was reminiscing about the ministry of Christ. Consider how older relatives recount incidents in their lives in no particular chronological order. So the sequence may simply reflect what was uppermost in John's mind on that day, and not a chronological claim.

Cockcrow

Predictably, Ehrman also raises the musty canard about the timing of Peter's denials. But as one commentator explains:

"Why then does Mark have the cock crowing twice, and later make a point of mentioning the crowings in his narrative at vv.72? The simplest explanation, particularly for those who take seriously the tradition that Peter was himself the source of much of the material in Mark's gospel, is that Mark preserves the account in its fullest and most detailed form (as Peter himself would have remembered and repeated it), but that the double cockcrow was omitted as an unnecessary additional detail in the other accounts. There is after all nothing improbable in a repeated crowing: even a single cock would be unlikely to crow once and then stop, and if there were others in the

neighborhood they would take it up," R. France, **THE GOSPEL OF MARK** (Eerdmans 2002), 579.

In this same connection, Ehrman exclaims that,

"In order to resolve the tension between the Gospels the interpreter has to write his own Gospel, which is unlike any of the Gospels founding the New Testament. And isn't it a bit absurd to say that, in effect, only "my" Gospel—the one I create from parts of the four in the New Testament—is the right one, and the others are only partially right?" (7-8).

Once again, is Ehrman really that stupid? If he is asking us how one account *relates* to another, then, of course, we have to go beyond the confines of any one account to show how they're interrelated. By definition, a relation involves two or more relata. And the harmonistic exercise is generated by *his* demand.

Two Angels?

Regarding the number of angels at the tomb, he says,

"Do they see a man, as Mark says, or two men (Luke), or an angel (Matthew)? This is normally reconciled by saying that the women *actually* saw 'two angels.'...The problem is that this kind of reconciling again requires one to assert that what really happened is unlike what *any* of the Gospels say—since none of the three accounts states that the women saw 'two angels'" (8).

i) In Scripture, angels often appear as men.

ii) The Bible sometimes uses stock numbers. *Two* may be a

stock number.

iii) Angels appear and disappear at will. The fact that they are visible in the tomb at one point doesn't mean they are continuously present in the tomb.

iv) For that matter, our perception of angels may well be telepathic. Two observers could look in the same direction, one sees an angel while the other doesn't because the angel only projects himself into the mind of one observer.

How Many Signs?

Ehrman thinks there's a discrepancy in the number of signs Jesus performed ([Jn 2:11,23](#); [4:54](#)). But as one commentator explains, "The reference to a 'second sign' here is to the second sign Jesus performed *after he had come from Judea to Galilee*," A. Köstenberger, **JOHN** (Baker 2004), 172.

Throughout his book, Ehrman does an excellent job, not of proving the Bible to be in error, but proving Ehrman to be in error.

The Farewell Discourse

Commenting on the apparent discrepancy between [Jn 13:36](#), [14:5](#), and [16:5](#), Ehrman says "either Jesus had a very short attention span or there is something strange going on with the sources for these chapters, creating an odd kind of disconnect" (9).

But this is well-trodden ground in the exegetical literature. As one scholar explains,

“The alternative reading attempts to take account of the characterization of the disciples in the discourse as a whole. It notes that Jesus does not say ‘None of you has asked me’ but ‘None of you is asking me,’ thus drawing the readers’ attention to the difference between the present response of the disciples and their response at the beginning of the discourse. Their earlier superficial questioning has revealed a total lack of comprehension about the implications Jesus’ departure. Since the last question from a disciple, Jesus has given uninterrupted teaching from 14:23-16:4. As Jesus’ comment in v6 makes clear, now at least the disciples’ lack of questioning indicates a partial, if still very inadequate, understanding,” A. Lincoln, **THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO SAINT JOHN** (Continuum 2005), 418.

The Chronology of the Passion

Ehrman asserts a contradiction between Markan chronology and Johannine chronology on the timing of the Passion. There are harmonizations that Ehrman fails to tell the reader:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2014/06/johns-passion-week-chronology.html>

<https://triablogue.blogspot.com/2017/11/passover-and-last-supper.html>

The Genealogies of Jesus

“The real problem they pose, however, is that the two genealogies are actually quite different” (37).

This objection assumes that there is only one way to reckon descent. But as one scholar points out, that's a dubious assumption:

"Obviously, in a small and close-knit community, there is every probability that someone could trace their descent from the same source by two or more different routes. The Maori themselves can give several different genealogies for themselves, depending on which ancestor they want to highlight and how much intermarrying has taken place. Different tribal sub-units can trace their descent in different ways for different purposes, resulting in criss-crossing links of all sorts."

"This is so even in modern Western society. After my own parents married, they discovered that they were distant cousins with one remove of generation. Think of the little country of Israel in the period between David and Jesus; similar things could easily have happened. Many could have traced their descent to the same ancestors by at least two routes," Tom Wright, **LUKE FOR EVERYONE** (WJK 2004), 39-40.

Ehrman has another complaint:

"The problem is that the fourteen-fourteen-fourteen schema doesn't actually work...In the third set of fourteen there are in fact only thirteen generations. Moreover...It turns out that Matthew left out some names..." (38).

i) It's true that his tabulation is selective. So what? This is not meant to be a pure genealogy. Rather, it's an exercise in gematria. So we'd expect the arrangement to be somewhat stylized. Matthew is writing to Jews, using Jewish

conventions.

ii) As to the alleged numerical discrepancy, there are at least two explanations:

a) "In this statement [v11] the genealogist needs to evoke the end of the David kingship, with the collapse of the nation and exile...How can all this be evoked? We recall that in Septuagintal usage the grandson of Josiah is called either 'Jechoniah' or 'Jehoiakim,' in the latter sense using the same name as for the father...In the statement, 'Jechoniah' is first and foremost himself, but secondarily a cipher for the father with whom he shares a name."

"The third fourteen takes us from Jechoniah to Jesus, and are achieved by counting both Jechoniah and Jesus. The genealogist probably does not consider this to be double counting because in counting Jechoniah in the second fourteen, he really had in mind Jehoiakim; this leaves Jechoniah actually to be counted in his own right in the third fourteen," J. Nolland, **THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW** (Eerdmans 2006), 84-86.

b) "Matthew's numerically structured genealogy parallels this arbitrary schematization of Israel's history. Moreover, the supposed discrepancy between the statement of verse 17 that there are fourteen generations from the Babylonian deportation to the Messiah and the actual number thirteen names listed in the table is resolved by it. Indeed, it is in the third division of the genealogy that the scheme of twelve plus two or fourteen has its real application. That is, there are twelve ancestors and Jesus the Messiah who, in contrast to all the other individuals in the family tree

is to be counted twice. He represents two generations, not consecutively, but simultaneously from the beginning of his life.”

“His birth marks the end of the age of exile...He is ‘the king of the Jews’ who draws the Magi from the east, and “they rejoice with exceeding great joy’ when they arrive at his home in Bethlehem in order to pay him homage. But his birth also elicits the dreadful response of Herod the Great who dispatches his soldiers to slaughter all the infant boys in Bethlehem and the surrounding regions. Jesus as the sole survivor of this massacre becomes the bearer of this holocaust character and will embody its judgment at the end of his life when this sequence of the new age and death will be reversed...Because Jesus' life is the ground on which the consummating events of history occur, he is the bearer of two generations. His death not only relates him to the thirteenth episode in the scheme of the Messiah Apocalypse; the resurrection of the saints effected by the emission of his final divine breath of life (27:50), links him to the fourteenth, the beginning of a new time.”

<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=30>

Because Ehrman always assumes that Scripture must be wrong, he makes no effort to understand it. As such, we’re treated to a steady stream of superficial objections. Real scholars try to understand what the writer is saying.

The Baptism of Christ

“Mark especially is quite clear about the matter, for he states, after telling of the baptism, that Jesus left ‘immediately’ for the wilderness...In John...the day after John the Baptist borne witness to the Spirit descending on Jesus as a dove at baptism ([John 1:29-34](#)), he sees Jesus again...(John is quite explicit, stating that this occurred ‘the next day’)” (40-41).

But “immediately” (Gr.=euthus] is just a stylistic feature of Markan syntax—occurring some 40 times in his Gospel. In Markan usage it doesn’t generally carry any special temporal significance. Most of the time it functions “merely [as] a connective conjunction,” N. Turner, **GRAMMAR OF NEW TESTAMENT GREEK**, vol. III (T&T Clark 1980), 229. Doesn’t Ehrman know Greek?

The Census of Quirinius

“The historical problems with Luke are even more pronounced. For one thing, we have relatively good records for the reign of Caesar Augustus, and there is no mention anywhere in any of them of an empire-wide census for which everyone had to register by returning to their ancestral homes...If the Gospels are right that Jesus’ birth occurred during Herod’s reign, then Luke cannot also be right that it happened when Quirinius was the governor of Syria. We know from a range of other historical sources, including the Roman historian Tacitus, the Jewish historian Josephus, and several ancient inscriptions, that Quirinius did not become governor of Syria until 6CE, ten years after the death of Herod” (32-34).

i) Josephus may simply be wrong:

https://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/54/54-1/JETS_54-1_65-87_Rhoads.pdf

ii) Luke's statement may be hyperbolic. Hyperbole is a deliberate overstatement for rhetorical effect. The Bible often resorts to hyperbole. For example, "Then the earth reeled and rocked; the foundations also of the mountains trembled and quaked, because he was angry" (Ps 18:7).

Luke is fond of hyperbole, as Robert Stein has documented in his commentary on the Gospel of Luke. If Lk 2:1-2 is hyperbolic, then all this means is that Luke is telescoping a number of events in time and place as if they all took place at one time.

Hyperbole is not an error. It would only be erroneous if the author intended to be strictly accurate. Hyperbole is a standard rhetorical device. Luke's original audience would appreciate that fact. Ehrman is simply tone-deaf to Luke's literary conventions.

The Death of Judas

"Luke wrote a second volume to accompany his Gospel, the Book of Acts. Acts gives an account of what happened to Judas after the betrayal, as does the Gospel of Matthew, but it is striking that the two accounts stand directly at odds with each other on a number of points...the two reports give different accounts of how Judas died...And they are flat out contradictory on two other points: how purchased the field (the priests, as per Matthew, or Judas, as per Acts?) and why the field was called the field of blood (because it was purchased with blood money, as Matthew says, or because Jesus bled all over it, as Acts says?)" (46-47).

i) There are striking differences in how Matthew and Acts report this event. But even in that respect, it's equally striking that both accounts say the death of Judas occurred at the same place (the "Field of Blood"). If, however, these are independent legends, then how do you explain that parallel? It only makes sense if both accounts have a common source in a common event. Judas did indeed die at that location.

ii) The description of events in biblical narration is generally quite sketchy, so there are many variations on how to visualize the an event happened.

iii) Suppose Judas hanged himself on the branch of a tree on the ridge of a hill. There's nothing unrealistic about that scenario.

Suppose, in addition, Judas didn't simply fall from the tree. Suppose the rope didn't break from the weight. Rather, what if the body was pulled down.

By what, you ask? What about scavenger dogs? It's not unrealistic to posit scavenger dogs. We know they exist. Packs of dogs on the prowl for carrion. That happens.

If the dogs got on their hind legs, perhaps supported by the tree trunk or the corpse, grabbed the corpse by the armpit, and kept tugging, and if that dislodged the corpse, the corpse wouldn't just fall *down* but fall *over*. It wouldn't fall feetfirst but headfirst. For the very act of pulling it down would reposition the corpse.

(Incidentally, I once saw a nature show in which photographers hung meat from a branch to photograph the

reaction of lions. The lions were very persistent in attempting to pull the meat down.)

The only remaining question is if it falls headfirst, does it land headfirst? I'm no expert, but when we watch swimmers highdive (10 meters), they dive headfirst and land headfirst. Their body doesn't change position in mid-fall.

From what I can tell, there's nothing unrealistic about my harmonization. These are things that naturally happen.

iv) Suppose you have a corpse that falls from a hilltop. The slope of a hill means that it's narrower on top but spreads out further down. Depending on the slope, a body could tumble down a hill. It's in one position when it begins the descent, but rolls over and over, picking up speed on the way down. It's in a different position when it reaches bottom.

v) Or a corpse might begin the descent feetfirst in freefall for several yards, then strike the side of the hill one or more times. Bouncing off the hillside repositions the body.

vi) Matthew doesn't say where Judas hanged himself. Acts doesn't say where Judas hanged himself. It indicates where he landed. All it says (in Greek) is that:

He acquired a field from the reward of unrighteousness, and falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all his guts spilled out.

He may well have hanged himself in a different location above the Field of Blood, then his falling corpse landed in the Field of Blood. For instance, Mount Olivet has an

elevation of 2684 feet while the adjacent peak (Mount Scopus) has an elevation of 2710 feet. If, say, he hanged himself on the branch of an olive tree high on the hillside of Mount Olivet, it's easy to imagine the falling body splattering over the field when it hit the ground.

It's possible that the tree was dislodged by seismic activity (Mt 27:51; 28:2).

There's nothing ingenious about these explanations. They're realistic, commonplace scenarios.

The Triumphal Entry

“When Jesus entered Jerusalem during the Triumphal Entry, how many animals did he ride?” (50).

i) To begin with, the syntax is ambiguous:

“Addition of the prefix leads to a change of Mark’s ἐν αὐτῷ, ‘on him,’ to ἐπάνω αὐτῶν, ‘on top of them,’ which probably refers to the saddle garments rather than to the animals...It is doubtful that he intends his readers to visualize a trick rider balancing himself on two animals at the same time. Therefore we are to think that the garments were draped over both animals, just as in modern Palestine both mother donkeys and their unriden colts trotting after them have garments put across their backs...Though Jesus sat on top of the garments only on the colt, the association of the garmented mother makes a kind of wider throne,” R. Gundry, **MATTHEW** (Eerdmans 1994), 410.

ii) Moreover, even if we think the second αὐτῶν refers to the

animals, it's pedantic to assume that Matthew took this literally: "it hardly means that the evangelist alleges that Jesus actually sat upon both animals at once (!) or even in succession. Instead it means that here the two animals, which were kept so closely together, are conceptually regarded as a single, inseparable unit," D.

Hagner, **MATTHEW 14-28** (Nelson 1995), 595.

The Thirty Pieces of Silver

"When Matthew indicates that Judas betrayed Jesus for thirty piece of silver, he notes (as we now expect of him) that this was spoken in fulfillment of Scripture...The problem is that this prophecy is not found in Jeremiah. It appears to be a loose quotation of **Zechariah 11:3**" (51).

But as one commentator explains,

"This is not, however, a simple quotation of a single text, but a mosaic of scriptural motifs, some of which do in fact come from Jeremiah (see below). Like the combined quotation of **Mark 1:2-3**, it is attributed to the better known of the prophets concerned, even though its opening words are from the minor prophet. As a 'quotation' about a potter's field it was naturally associated with Jeremiah as the prophet most memorably associated with potters and with the buying of a field. Note that Matthew's attributed quotations name only the major prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah... together with one specific allusion to Daniel (24:15), while formal quotations drawn from the minor prophets are elsewhere left anonymous," R. France, **THE GOSPEL**

OF MATTHEW (Eerdmans 2007), 1042-1043.

“Some interpreters are content to consider ‘Jeremiah’ in **Mt 27:9** a simple mistake, indicating limited access to scriptural texts on the part of Matthew. But the series of links with texts in Jeremiah which we have been exploring count strongly against this view. Matthew has other quotations that merge texts: **Mt 2:5-6** merges **Mi 5:1** with **2 Sa 5:2**; **Mt 21:4-5** merges **Is 62:11** and **Zc 9:9**,” J. Nolland, **THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW** (Eerdmans 2005), 1156n322.

“Given his ability to retranslate the entire Hebrew text based on revocalization...it is unlikely that Matthew simply got his attribution wrong,” C. Keener, **A COMMENTARY ON THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW** (Eerdmans 1999), 657n140.

Throughout these objections, Ehrman thinks he’s being oh-so clever when he merely exposes himself as shallow, ignorant, and obtuse.

The Lucan Paul

Ehrman also plays up alleged discrepancies between Acts and the Pauline epistles on the life of Paul.

To correlate one man’s writing with another man’s writing is obviously a complicated business. There are entire books that defend the Lucan Paul. From reading Ehrman, the uninitiated would never know that this material even exists. For example:

Hemer, C. **THE BOOK OF ACTS IN THE SETTING OF HELLENISTIC HISTORY** (Eisenbrauns 1990)

Porter, S. **PAUL IN ACTS** (Hendrickson 2001)

Riesner, R. **PAUL'S EARLY PERIOD: CHRONOLOGY, MISSION STRATEGY, THEOLOGY** (Eerdmans 1998).

Ehrman may be a competent textual critic, but when he strays from his field of expertise, he comes across as nothing more than a big-name hack.

One in a billion?

“Of the six billion people in the world, not one of them can walk on top of lukewarm water filling a swimming pool. What would be the chances of any *one* person being able to do that? Less than one in six billion. Much less,” B. Ehrman, **JESUS INTERRUPTED**, 176.

I’ve already commented on one aspect of this statement. Now I’m going to zero in on another aspect.

Who is Ehrman alluding to? To Jesus, of course.

And who is Jesus? Is Jesus just one more person? Interchangeable with six billion others? Or is Jesus unique?

We not talking about an ordinary person doing something extraordinary. Rather, we’re talking about an extraordinary person doing something extraordinary.

Jesus is the most extraordinary person who ever lived. Indeed, Jesus is the most extraordinary person who ever lives.

We’d expect an extraordinary person to do something extraordinary. To the extraordinary, the extraordinary is ordinary. What would be truly extraordinary is if an extraordinary person never did anything out of the ordinary.

Of course, Ehrman doesn’t believe that Jesus is the Son of God Incarnate. My point, though, is that Ehrman isn’t even addressing the text on its own terms.

Although this is not properly a question of mere probabilities, yet if that's how you choose to cast it, then the real question is not, what are the odds of someone ordinary doing something extraordinary, but what are the odds of someone extraordinary doing something extraordinary? An extraordinary person on an extraordinary mission.

Ehrman is too stupefied by infidelity to even know how to correctly frame the question. Was he that uncomprehending back when he was a nominal Christian? If so, then would explain how he fell so far so fast.

Ehrman Corrupted

Continuing my review of Bart Ehrman's latest book:

"What I want to show is that because of the very nature of the historical disciplines, historians cannot show whether or not miracles every happened. Anyone who disagrees with me—who thinks historians can demonstrate that miracles happen—needs to be even-handed about it, across the board. In Jesus' day there were lots of people who allegedly performed miracles. There were Jewish holy men such as Hanina ben Dosa and Honi the circle drawer. There were pagan holy men such as Apollonius of Tyana, a philosopher who could allegedly heal the sick, cast out demons, and raise the dead. He was allegedly supernaturally born and at the end of his life he allegedly ascended to heaven. Sound familiar? There were pagan demigods, such as Hercules, who could also bring back the dead. Anyone willing to believe in the miracles of Jesus needs to concede the possibility of other people performing miracles, in Jesus' day and in all eras down to the present day and in other religions such as Islam and indigenous religions of Africa and Asia," **JESUS**

INTERRUPTED (HarperOne 2009), 172.

The most impressive feature about this argument is the fact that Ehrman seems to be impressed by this argument. Why he thinks this is supposed to be a compelling argument is a complete mystery to me.

i) What's problematic about the notion that 1C Jews might be able to perform miracles? Other Jews could perform

miracles. Moses, Elijah, Elisha, as well as Peter and Paul—to name a few.

ii) What's problematic about the notion that pagans could perform miracles? Jannes and Jambres could apparently perform miracles (Exod 7-8). A medium could conjure up the shade of Samuel (1 Sam 28). A demonic could predict the future ([Acts 16:16](#)). Witches could strike people dead ([Ezk 13:17-23](#)).

iii) What's problematic about the idea that miracles might occur at present as well as the past? Don't foreign missionaries report this sort of thing?

iv) Must I be prepared to believe that Hercules can do a miracle? Not unless I believe that Hercules actually exists.

v) Yes, the feats attributed to Apollonius sound familiar. Why is that? Let's see. Maybe, just maybe, because his biography was written long after the time of Jesus? If you think the parallels are genuine, that's because a 3C AD biography is aping the life of Christ.

Ehrman knows that. But he's banking on the ignorance of his gullible readers.

vi) Why does Ehrman think his argument has any teeth? Perhaps this is the unspoken assumption: miracles attest the messenger. Therefore, the miracles of one religion cancel out the miracles of another.

What about that assumption?

vii) Even in Scripture, attestation is not the only function of a miracle. A miracle may be performed as an act of mercy.

viii) Suppose, moreover, that a miracle does attest the messenger. So what? We need to draw an elementary distinction between what is what is *right* and what is *true*.

What does witchcraft attest? The reality of the dark side. The fact that demonic or diabolical spirits have paranormal powers. The fact that if you're in league with the devil, you may acquire black magical powers.

But the fact that something is true doesn't make it right. Suppose demonic possession confers paranormal powers on the human host? That doesn't mean we should become devil-worshipers, does it? If Satanism works, that may mean it's true, but that doesn't mean it's good. It's still pure evil.

ix) The existence of sorcery does nothing to falsify Christian doctrine. To the contrary, this is corroborative evidence.

Inerrancy and textual criticism

At some point I intend to comment on some of the contradictions that Bart Ehrman imputes to Scripture in his new book, **JESUS, INTERRUPTED**. For now I want to draw attention to a dilemma generated by his own position.

A contradiction involves a discrepancy between two or more passages. You can't allege a contradiction unless the text is reliable. If the text is unreliable, then you're in no position to say that these passages are ultimately discrepant. For all you know, the discrepancy might well be a scribal gloss.

So a necessary precondition for imputing contradictions to scripture is the essential integrity of the text. If the transmission of the text is unreliable, then any contradiction you allege is vitiated by an unreliable witness to the original text.

Therefore, the liberal has to choose between two mutually exclusive lines of attack. If he attacks the integrity of the text, then he forfeits the right to attack the inerrancy of the text—but if he attacks the inerrancy of the text, then he forfeits the right to attack the integrity of the text. One line of attack cancels out the other, and vice versa. You can pay on the way in, or you can pay on the way out, but either way, you have to pay up.

Incidentally, a parallel conundrum is generated by critics who claim the meaning of Scripture is hopelessly uncertain since Christians disagree over the correct interpretation of Scripture. If you press this issue, then you disqualify yourself from imputing error to Scripture—for the imputation

of error is only as good as your interpretation. So the unbeliever is in a quandary. He likes to attack the Bible from every conceivable angle, but in the process he is forming a circular firing squad. He makes himself the target of his own incoherent stratagems.

A history of miracles

Over the next few days or weeks I plan to review Bart Ehrman's new book, **JESUS, INTERRUPTED** (HarperOne 2009). I haven't decided yet if I'm going to review the whole thing. The basic problem with his book is that Ehrman is recycling a lot of hackneyed objections to the Bible that have been repeatedly addressed by conservative scholars. And he's either too ignorant or too dishonest to engage the opposing argument.

Today I'll confine myself to an analysis of his historiography:

"There is something historically problematic with his [Jesus] being raised from the dead, however. This is a miracle, and by the very nature of their craft, historians are unable to discuss miracles...But that is not why historians cannot show that miracles, including the resurrection, happened. The reason instead has to do with the limits of historical knowledge. There cannot be historical evidence for a miracle" (172-73).

"Historians more or less rank past events on the basis of the relative probability that they occurred. All that historians can do is to show what *probably* happened in the past" (175).

"That is the problem inherent in miracles. Miracles, by our very definition of the term, are virtually impossible events. Some people would say they are literally impossible, as violations of natural laws: a person can't walk on water any more than an iron bar can float on it. Other people would be a bit more accurate and say that there aren't actually any laws in nature, written

down somewhere, that can never be broken; but nature does work in highly predictable ways. That is what makes science possible. We would call a miracle an event that violates the way nature always, or almost always, works so as to make the event virtually, if not actually, impossible. The chances of a miracle occurring are infinitesimal. If that were not the case it would not be a miracle, just something weird that happened. And weird things happen all the time" (175).

"By now I hope you can see the unavoidable problem historians have with miracles. Historians can establish only what probably happened in the past, but miracles, by their very nature, are always the least probable explanation for what happened. This is true whether you are a believer or not. Of the six billion people in the world, not one of them can walk on top of lukewarm water filling a swimming pool. What would be the chances of any *one* person being able to do that? Less than one in six billion. Much less" (176).

"If historians can only establish what probably happened, and miracles by their definition are the least probable occurrences, then more or less by definition, historians cannot establish that miracles have ever happened...Historians can only establish what probably happened in the past. They cannot show that a miracle, the least likely occurrence, is the most likely occurrence" (176).

To see what's wrong with this argument, let's begin with an illustration. Human beings are rational agents. One thing we do with our rationality is to make tools. Design machines. Invent appliances.

We do this for various reasons. We may do it because the machine can do something we can't. We may do it because, even though we're able to perform certain tasks, we find

them tedious to perform, and so we delegate them to a machine. Or we may do it because a machine is more reliable. It yields a uniform result.

What makes the machine reliable is that it's impersonal. It can't think for itself. It can't exercise personal discretion. It can't change its mind or vary its routine.

Machines are designed to work within certain parameters. A device, left to its own devices, can't operate outside specified parameters—unless it malfunctions.

Take an automatic card shuffler. Why would we invent an automatic card shuffler? One motivation is that we don't trust the dealer. The dealer might be a cardsharp. He might be on the take.

The dealer can do things with a deck of cards that an automatic card shuffler cannot. And that's the problem. In a high-stakes poker game, we don't want a dealer who can stack the deck. So we may use an automatic card shuffler instead, since that gizmo is designed to randomize the order of the deck.

By the same token, we might prefer a machine count of the vote to a hand count. The machine is nonpartisan. It doesn't discriminate between one party and another, one candidate and another, one voter and another.

Nature has a mechanical quality to it. A number of inanimate, impersonal agencies that effect various events without a thought, forethought, or afterthought.

God designed nature that way to ensure a level of stability to human existence. An ability to plan for the future. Seedtime and harvest. That sort of thing.

Now let's draw some distinctions:

i) It would be quite illogical to infer that if an automatic card shuffler can't do certain things, then a dealer is subject to the same restrictions. The fact that certain outcomes are impossible or improbable for an impersonal process doesn't mean the same outcomes are equally impossible or improbable for a personal agent.

History is simply the record of what happened. While it may be impossible for natural forces to do certain things, that doesn't mean a rational agent is just as limited in his sphere of influence.

ii) Certain patterns indicate intelligent direction or personal intervention. If one player receives a string of winning cards while his opponent receives a string of losing cards, we conclude that the deck is stacked.

Either the dealer is a cardsharp, or the automatic shuffler has been reprogrammed to stack the deck.

While that falls outside the standard operating parameters of an automatic card shuffler, this doesn't mean it's impossible for an automatic card shuffler to stack the deck. What it means, rather, is that, if left to its own devices, an automated card shuffler is unable to stack the deck. But it's possible for the device to be reprogrammed.

iii) To verify a miraculous event is a step-process.

a) First, you verify the occurrence of the event. You don't need to verify the miraculous character of the event to verify the occurrence of the event. That's a separate issue.

b) Given the occurrence of the event, you then interpret the event. Are the internal resources of an impersonal process sufficient to account for the event? Or does the event exceed the standard operating parameters of natural causation?

It's like a game of cards. You can verify that each player was dealt a particular hand. You can verify which cards he was dealt.

But depending on the outcome, there are cases in which cheating is far and away the most likely explanation for the outcome. The odds against that pattern occurring at random are astronomical.

The chances of that happening are only infinitesimal if the automated card shuffler is working within standard parameters. But that's quite distinct from the chances of reprogramming its parameters. And that, in turn, is also distinct from the chances of what it can do once the machine is reprogrammed.

To infer that just because it's improbable that an automatic card shuffler will deal a royal flush in every game—given its standard operating parameters, then it's equally improbable that someone would reprogram its operating parameters to yield a desired result, is quite illogical. Those are separate issues. The probability of the one is irrelevant to the probability of the other.

Probability is a relative concept. Probable relative to what? In relation to what background conditions?

In this instance we attribute the outcome to the dealer's sleight-of-hand, or—in the case of an automated card shuffler—to the hidden hand of an engineer who

reprogrammed the machine.

Just as there can be probative evidence for cheating, there can be historical evidence for miracles.

Inerrancy / Historicity

Why some people lose faith

Why do folks like Bart Ehrman lose their faith? There are different reasons people lose faith. In some cases, it's due to a personal tragedy, or succumbing to sexual temptation.

According to Ehrman:

A turning point came in my second semester, in a course I was taking with a much revered and pious professor named Cullen Story...we had to write a final term paper on an interpretive crux of our own choosing. I chose a passage in Mark 2... In my paper for Professor Story, I developed a long and complicated argument to the effect that even though Mark indicates this happened "when Abiathar was the high priest," it doesn't really mean that Abiathar was the high priest, but that the event took place in the part of the scriptural text that has Abiathar as one of the main characters. My argument was based on the meaning of the Greek words involved and was a bit convoluted. I was pretty sure Professor Story would appreciate the argument, since I knew him as a good Christian scholar who obviously (like me) would never think there could be anything like a genuine error in the Bible. But at the end of my paper he made a simple one-line comment that for some reason went straight through me. He wrote: "Maybe Mark just made a mistake." I started thinking about it, considering all the work I had put into the paper, realizing that I had had to do some pretty fancy exegetical footwork to get around the problem, and that my solution was in fact a bit of a stretch. I finally concluded, "Hmm . . . maybe Mark did make a mistake."

Once I made that admission, the floodgates opened. For if there could be one little, picayune mistake in Mark 2, maybe there could be mistakes in other places as well. B. Ehrman, **MISQUOTING JESUS** (HarperCollins, 2005), 8-9.

However, there's something fishy about that explanation. As he says elsewhere:

When I went to Wheaton, I was warned not to go to Princeton Theological Seminary — a Presbyterian school training ministers — because “there aren’t any Christians there.” Really. I did indeed know that my faith would be challenged there, because it was “liberal” (REALLY liberal for my tastes).

<http://www.thebestschools.org/special/ehrman-licona-dialogue-reliability-new-testament/bart-ehrman-interview/>

But if he knew ahead of time that his Princeton profs. rejected the inerrancy of Scripture, how can he honestly say "I was pretty sure Professor Story would appreciate the argument, since I knew him as a good Christian scholar who obviously (like me) would never think there could be anything like a genuine error in the Bible"?

Given what he knew about Princeton's reputation, why would Story's remark knock him off his pins? Indeed, didn't he have reason to *expect* that his Princeton profs. would impugn the inerrancy of Scripture?

Which brings me to another point: Some people lose faith when they first encounter objections to Scripture or Christian theology. Say, their freshman year in college. Or

reading a book by an atheist. Or browsing an atheist website.

But then you have people like Ehrman who lose their faith much later in the educational process. In graduate or post-graduate school. By that stage, this is hardly the first time they've run across these challenges. The stock objections aren't surprising anymore. So is there some other factor? Some new factor? Consider this statement:

I began my teaching career in a very different context, at a secular research university in New Jersey: Rutgers. After teaching there for four years, in 1988 I moved to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, one of the truly great state universities in the country. My colleagues in both places have been specialists in a wide range of academic disciplines: classics, anthropology, American studies, philosophy, and lots of other disciplines, especially history. I live with and move among people who do serious historical research for a living. That's what they have done for their entire academic lives. It's not a Christian school context, but the context of a purely academic, research institution.

<http://www.thebestschools.org/special/ehrman-licona-dialogue-reliability-new-testament/ehrman-detailed-response/>

Here I think he unwittingly tips his hand. There are two related reasons a person might lose their faith in graduate or post-graduate school. Both of them involve an inferiority complex, but this can take different forms.

There's a social inferiority complex. Take the social climber. Have you noticed how often people move left to move up?

They move in two directions simultaneously. According to Ehrman:

My father was a salesman for a corrugated box company; my mother was a secretary.

<http://www.thebestschools.org/special/ehrman-licona-dialogue-reliability-new-testament/bart-ehrman-interview/>

So by going to Moody, then Wheaton, then Princeton, then becoming a college prof., he was moving up the social ladder. But what if acceptance in elite circles induces you to share their outlook? You want to fit in. Be one of them. So you curry favor. Avoid incurring their disapproval. They are the gatekeepers of elite society.

Just see how flattered he feels to "live with and move among people who do serious historical research for a living."

He "made" it. He's arrived! As Sinatra would say, "I want to find I'm number one, top of the heap, top of the list, king of the hill".

Some people don't suffer from a social inferiority complex, so they aren't susceptible to that kind of compromise. There can be different reasons for that. Some people just don't care about status. Impressing strangers. They don't feel they have anything to prove to others.

Then you have some people who were born into elite society. They don't *aspire* to that status. They already have it. So they aren't overawed by members of the elite. For them, that's ordinary. Nothing special.

In addition, there's an intellectual inferiority complex. People like Bart Ehman and Peter Enns aren't overly-bright. I don't mean they're unintelligent. But they're not men of outstanding intellect.

By contrast, you have some very gifted moderate to conservative scholars who don't need their self-esteem stroked by members of the guild. Most of their colleagues are not their intellectual peers. So they are unimpressed by liberal scholarship. Too independent to take liberal groupthink seriously.

It would, of course, be better for all concerned parties to base their self-esteem on what God thinks of us in Christ.

Truly this was God's son

Bart Ehrman constantly plays up alleged discrepancies in the Gospels to disprove their historical reliability. This involves a "horizontal" reading of the Gospels. In honor of Holy Week, I will cite a striking example to illustrate how I approach the same issue:

And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's son" (Mk 15:39).

When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, "Truly this was God's son!" (Mt 27:54).

Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, "Surely this man was innocent!" (Lk 23:47).

i) In Matthew and Mark, the centurion calls Jesus "God's son". But in Luke, the centurion says Jesus was "innocent". How do we account for the difference? There are different possibilities. You could propose additive harmonization. Maybe the centurion made both statements. I think additive harmonization is sometimes the correct explanation, but I think that's clunky in this particular context.

Or you might say Luke relies on a different tradition of the crucifixion at this point. That's somewhat problematic for the detailed accuracy of the accounts.

Finally, you might say Luke's version reflects an editorial change. He redacted Mark at this juncture. I'm going to pursue that explanation.

ii) One objection some people might raise to that harmonization is that it makes Luke put words in the mouth of the centurion that he never said. But doesn't that involve taking unacceptable liberties with historical events?

Sometimes that's a valid criticism. If a writer puts a statement on the lips of a character who didn't actually say it, we usually think that detracts from the accuracy of the account. However, it depends.

Suppose a guy says he was "shooting the bull" with some friends. Suppose I repeat that conversation to an immigrant who lacks a command of idiomatic English. "Shooting the bull" would conjure up a completely misleading image in his mind. Does that mean the guy was on a hunting range? In that context, it would be perfectly appropriate for me, in recounting that conversation, to reword it. To use a different phrase. Although I'm quoting someone, yet in that situation I substitute a different phrase because the original idiom would be misleading to the foreign listener. It wouldn't mean to him what it meant to the original speaker.

iii) What does "son of God" mean in the Gospels? Occasionally it's used as a Davidic title (e.g. [2 Sam 7:14](#)). But that's contextual. And you have many passages where it functions as a divine title rather than a Davidic title.

iv) A striking example is where demons recognize Christ's true identity (Mk 3:11, 5:7; Mt 8:29 & Lk 8:28). This is a bit hair-raising because human observers are overhearing a conversation between two inhuman agents. The demon is inhuman. And it senses something inhuman about Jesus.

That's not to deny the humanity of Christ. But what the demons detect has nothing to do with his human aspect or Davidic sonship. They discern something that's not empirical. That Jesus is, in a sense, God in disguise. The demons are naturally privy to something about Jesus that's inevident to human observers. Something that transcends the five senses. Demons were in a unique position to immediately apprehend his underlying identity.

v) Then we need to consider the connotation of that designation for a pagan. If Ares is the son of Zeus and Hera, that means he is the same kind of being as Zeus and Hera. If Zeus is a god, Hera is a goddess, and Ares is their son, then Ares is a god.

vi) Now, the Gospel writers don't think Jesus is "God's son" in a pagan sense. However, the Gospels were written in the lingua franca (Greek) of the Roman Empire. The Gentile mission was a major focus of evangelization in the NT church. Therefore, I think they trade on an overlapping sense. By that I mean, they are using "son of God" in an ontological sense. They use it to indicate that Jesus is the same kind of being as the Father. The phrase intentionally plays on that like father/like son implicature.

The main difference is a different conceptualization of God. Yahweh is a very different kind of divinity than Zeus. Hence, his son has no point of origin.

Unless the Gospel writers are using "God's son" ontologically, it would be extraordinarily misleading to make this a standard designation for Jesus, given so many Gentile readers—considering the default connotations of that title for Gentiles/pagans. Put another way, the Synoptics would need to take great precautions to guard against otherwise inevitable misunderstanding, given the associations that title would automatically have for non-Jewish readers. Yet they don't generally do that.

vii) There are, however, some further gradations. I think Mark's audience is fairly indiscriminate. Notable scholars (e.g. R. T. France, Martin Hengel, Robert Stein) think his immediate audience was the church of Rome. And that, of itself, was a federation of Gentile and Messianic Jewish house-churches.

By contrast, Matthew targets Jewish readers. That's a control on how the implied reader would assess the centurion's statement. A Jewish read would make allowance for the centurion's heathen background. And he'd distinguish that from Jewish theism.

However, Luke has a Gentile target audience. On the lips of a Roman soldier, that would have a pagan connotation, and Luke can't assume that his audience has the same standard of comparison as Matthew's. There is, moreover, evidence that Matthew and Luke occasionally redact Mark to forestall misimpressions.

So I suspect that Luke substituted a dynamic equivalent. Although "innocent" is not synonymous with "God's son," the centurion was vindicating Jesus by his exclamation ("Surely, this is God's son!"), so Luke's alternative faithfully conveys the speaker's intent.

"Jesus was indignant"

Bart Ehrman harps on [Mk 1:41](#). He uses that as a showcase example to demonstrate the allegedly problematic state of the NT text. Consider two translations representing the two different variants:

Jesus was indignant. He reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" (NIV).

Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, "I will; be clean" (ESV).

i) Was Jesus "moved with anger" or "moved with pity"? A number of scholars think this verse presents a text-critical dilemma, because the two rival readings confront us with conflicting textual criteria. On the one hand, the "compassionate" reading enjoys far stronger external attestation. On the other hand, it's hard to see what would prompt a scribe to intentionally change the original from "moved with pity" to "moved with anger". So internal grounds favor the "indigent" reading.

Keep on mind that on this view, it's only a dilemma if the scribal variation was intentional.

ii) Peter Williams thinks this was an accidental scribal error:

<http://evangelicaltextualcriticism.blogspot.com/2012/02/mark-141-and-ehrman.html>

If his explanation is correct, that would dissolve the dilemma. An unintentional mistranscription would be consistent with the external attestation. Indeed, if this was an unusual, but accidental mistake, then it's unsurprising that it wasn't more widely disseminated in the MSS record, inasmuch as few scribes would independently repeat that kind of mistake in that particular location.

iii) Other textual critics propose a different explanation. See the ensuing discussion in the Evangelical Textual Criticism post I linked to.

iv) In that event, we don't have to puzzle over why Jesus was angry, since that's not the original reading.

v) But suppose, for the sake of argument, that we think the "indignant" variation represents the original. On the face of it, it's perplexing that Jesus would get mad at a leper who approached him for healing.

Mind you, it's easy to speculate. Suppose a serial killer developed Parkinson's disease, and sought out Jesus for healing. Jesus knows something about his double life that the reader does not. And it's understandable that Jesus would take umbrage at the prospect of healing an evildoer like that. So there's nothing inherently inexplicable about the notion that Jesus would irate about a certain kind of person who came to him for healing. His disapproval would be based on his divine insight into the character of the supplicant. But the reader isn't privy to that information.

However, that conjecture fails to explain why Jesus complied with the leper's request despite his disapproval.

vi) Another explanation is that Jesus is not indignant at the leper, but his condition. Jesus is outraged by the suffering itself.

vii) But whichever reading is original, that's consistent with Markan Christology, Synoptic Christology, and NT Christology generally. Our doctrine of Christ doesn't hinge on which reading is original in **Mk 1:41**. We needn't revise it depending on which reading is original. At worst, it means we can't read Christ's mind. We don't always understand what motivated his actions. But that's realistic.

Calvary

One of Bart Ehrman's stock examples of alleged discrepancies in this Gospels is his contention that Mark and Luke present contradictory accounts of the Passion. I'll make a few observations:

i) Part of the problem is with his illogical assumption that if one account includes information not mentioned in another account, that must be fictional or unhistorical.

ii) It doesn't occur to Ehrman that if someone is in a state of extreme physical and emotional distress, that person may well be subject to mood swings. Surely that's a commonplace of human experience. People in that condition may oscillate between hope to despair. It's perfectly realistic for the same person to have conflicting feelings—especially when traumatized. It would be surprising if Jesus did not experience a gamut of emotions during this crisis.

iii) In addition, a subjective feeling of divine abandonment is entirely consistent with an objective reality of divine provision. That's a common motif in the Prophets and Psalms. A sense of utter desolation doesn't mean the sufferer has in fact been deserted by God.

What is historical accuracy?

1. Bart Ehrman spends a lot of time attacking the historical accuracy of the Gospels. However, he doesn't spend much time unpacking the concept of historical accuracy. Rather, he contents himself with examples of what he considers to be discrepancies in the Gospels. But what does it mean for something to be historically accurate?

2. Perhaps we'd say an account of an event is accurate if the event happened, and the account corresponds to how the event happened. In a sense, that's unobjectionable, but it's fatally ambiguous. Let's take a few examples:

i) Was the healing of Jairus' daughter an event? That's a trick question. In a sense, it's an event. But in another sense, it's a series of events. In Mark's account, Jairus comes to Jesus. That's an event. He talks to Jesus. That's an event. Jesus goes with Jairus. That's an event. While they are on their way to his house, servants come to say his daughter has died. The sending of the servants is an event. Her death is an event. And so on.

In other words, we can view this as one event, or a series of related events. And that's not a pedantic distinction. If we say an accurate account should correspond to the event, are we saying it must correspond to every link in the chain? But what if that makes the description bloated? Stuffed with extraneous details? Is it inaccurate for a narrator to cut the dead wood?

If, to be accurate, an account must correspond to every link in the chain of events, then where's the cutoff? You could always go back another step in the series of events leading

up to the conclusion. When did the daughter take ill? What was the history of the pathogen (if that's what it was)?

Any description of the event must somewhat arbitrarily isolate what's relevant from all the precipitating factors leading up to the denouement. In terms of causality, the event isn't a self-contained incident. Rather, it's the end-product of an ever-receding series of cause and effect. Any account will have to omit many details.

ii) Take another example: suppose we say an accurate account of the Civil War is an account that corresponds to what actually happened. In a sense that's a truism. But the Civil War isn't a single event. Rather, it's a network of various events at different times and places. That can't be shoehorned into one linear plot. Rather, you have multiple chains of events. What was happening in Virginia, South Carolina, Missouri, the District of Columbia, &c. What a Union general was doing, what a Confederate general was doing, what a Union politician was doing, what a Confederate politician was doing, and so forth.

No single narrative can correspond to everything that was happening at the same time, or different times, in different states during the Civil War. At best, you can have multiple narratives that correspond to one chain of events or another—related, but distinct—chain of events.

3. In one sense, a time machine is the ideal standard of historical accuracy. By taking you back into the past, that's an exact match.

In another sense, that's not what we mean by historical accuracy. For accuracy involves the concept of representation, not identity.

4. Apropos (3), take holodeck simulations of the past. The computer creates an interactive, 3D facsimile of the past. That would certainly correspond to the past.

But, of course, that's science fiction. Even if we had the technology to pull that off, we lack the fine-grained knowledge of the past to reproduce details. The computer would have to pad the simulation of generic, imaginary details to plug the many gaps.

5. Let's take another example. Suppose I'm a director. I'm going to make a miniseries on the Civil War. A nonfiction dramatization. I wish to make it as historically accurate as possible.

i) One challenge is dialogue. To my knowledge, not much original Civil War dialogue has come down to us. By that I mean, you didn't have stenographers following soldiers and statesmen around, taking down their informal conversations in shorthand. So how do I supply authentic dialogue? Or do I?

I could simply invent dialogue that's the kind of thing that characters might say in that situation. It would be accurate in that very broad sense.

However, it's possible to get much closer to the reality. There's tons of primary source material consisting of speeches, sermons, letters, memoirs, diaries, journals, essays, tracts, pamphlets, editorials, biographies, news articles, &c., by Civil War observers or participants. That could be mined for raw material to turn into dialogue.

Although it wouldn't be what they said in conversation, it would be in their own words. It would be about the war.

Therefore, I'd have the Robert E. Lee character saying things Lee actually said. Same thing with all the other characters.

Sure, that's not something they said on that exact occasion. As a filmmaker, I've changed the setting by adapting their statements to dialogue. But that's a necessary adjustment to the medium. No, it's not something they said *at* that particular time or place, but it is something they said *about* that particular time or place.

ii) Another challenge is viewpoint. Should the series have an editorial viewpoint? That's unnecessary. Different characters would naturally present different viewpoints. North and South. Generals. Statesmen. Foot soldiers. Slaves. Abolitionists. And the dialogue would be taken from things they actually said.

iii) On a related note, how would I depict battles? Well, if I have descriptions of the same battle from a Union soldier and a Confederate soldier, I might show the battle from both perspectives. After all, each soldier experienced the battle differently.

iv) Some of the original settings are gone. There are different ways to finesse that. There are still Antebellum buildings around. I could substitute one of those. I could build period sets, based on historic photographs. And in the age of CGI, I could simulate period landscapes and cityscapes, based on historic photographs. I could even digitally alter the facial appearance of the actors to make them look just like the historical figures they portray.

Now, all these devices are one or more steps removed from the original event. Yet all of them strive for authenticity.

Suppose I go to all the effort, only to have film critic Bart Ehrman exclaim that my miniseries wasn't historically accurate in any modern sense of the term. Really? Would any rational person agree with his review?

6. I think the Gospels are much closer to reality than the scenario I proposed in #5. But even if, for argument's sake, the Gospels were like my hypothetical miniseries, they'd be highly informative about what happened in the Civil War. If that's historically accurate in the case of a representation which is more steps removed from the original event, then that's even more accurate in the case of a representation which is fewer steps removed from the original event.

Bullwinkle is a dope

Once again, I'm going to explore the question of what makes a claim historically accurate. Bart Ehrman constantly impugns the historical accuracy of the Gospels, but rarely says much about what makes a claim historically reliable or accurate.

Sometimes he says we should judge the Gospels by modern standards of historical accuracy rather than ancient standards, but that assumes, among other things, that modern standards are indeed more accurate or reliable. It's true that we can measure space and time with greater precision. Down to multiple decimal places. But unless you're an engineer, that's pedantic.

Let's run through some examples:

#1 A newsworthy event happened on August 8, 1974.

#2 On August 8, 1974, Nixon tendered his resignation.

#3 In a televised address, Nixon tendered his resignation on August 8, 1974.

#4 In a televised address from the White House, Nixon tendered his resignation on August 8, 1974.

#5 In a televised address from the Oval office, Nixon tendered his resignation on August 8, 1974.

#6 In a televised address from the Oval office, President Nixon tendered his resignation on August 8, 1974.

#7 In a televised address from the Oval office, President Richard Milhous Nixon tenured his resignation on August 8, 1974.

#8 In a televised address from the Oval office, President Richard Milhous Nixon tenured his resignation on August 8, 1974, effective noon the next day.

#9 In a televised address from the Oval office, President Richard Milhous Nixon tenured his resignation on August 8, 1974, effective noon the next day, EST.

These successive descriptions are increasingly specific. Each is a bit more detailed than the previous description.

In that respect, you might say #9 is more accurate than #8, #8 is more accurate than #7, and so forth. Conversely, #1 is less accurate than #2, #2 is less accurate than #3, and so forth.

However, to be *less* accurate is not to be *inaccurate*. Each description is completely accurate.

Put another way: if a description mentions some detail, then to be accurate, the description must match the detail. However, including that detail is not a prerequisite for accuracy. Failure to mention that detail doesn't render the description inaccurate. Mere omission is not an inaccuracy. Rather, if it mentions some detail, and the description fails to match the detail, then that's an inaccuracy.

Compare three statements:

#1 Therefore, I shall resign the Presidency effective at noon tomorrow.

#2 Therefore, I shall resign the Presidency effective at noon tomorrow. Vice President Ford will be sworn in as President at that hour in this office.

#3 Therefore, I shall resign the Presidency effective at noon tomorrow. Vice President Rocky Squirrel will be sworn in as President at that hour in this office.

Both #1 & #2 are accurate. The fact that #2 omits some details doesn't make it inaccurate. It just makes it less informative.

#3 is inaccurate because it contains a false identification. In a sense, #3 is inaccurate because it says too much, unlike #1. Omission is not a falsehood—although it can sometimes be deceptive.

Let's take another example:

Rocky J. Squirrel is Bullwinkle J. Moose's best friend. Richard Nixon resigned in 1974.

That's an accurate statement. And it contains more information than a bare statement about Nixon's resignation. But that doesn't make it more historically accurate in reference to his resignation. Rather, it combines two entirely unrelated claims. Each claim is extraneous to the other.

The longevity of oral history

One reason unbelievers claim Biblical accounts are unreliable is because they were (allegedly) written so long after the fact. For instance, Bart Ehrman recently published a book on the subject. Yet there are two preliminary problems with this claim:

- i) It presumes a late date for the documents or the underlying sources.
- ii) It disregards the possibility of revelation and inspiration.

That said, the claim suffers from another problem. For there's evidence that under the right conditions, oral history can be reliable across centuries or even millennia. For instance:

One time when the Chief of the Below World was on the earth he saw Loha, the daughter of the tribal chief. Loha was a beautiful maiden, tall and straight as the arrowwood. The Chief of the Below World saw her and fell in love with her. He told her of his love and asked her to return with him to his lodge inside the mountain. But Loha refused to go with him. The Chief of the Below World was very angry. He swore he would have revenge on the people of Loha, that he would destroy them with the Curse of Fire. Raging and thundering on the top of his mountain, he saw the face of the Chief of the Above World on the top of Mount Shasta. From their mountaintops the two spirit chiefs began a furious battle. Mountains shook and crumbled. Red-hot rocks as large as the hills hurtled through the skies. Burning ashes fell like

rain. The Chief of the Below World spewed fire from his mouth. Like an ocean of flame it devoured the forests on the mountains and the valleys. The Curse of Fire reached the homes of the people. Fleeing in terror before it, they found refuge in Klamath Lake. This time the Chief Below the World was driven into his home, and the mountain fell upon him. When the morning sun rose, the high mountain was gone. The mountain which the Chief Below the World had called his own no longer towered near Mount Shasta. For many years the rain fell in torrents and filled the great hole that was made when the mountain fell upon the Chief of the Below World. Now you understand why my people do not visit the lake. From father to son has come the warning "Do not look upon this place." – Klamath story, recorded 1865 [Clark 1953, 53-55]

Who can doubt that we have here a vocalic eruption, with its river of fire, quakes, ash-fall, and lava bombs? Certainly no one who has followed the recent eruptions of Etna, Pinatubo, and Shasta's neighbor Mt. St. Helens.

Is transmission of oral information across centuries even possible? We read in the newspaper about how unreliable the witnesses to accidents and crimes can be a month later. What hope is there that verbal information could survive so long intact?

The Klamath story quoted above refers specifically to the place we know as Crater Lake—in fact, the story was related as answer to a young soldier at Fort Klamath when he inquired why the native people never went to that breathtakingly beautiful spot.

After emptying its magma chamber of lava in a catastrophic eruption, [Mt.] Mazama collapsed to form a crater 4,000 feet deep which, as the narrative relates, never erupted violently again and gradually filled with water to form today's magnificent Crater Lake. That eruption, so accurately described and vehemently warned against in the tale, has been ice-dated to 7,675 years ago. So, yes, real information can reach us intact across more than seven millennia of retelling. Even if we might not agree with their explanation of *why* these things occurred, the Klamath tribe in the 1860s still knew in considerable detail of events observed *millennia* earlier.

Vine Deloria Jr. came to the same conclusion about the Klamath myth of Crater Lake in his book *Red Earth, White Lives* [1995, 194-98]. We find Deloria also interprets much the way we do the Bridge of the Gods (the Dalles), the disappearance of Spokane Lake, and various other Pacific Northwest myths—all as recording specific geologically reconstructible events. And he too has collected massive evidence for the extreme longevity of these myths. Both we and Deloria are also indebted to Dorothy Vitaliano's book *Legends of the Earth* [1973], which appeared not long before we began collecting our Myth Principles.

Evidence abounds from several continents, in fact, that properly encoded information has passed unscathed through the oral pipeline for one to ten thousand years and more—for example, in Australia [Dixon 1984, 153-55,295]. But the conditions must be right for this to happen.

First of all, the information must be viewed as important, as in the Klamath warning about innocent-looking Crater Lake.

Second, the information must continue to correspond to something still visible to the hearers, such as Crater Lake to the Klamath. If tellers of volcano myths migrate away from all volcanos, the original meaning of those myths is sure to become clouded or lost.

The third condition for intact transmission is that it be encoded in a highly memorable way...An unbroken chain of good memories is part of the condition. But that chain is more likely to stay intact if the information is embedded vividly (so as to be more memorable) or encoded into the story multiple times (so there is a back-up)...The latter strategy is called *redundancy*. E. Barber & P. Barber, **WHEN THEY SEVERED EARTH FROM SKY: HOW THE HUMAN MIND SHAPES MYTH** (Princeton University Press, 2006), 6-10.

Consider how many Biblical narratives meet these conditions. Biblical narratives often record intrinsically memorable events.

Bible writers often live in the vicinity of the reported events, where natural landmarks are visible. In addition, God sometimes commands the Israelites to construct memorials.

Moreover, the event is often encoded in ritual. Religious ritual can function as a mnemonic device, where perennial repetition of the rite prompts collective memory of the event it commemorates (e.g. Passover; Eucharist). Furthermore, the event is often recorded in dramatic imagery. Finally, the event is often recorded in multiple sources.

"Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday"

I was thinking some more about Bart Ehrman's position on the unreliability of eyewitness memory. I'm referring to his debate with Richard Bauckham. I have seen a library edition of Ehrman's new book, but the preview of his position he gave in the debate was so idiotic that I figure the book must be a waste of time.

At least in the debate, Ehrman thinks memory is either reliable or unreliable. He flattens memory.

If, however, we reflect on memory, that's grossly simplistic. Take the question, "What were you doing in 9/11?" or "Where were you on 9/11?"

The question takes for granted that Americans of a certain age remember the 9/11 attack. The question isn't "Do you remember what happened on 9/11?"

Rather, the question presumes that because 9/11 was such a memorable event, not only will you remember the event itself, you will remember contextual details in relation to the event. To spell that out, because 9/11 was so memorable, that makes some otherwise forgettable details memorable by association.

Or let's go back to the title of the post. That's the famous opening line of *L'Étranger* by Albert Camus. The first line is arresting because the death of your mother is a paradigmatically-memorable event. If you don't remember that, what do you remember?

For those of us who've lost loved ones, we don't merely recall the day they died. Rather, we are apt recall certain

things we were doing on that day. The principle is that an intrinsically memorable event makes related incidents extrinsically memorable by association.

This introduces another distinction. An event can be prospectively insignificant, but retrospectively significant. Take the day before your loved one died. Or the day before you heard about their death. Especially if the death was sudden, if the death was unexpected, you probably don't recollect anything you did on the day before they died. But if you had advance knowledge that they were going to die the next day, then the day before they died becomes instantly significant. That might be the last full day you will ever have with them. The significance of the day they die makes the day before they died significant, with the benefit of hindsight. And if you had the benefit of foresight, you'd be likely to remember what you were doing on both days.

Indeed, suppose the doctor tells you that your loved one probably has only a few days to left. That advance warning can make the days leading up to their death memorable. The foreboding. Spending extra time with them. Your loved one is now on a countdown. So you make the most of the remaining time.

Suppose we apply that reasoning to the Gospels. Suppose we bracket inspiration. And suppose, for the sake of argument, we say the only historically reliable accounts in the Gospels are accounts centered on naturally memorable events. So what would those be?

For one thing, the miracles of Christ are memorable. In the nature of the case, a miracle is a memorable event. If Christ performed miracles, that's the kind of event we'd expect people to recall, and talk about.

But it's not just the miracle that's memorable. As my other examples illustrate, a memorable event enhances our recollection of contextual details. We remember, not merely the event itself, in isolation, but we're apt to remember other things that were said and done in relation to the event. Where and when. Who was there. Normally, these contextual details might be utterly forgettable, but a memorable event is like a light that's not only luminous in its own right, but illuminates the surroundings.

But even if all we had to go by were the accounts of dominical miracles in the Gospels, there's an awful lot of theology in those accounts. If those are historically reliable, because they're so memorable, that's quite a lot to work with.

Consider some other memorable events in the Gospels. The nativity accounts are studded with unforgettable incidents.

Or Holy Week. That was a harrowing experience for the disciples. They couldn't bring themselves to believe that Jesus would be martyred. And when Jesus was arrested, they lost their protector. They became marked men. They were terrified that the authorities were going to hunt them down. What could be more memorable?

And what about the empty tomb? And the Risen Christ appearing to them? Not only is that unforgettable, but it's even more dramatic in light of their harrowing experience.

The Gospels are interwoven with reported events that would be indelible to observers. And the events would make many incidental details stick in the mind.

Performance variants

Bart Erhman pretentiously instructs people to read the Gospels horizontally as well as vertically. Don't just read through one Gospel at a time, but compare them side-by-side.

Of course, that's hardly a novel approach. There are published Gospel harmonies that do just that.

For Erhman, this exposes discrepancies between the Gospels. Some scholars explain these "discrepancies" by appeal to redaction criticism.

In this interview, Andy Bannister discusses the oral nature of the Koran. Around the 30-36 min. mark he describes the nature of "performance variants," and then applies that to the Gospels. These are not redactional variants, but reflect the living voice of Christ:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HmRGhxnDu0&feature=share>

Piggybacking on his argument, I'd like to make an additional point. It's common for scholars to remark that since Jesus was an itinerate preacher, we'd expect him to repeat himself at different times and places. And by the same token, we'd expect performance variants. There'd be minor verbal changes as he adapted his message to a particular audience at a particular time and place. Different synonyms. Adding a word here, subtracting a word there. Even when talking about the same thing or retelling the same story, speakers naturally reword things. Spontaneous variations.

Yet there's a related, but neglected consideration. We shouldn't expect performance variants to be confined to the same speech at a different time and place, but to the same speech at the same time and place.

It's generally acknowledged that the speeches, sermons, and dialogues in the Gospels and Acts are condensed. One stereotypical difference between the spoken word and the written word is that speech is a redundant medium.

That parallels the difference between readers and listeners. A reader can process the material at his own pace whereas a listener hears what is said at the speaker's pace. Likewise, if a reader doesn't follow a sentence the first time he sees it, he can stop, go back, and reread it.

By contrast, a listener can't pause the speaker. If an idea is spoken only once, it may get past the listener too fast to register. If a listener doesn't understand a statement, and he puzzles over what it means, he can't simultaneously pay attention to the rest of what the speaker says. For the speaker just keeps on talking.

As a result, a skillful speaker will repeat himself in the same speech to make it easier for listeners to process the message. He may repeat some phrases verbatim as well as paraphrasing the same idea.

It's likely that Jesus expressed the same idea in different words in the course of the same discourse. The original discourse probably had performance variations. Not just wording things differently when he spoke to a different audience at a different time and place, but to the same audience at the same time and place.

If two or more people jotted down in journals what they heard Jesus say, they could, in principle, quote him verbatim, yet there'd still be verbal variations in their respective excerpts because they're quoting different parts of the same discourse. Where Jesus uses similar words to express the same idea. So there's no presumption that synoptic variants are redactional variants rather than performance variants.

That doesn't rule out redaction in some cases. But we shouldn't default to that.

Abiathar the high priest

Then David came to Nob, to Ahimelech the priest. And Ahimelech came to meet David, trembling, and said to him, “Why are you alone, and no one with you?” (1 Sam 21:1, ESV).

how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?” (Mk 2:26, ESV).

There is often thought to be an actual or apparent contradiction between these two verses. Bart Ehman has showcased this as the triggering event which precipitated his loss of faith in Biblical inerrancy.

There are commentators like R. T. France who think Mark made an innocent mistake. There are commentators like Stein and Bock who offer possible harmonizations to defend the accuracy of Mark, but admit that there's no good resolution to the apparent contradiction.

But I confess that I don't even see a *prima facie* contradiction:

i) Mark's actual wording is very terse. He uses a three-word phrase: *epi* followed by *Abiathar [the] high priest*.

A contradiction is generated when Mark is rendered: "at the time when Abiathar was high priest." But I don't think it would even occur to me to construe the text that way. For one thing, that's not what Mark actually says. Mark doesn't say this happened *when* Abiathar was high priest.

I simply take "high priest" to be a title. That's what Abiathar was known for. So it's not a statement of when he was in office, but a designation that identifies the Abiathar in question as *that* Abiathar. Presumably, he wasn't the only Jewish male with that name. So the title singles him out by giving that additional information to distinguish him from other Jews who might have the same name. We do the same thing with ex-presidents.

ii) Moreover, the association between Abimelech and Abiathar is natural, since they were father and son, as well as predecessor and successor in that office. They were contemporaries. Their lives overlapped. But Abiathar is the more prominent figure in OT history, so it makes sense to mention him to give the general timeframe.

iii) For that matter, it's quite possible if not probable that they were both present on that occasion. As father and son in the Levitical priesthood, it makes sense that both were in attendance at the tabernacle.

iv) We see a similar alternation between Annas and Caiaphas during the trial of Jesus. Annas had been deposed. Technically, Caiaphas, his son-in-law, was high priest at the time. But formalities aside, Caiaphas seems to be a figurehead while his father-in-law, though high priest emeritus, was still running the show behind-the-scenes.

Modern historiography

I am glad to see that in one major way Mike and I agree about the Gospels. We agree that we cannot hold the Gospels to modern standards of accuracy, because if we do, the Gospels are not accurate. In Mike's words, the Gospels are "flexible with details" and they are comparable to modern movies that employ extensive "artistic license." I couldn't agree more.

My sense is that when people today want to know whether the Gospels are historically accurate, what they want to know is this: Did the events that are narrated in the Gospels actually happen in the way the stories are told or not?

And so the natural question arises, as Mike himself raises it: What do we mean by historical accuracy? Let me tell you what I think most people mean. My sense is that when people today want to know whether the Gospels are historically accurate, what they want to know is this: Did the events that are narrated in the Gospels actually happen in the way the stories are told or not? People in general are interested in that basic question, not so much in the points that Mike raises. That is to say, people are not overly interested in the question of whether the Gospels stack up nicely in comparison with ancient biographers such as Plutarch and Suetonius. Of course they're not interested in that. Most people have never read Plutarch and Suetonius. I'd venture to say that most Bible readers have never even heard of Plutarch or Suetonius, or if they have, it's simply as some vague name of someone from the ancient world.

People don't care much, as a rule, about other ancient biographers and their tactics when talking about the Bible. They are interested in the Bible. Is it accurate? For most people that means: Did the stories happen in the way they are described or not? If they did happen that way, then the stories are accurate. If they did not happen in that way, they are not.

If it were, however, important to talk about the relationship of the Gospels to such ancient authors, then it would be worth pointing out, as Mike knows full well, that Plutarch and Suetonius are themselves not thought of as historically reliable sources in the way that many people hope and want the Gospels of the New Testament to be. Both authors tell a lot of unsubstantiated anecdotes about the subjects of their biographies; they include scandalous rumors and hearsay; they shape their accounts in light of their own interests; and they are far less interested in giving abundant historically accurate detail than in making overarching points about the moral qualities of their characters. That is what Plutarch explicitly tells us he wants to do. He wants the lives that he describes to be models of behavior for his readers, and he shapes his stories to achieve that end. He is not concerned simply to give a disinterested historical sketch of what actually happened.

Mike thinks the Gospels are like Plutarch, and I completely agree. They are far more like Plutarch, and Suetonius, than they are like modern attempts at biography. In modern biographies, an author is concerned to make sure that everything told has been verified and documented and represents events as they really and truly happened. Ancient biographies, including the Gospels, are not at all like that.

<https://thebestschools.org/special/ehrman-licona-dialogue-reliability-new-testament/ehrman-detailed-response/>

i) Ehrman's protestations to the contrary notwithstanding, there is some value in judging ancient historical/biographical writing by ancient standards. For instance, it's not erroneous for a writer to use round numbers. Since he wasn't aiming for exactitude, he can't fail to hit a target he wasn't aiming for.

ii) However, I disagree with the popular contention that the Gospels and Acts operate with essentially different standards than modern historical/biographical writings. It's often said that the Gospels weren't merely history, but interpretive history. That's true, but it's hardly distinctive to the Gospels.

Good historians and biographers don't content themselves with giving a bare chronicle of events. Rather, they wish to explain what caused events. Why did the Roman Empire fall? That sort of thing.

They consider different determinants. The motivations of human participants. Economic factors. Social dislocation due to famine or pandemic. And so forth. Modern biographies and history books are interpretive history no less than the Gospels or Acts.

Grave robbers!

One thing we can say with relative certainty (even though most people – including lots of scholars!) have never thought about this or realized it, is that no one came to think Jesus was raised from the dead because three days later they went to the tomb and found it was empty. It is striking that Paul, our first author who talks about Jesus' resurrection, never mentions the discovery of the empty tomb and does not use an empty tomb as some kind of "proof" that the body of Jesus had been raised.

Moreover, whenever the Gospels tell their later stories about the tomb, it never, ever leads anyone came to believe in the resurrection. The reason is pretty obvious. If you buried a friend who had recently died, and three days later you went back and found the body was no longer there, would your reaction be "Oh, he's been exalted to heaven to sit at the right hand of God"? Of course not. Your reaction would be: "Grave robbers!" Or, "Hey, I'm at the wrong tomb!"

<https://ehrmanblog.org/an-easter-reflection-2018/>

Depends on who my friend is. If my friend is God Incarnate, if my friend performed astounding miracles at will—including the ability to raise the dead—if my friend predicted his death and resurrection, if Isaiah predicted messiah's death and resurrection ([Isa 53:7-12](#)), then the first reaction, the most logical reaction, to the empty tomb shouldn't be "Grave robbers!" Or, "Hey, I'm at the wrong tomb!"

The Gospels and the Gettysburg Address

Bart Ehrman harps on how we should read the Gospels horizontally as well as vertically. We should compare parallel accounts. When we do, we notice differences. Of course, that's hardly a novel observation.

Redaction criticism typically attributes variations to theologically motivated editorial changes. That may *occasionally* be true, but that's a problem when it's treated as the default explanation.

To take a comparison, the Gettysburg Address is one of the most famous speeches in American history. And it's multiply-attested in contemporary sources. We have copies in Lincoln's own hand, as well as transcriptions by newspaper stenographers who heard the speech live. Yet there are variations in our sources:

Abraham Lincoln gave his famous Gettysburg Address at a public cemetery dedication 151 years ago today. But was the mention of God really taken out of the famous speech by the president himself?

No one will really know for sure, since audio of the event wasn't recorded. That technology was another two score years away in the future.

But there are at least nine versions of the Gettysburg Address from the time period, with some in Lincoln's handwriting. All are slightly different, and not all accounts agree that Lincoln mentioned God during the 270-word, two-minute speech.

Lincoln was invited as guest speaker at the Gettysburg cemetery event as a courtesy, and it wasn't entirely expected he would attend. The famed orator Edward Everett was the featured speaker.

Lincoln and his staff arrived on the day before the event, and Lincoln compared notes with Everett. The president also worked on his speech that night.

The Gettysburg Address itself is not in question. The Associated Press and three newspapers transcribed the remarks for publication. Lincoln gave his draft copy and a copy written right after the speech to his secretaries.

In later days, Lincoln wrote out three other copies as mementos, giving us a total of nine versions of the speech. All nine are different.

The gist of all the versions is the same, and all the versions contain the quotes widely taught in history class.

However, the first two versions, in Lincoln's own handwriting, omit the mention of God in the conclusion.

"The nation, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people by the people for the people, shall not perish from the earth," Lincoln wrote in his first two versions. Later versions added the word "under God" so that the sentence reads, "the nation, under God, shall ..."

The inclusion of God in the speech is perhaps the most significant difference among the versions. The fifth version of the speech, which was signed and dated by

Lincoln, was considered the “final” version and included “under God” in its last sentence.

But is that what Lincoln actually said on the battlefield?

In “The Collected Works Of Abraham Lincoln: Volume 7,” [the dispute seems to be settled](#).

The Associated Press report of the speech, written by Joseph Gilbert, along with reports from newspapers in Philadelphia and Chicago, all agree that Lincoln said “under God” as his speech concluded.

In that book’s footnotes, it’s explained that the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and *Chicago Tribune* had the words in its independent accounts.

“These papers corroborate Gilbert's version, however, in having the phrase ‘under God,’ which Lincoln must have used for the first time as he spoke,” the book says.

It also appears that Lincoln used the Associated Press version as a reference point when he wrote out the third, fourth, and fifth versions.

A fourth printed version, from the *Boston Advertiser*, shows that Lincoln used the words “under God” as [the address concluded](#).

<https://constitutioncenter.org/blog/did-abraham-lincoln-omit-god-from-the-gettysburg-address>

How is that possible? One explanation is the difference between the spoken word and the written word. Some speakers write out their speech in advance. That's their script.

But when they speak before a live audience, they may depart from their prepared remarks. In addition, if they make copies from memory, they may introduce further variations, in part because they don't recall exactly how they worded it the first time, and because they're not even attempting to reproduce the original wording verbatim. They reserve the right to paraphrase their own statements. What matters isn't the precise phraseology, but communicating the same ideas.

In principle, all the variant accounts of Lincoln's speech could be authentic. They could all be his own words. He casually reworded what he said, when he delivered the speech and when he made copies of his own speech.

How Ehrman shot himself in the foot

Whether or not he had this in mind when he began his journey into apostasy, there's a strategy to Ehrman's attack on the historical Jesus. Basically, it goes like this:

i) Because the text of the NT is unreliable, we don't know what Jesus was actually like. We don't know what he really said and did. **MISQUOTING JESUS.**

ii) Even if the text of the NT was reliable, the Jesus traditions which were eventually canonized aren't based on firsthand information. **JESUS INTERRUPTED.**

iii) Even if the Jesus traditions in the Gospels were based on firsthand information, eyewitness memory is unreliable. **JESUS BEFORE THE GOSPELS.**

Now, each step in the argument can be challenged. I've done some of that myself, as have others.

But Ehrman's argument suffers from another problem. One way Ehrman attempts to discredit the Gospels is to alleged that some of their claims can be shown to be historically erroneous. For instance, in **JESUS INTERRUPTED**, he dusts off the chestnut about the census of Quirinius. He says that's falsified by extrabiblical historical sources (pp31-33).

However, a glaring problem with his appeal is that Ehrman is resorting to a double standard. He's exempting the extrabiblical sources from the same skepticism he applies to the Gospels. For instance, he appeals to Tacitus, Josephus,

and inscriptional evidence regarding Quirinius. Yet he fails to apply the same criterion to them:

i) Do we have a reliable textual tradition for Tacitus and Josephus? In **MISQUOTING JESUS**, Ehrman hypothesizes:

Suppose that after the original manuscript of a text was produced, two copies were made of it, which we may call A and B. These two copies, of course, will differ from each other in some ways — possibly major and probably minor. Now suppose that A was copied by one other scribe, but B was copied by fifty scribes. Then the original manuscript, along with copies A and B, were lost, so that all that remains in the textual tradition are the fifty-one second-generation copies, one made from A and fifty made from B.

Although he had the NT in mind when he wrote that, the same principle applies to his extrabiblical sources. What if all our MSS of Tacitus or Josephus derive from a mistake-ridden fifth-generation copy?

ii) Even assuming that we have reliable MSS of Tacitus and Josephus, what's the evidence that their statements about Quirinius are based on firsthand information?

iii) Even assuming that their statements (or the inscriptions) about Quirinius are based on firsthand information, Ehrman has published a new book in which he claims eyewitness recollection is untrustworthy.

So this poses a dilemma for Ehrman: if, on the one hand, he treats his extrabiblical sources with the same skepticism he treats the NT, then he can't use extrabiblical sources as a standard of comparison. By that logic, they are just as

dubious as the NT. If, on the other hand, he deems his extrabiblical sources to be prima facie trustworthy, then, in consistency, he must grant the same presumption regarding the canonical Gospels. He can only use extrabiblical sources to impugn the historicity of the Gospels on pain of special pleading. So his trilogy becomes an automated machine that shoots himself in the foot the moment he tries to discredit the historicity of the Gospels by appeal to extrabiblical historical sources.

The Ehrman follies

I'll comment on some statements that Bart Ehrman made in a recent interview:

<http://www.thebestschools.org/special/ehrman-licona-dialogue-reliability-new-testament/bart-ehrman-interview/>

In some cases I will rearrange his statements to collate statements on the same topic. That will make the review more logical and less repetitive.

I never argue that the empty tomb and the appearances somehow are incompatible and cancel each other out, or that they are in any way incompatible. My view instead is simply that they are two different traditions and it's important to recognize their differences. It has long been noted that the apostle Paul speaks of Jesus's appearances, but never mentions the story about the women going to the tomb and finding it empty. Strikingly, the Gospel of Mark tells the story about the women going to the tomb to find it empty, but never mentions any stories about Jesus's post-resurrection appearances.

In the Gospels (and Acts), the empty tomb functions to show that Jesus really was physically raised from the dead. But, strikingly, it never leads anyone to believe. (And why would it? If a body was buried in a tomb and later it was not there, would someone immediately say: "He has been raised from the dead?" Of course not. They would say: "Grave robbers!" Or, "Hey, I'm at the wrong tomb!")

On the other hand, the resurrection appearances function to show that Jesus really did come back to life.

And it is these appearances, and only these appearances, that cause people to believe.

i) If Jesus *did* rise from the dead, then you'd expect two outcomes: an empty tomb and post-Resurrection appearances of the risen Christ. These aren't two different traditions. Rather, these are two logical consequences of the same underlying event. Of course, Ehrman denies the event, but the point is that you don't need to appeal to two different traditions to account for this twofold phenomenon. Rather, if Jesus rose from the dead, that would have both results. His death would empty the tomb and he'd appear to acquaintances to attest his resurrection.

ii) In addition, the Gospels record that Jesus predicted his resurrection. So it's not just empty tomb accounts. That must be complemented by predictions which explain why the tomb will be empty.

iii) The fact that Paul doesn't mention the women finding the tomb empty is such an old chestnut:

a) Paul is writing a letter, not a biography.

b) Paul is writing to Christians who already knew about the life of Christ.

c) It's a mark of Paul's integrity that he doesn't say more than he knows. He doesn't make up a story.

The book is about how we go about the incredibly difficult process of knowing what the authors of the NT wrote, given the circumstance that we don't have their original writings, or copies of those originals, or copies of the copies of those originals, or copies of the copies of those originals.

That book was less about how specialists reconstruct the NT text (the theme of the Metzger book) than it was about the enormity of the textual problem (as presupposed in the Metzger book). Yes, we have abundant evidence for the text of the NT. But very little of that evidence is early, and much of it is highly problematic.

I find that very deceptive:

i) This isn't like anecdotes that are passed down by word-of-mouth. Rather, when a scribe copies a text, the text furnishes an objective standard of comparison. It's not like relying on memory. Or secondhand memories.

ii) If a scribe introduces the wrong word into the text, that will usually be detectable, because using the wrong verb or noun will generally make the sentence nonsense. The next scribe will be able to see that there's something wrong with the sentence. And he will be able to see where the problem lies. The wrong word will stick out. A detectable error is generally a correctible error. You can usually figure out what the original word was.

We do this all the time when we run across typos. We can spot the mistake and fix the mistake.

iii) Even if we're unsure what the original word was, yet because communication tends to be redundant, you usually get the gist of what the sentence meant even if one word is wrong.

iv) In addition, we have thousands of manuscripts. There are usually many manuscripts that contain the right word for every manuscript that contains the wrong word.

I have long been struck by the fact (which historians generally take to be a fact) that Jesus died around the year 30 CE, but the first surviving account of his life was not written until around 70 CE (the Gospel of Mark; Matthew and Luke were maybe 10–15 years later than that, and John may another 10–15 years after even that).

So, where did the Gospel writers get their stories of Jesus from? There are compelling reasons for thinking that the authors of our Gospels were not eyewitnesses to Jesus's life (none of them claims to be). They were living in different countries, in different communities, speaking different languages, decades later. And so how did they get their stories?

For nearly a century now, scholars have argued that they got their stories from the "oral tradition." That is, people told and retold the stories, until the Gospel writers heard them and wrote them down.

The reason there are so many differences (and similarities!) in the Gospels is that the stories they narrate were being told by word of mouth, year after year, decade after decade, after the disciples had come to believe that Jesus had been raised. What happens to stories that get circulated this way? They change.

People forget things. They misremember things. They invent things. Happens all the time. It happened to the stories of Jesus.

It is true to say that many parts of the New Testament show knowledge of first-century geography, religion, and culture. But how could it not show this knowledge? It was written by first-century authors! Presumably, they knew about the geography, religion, and culture of the first century! But that doesn't mean that what they say is historically accurate or not. Suppose I were to write a novel, or even a biography, about someone who lived in my home town of Lawrence, Kansas.

Presumably, I would know about the main street (Massachusetts), the location of the university (on the hill), the basic size of the place (middlin'), the industries in the area (e.g., the Lawrence Paper Company), and so on. Would that make the stories I told about my protagonist true? Of course not. I could simply be making stuff up. If in 2,000 years an archaeologist digs up Lawrence in order to see if my novel is "true," well, the location of the university on a hill would have no bearing on whether my stories about a professor who taught at the university are true or not.

The problem with his illustration is that his fictional story about Lawrence, Kansas is based on his firsthand knowledge of the town. That's his hometown, where he grew up. That's why, even if the story is fictional, it will contain many historically accurate details.

But that's precisely where the comparison falls apart when he says the Gospels were written decades after the fact by authors who weren't eyewitnesses, or had access to firsthand informants. Under that scenario, it's puzzling that the Gospels would contain so much accurate information about a time and place decades earlier. Information that archeology can corroborate. All the more remarkable when you consider the random preservation and discovery of corroborating evidence.

So, about five years ago it occurred to me that scholars of the Gospels would be well served to learn more about what we know about oral cultures, and about story-telling practices, and more broadly about memory. How do we learn things? And remember them? And reimagine them? And forget them? And

invent them? And retell them? And then the person we tell a story to: how do they learn, remember, reimagine, forget, invent, and retell them? And the person they tell a story to: how do they...? And so on.

He acts as though he's breaking new ground on a neglected topic. Evidently, Ehrman doesn't bother to read standard monographs of the historical Jesus that discuss memory studies, viz. Dale Allison, **RECONSTRUCTING JESUS**, Richard Bauckham, **JESUS AND THE EYEWITNESSES**, Craig Keener, **THE HISTORICAL JESUS OF THE GOSPELS**.

The view is that even if miracles did happen in the past — let's simply grant that they happened — there is no way to establish that they happened using the historical disciplines (i.e., to show they are, using your term from earlier, "objective historical truth"). Again, that's not a result of atheist, anti-supernaturalist presuppositions. It is the result of historical method. Historians simply have no access to supernatural activities involving the actions of God. Only theologians (among the scholars) have access to God. Theologians can certainly affirm that God has done miracles, but they are affirming this on theological grounds, not historical grounds.

The past is everything that happened before now. History is what we can establish as having happened before now. Miracles may be in the past. But they cannot be established as having happened. Big difference.

Historians, by the nature of their craft, have no access to any activities of God. That is the purview of theologians. Historians do not have tools to access the supernatural. That's no one's fault. It's just the way it

is. Historians also have no way of establishing if a poem is beautiful, if I love my wife, if there is dark matter, if the Pythagorean theorem is true, or anything else outside the realm of "history" (please remember, "the past" is not synonymous with history). To believe in the resurrection of Jesus is a religious commitment. It is a belief. It is no more susceptible of historical "proof" than is the claim that there is only one God (or that there are two; or 24).

i) A miraculous past event would be a certain kind of historical event. If history can establish the occurrence of past events, why can't history establish the occurrence of miraculous past events? If they happened, they are past events. In that respect, they are just like other past events: something that happened in the past.

ii) Likewise, the type of evidence would be the same: testimonial evidence.

iii) Suppose Ehrman lived in the time of Christ. Suppose he witnessed Jesus walk on water, change water into wine, multiply the loaves and fish, or raise Lazarus from the dead. Is he saying an observer would have no access to the event itself? He could see it happen right before his eyes. He could see what things were like right before the event, and what things were like right after the event.

He could see and feel that Jesus was really dead. He could see and feel that Jesus was really alive. Presumably, that would suffice to establish this as having happened.

iv) Perhaps he'd say that's different because we're dealing with reported miracles rather than miracles we can see for ourselves. And there's a degree of uncertainty with respect

to secondhand information. But even if we grant that distinction for the sake of argument, that's not a categorical difference between historical events in general and miraculous events in particular. In both cases, a historian is dealing with reported past events. Yet Ehrman wants to say there's something qualitatively different about miracles that render them inaccessible.

v) Or does Ehrman intend to distinguish between the occurrence of an event and the interpretation of an event? A historian could establish the occurrence of a miraculous event qua event but not the occurrence of a miraculous event qua miraculous? A historian is disqualified from classifying the event as miraculous. He can't access supernatural agency in the sense that a historian can't establish that God caused it. Is that what Ehrman is groping at?

If so, why can't a historian "access divine activities" from the effects of divine activities? If there's historical evidence for the effects, why can't a historian infer the cause? For instance, historians routinely attribute certain effects to personal agency. They go behind the event to the source.

vi) Apropos (v), consider a definition of the miraculous. Here's how J. L. Mackie unpacks the concept of the miraculous:

What we want to do is to contrast the order of nature with a possible divine or supernatural intervention. The laws of nature, we must say, describe the ways in which the world—including, of course, human beings—works when left to itself, when not interfered with. A miracle occurs when the world is not left to itself, when something distinct from the natural order as a whole

intrudes into it.

Even in the natural world we have a clear understanding of how there can be for a time a closed system, in which everything that happens results from factors within that system in accordance with its laws of working, but how then something may intrude from outside it, bringing about changes that the system would not have produced of its own accord, so that things go on after this intrusion differently from how they would have gone on if the system had remained closed. All we need do, then, is to regard the whole natural world as a being, for most of the time, such a closed system; we can then think of a supernatural intervention as something that intrudes into that system from outside the natural world as a whole. However, the full concept of a miracle requires that the intrusion should be purposive, that it should fulfill the intention of a god or other supernatural being...It presupposes a power to fulfill intentions directly without physical means. **THE MIRACLE OF**

THEISM (Oxford 1982), 19-22.

Suppose we grant that definition for the sake of argument. Since Mackie was a prominent atheist philosopher, I'm not tilting the scales in favor of Christianity by using his definition. (I disagree with his notion that a miracle must bypass physical means.)

In that case, a historian can classify a past event as a miracle if it meets the definition: an event that happened, but would not have happened if the natural world was left to itself, as opposed to outside agency (i.e. supernatural intervention).

Let's consider how Erhman tried to justify his position ten years ago:

I'm just going to say that miracles are so highly improbable that they're the least possible occurrence in any given instance. They violate the way nature naturally works. They are so highly improbable, their probability is infinitesimally remote, that we call them miracles. No one on the face of this Earth can walk on lukewarm water. What are the chances that one of us could do it? Well, none of us can, so let's say the chances are one in ten billion. Well, suppose somebody can. Well, given the chances are one in ten billion, but, in fact, none of us can.

What about the resurrection of Jesus? I'm not saying it didn't happen; but if it did happen, it would be a miracle. The resurrection claims are claims that not only that Jesus' body came back alive; it came back alive never to die again. That's a violation of what naturally happens, every day, time after time, millions of times a year. What are the chances of that happening? Well, it'd be a miracle. In other words, it'd be so highly improbable that we can't account for it by natural means. A theologian may claim that it's true, and to argue with the theologian we'd have to argue on theological grounds because there are no historical grounds to argue on. Historians can only establish what probably happened in the past, and by definition a miracle is the least probable occurrence. And so, by the very nature of the canons of historical research, we can't claim historically that a miracle probably happened. By definition, it probably didn't. And history can only establish what probably did.

I wish we could establish miracles, but we can't. It's no one's fault. It's simply that the canons of historical research do not allow for the possibility of establishing

as probable the least probable of all occurrences. For that reason, Bill's four pieces of evidence are completely irrelevant. There cannot be historical probability for an event that defies probability, even if the event did happen. The resurrection has to be taken on faith, not on the basis of proof.

Read more: <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/is-there-historical-evidence-for-the-resurrection-of-jesus-the-craig-ehrman#ixzz42WR9XuNR>

But that's confused in multiple respects:

i) Using Mackie's definition, a miracle is improbable with respect to what could happen when nature is operating as an isolated system, absent outside "interference".

ii) That, however, doesn't mean a miracle is improbable *given* divine intervention.

iii) Why does Ehrman assume it's unlikely that God will interfere with natural order? What's his justification for that supposition?

iv) I'd add that even if we frame the issue in terms of natural laws, unless we define a law of nature in contrast to divine agency, there's no reason to say divine agency "violates" a law of nature. Why can't divine agency sometimes be in accordance with the laws of nature?

The Ehrman follies, part 2

I'm going to comment on the next installment of Ehrman's debate:

<http://www.thebestschools.org/special/ehrman-licona-dialogue-reliability-new-testament/ehrman-major-statement/>

Ehrman is very repetitious in his debates and books, so I won't repeat objections I've addressed before in responding to his material.

Ehrman cites stock "contradictions" like raising the daughter of Jairus and the cleansing of the temple. Having recently discussed these myself, I won't repeat myself here.

I should stress that the views I lay out here are not unique to me, as if I'm the one who thought all this up. On the contrary, the views I will be laying out here are those held by virtually every professor of biblical studies who teaches at every major liberal arts college or research university in North America. Take your pick: Yale, Harvard, Princeton, Berkeley, University of Chicago, University of Kansas, University of Nebraska, University of Minnesota, University of Florida, Amherst, Middlebury, Oberlin — literally, pick any top liberal arts college or state university in North America, and the views that I will be sketching here are pretty much the sorts of things you will find taught there.

Ah, yes, the power of secular groupthink.

The Gospels are obviously full of supernatural stories. And for scholars prior to the Enlightenment, these stories were actual events of history. They really happened. If you had been there, you would have been able to record them with your video camera...

Somewhat misleading. Yes, a video camera would be able to record the supernatural events. That, though, doesn't mean the Gospels narrate them from the perspective of a cameraman. Writing is a different medium than photography. You can see several things happen simultaneously (e.g. watching football), but writing is sequential. Even if you can watch several things happening at once, you can't write about them all at once (or read about them all at once), but only one at a time.

Moreover, the field of vision contains lots of background detail that's extraneous to the main event. A narrative will omit most of that.

The sciences were on the rise, and scholars began to realize that one does not need to appeal to the activities of God to explain the events of the world. Lightning strikes, floods, and droughts were no longer thought of as direct interventions of God into the world; they were seen as naturally occurring climactic conditions.

i) Since when did pre-Enlightenment believers think natural evils has to be direct divine interventions? To the contrary, didn't they pray that God intervene to prevent or end a natural evil? In other words, they might just as well view a natural evil as something that happens on its own unless God steps in to stop it.

Unless they thought lightning, flooding, and drought were divine judgments, there'd be no reason to presume these were direct divine interventions. Take the annual flooding of the Nile. Did they think that was a direct divine intervention, or the ordinary course of nature?

The emphasis during the Enlightenment was on the possibility of human reason to understand our world and the nature of life in it.

ii) Is Ehrman ignorant of the fact that Scripture and historical theology have a concept of ordinary providence?

iii) Ehrman posits a false dichotomy. To deny that lightning, flooding, and drought represent "divine interventions" doesn't preclude "activities of God to explain events of the world". A washing machine relieves humans of having to launder clothes by hand. But that doesn't eliminate the need for someone to invent the washing machine. Ehrman is such a simpleton.

Medicine was developed, and proved to be much more efficient in solving human illness than prayer and hope.

Medicine antedates the Enlightenment by centuries and millennia. It's just that we've gotten better at it.

Astronomy developed and people came to realize that the earth was not the center of the universe.

Viewing the sky through a telescope doesn't tell you whether or not earth is the center of the universe. After all, the universe surrounds the earth. Everywhere you look, in every direction, is outer space. So how could you tell from a

terrestrial frame of reference whether the earth was or wasn't at the center of the universe?

That's based more on a theory of cosmic origins—like a ripple effect, where our solar system is an outer wave in relation to the point of origin.

Eventually, scientists realized that the world was not created in six days and that humans were not simply created out of the dust, but evolved from lower forms of primates, which were themselves evolved from yet other forms of life.

Which disregards evidence to the contrary.

If we no longer needed to appeal to “miracle” to explain why we got over the flu, or why it finally rained last week, or why the solar system was formed, do we need to appeal to miracle to understand the Gospels?

i) In Scripture, rain comes from clouds. Observers could actually see that happen.

ii) People routinely recover from the flu. That's not inherently life-threatening. Why would pre-Enlightenment believers assume that's a miracle?

iii) In addition, there's a need to distinguish between folklore and what theologians believed.

Even though we continue to call the Gospels “Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John,” we do not know who the authors actually were. Each of the Gospels is completely anonymous: their authors never announce their names. The titles we read in the Gospels (e.g., “The Gospel according to Matthew”) were not put there

by their authors, but by later scribes who wanted to tell you who, in their opinion, wrote these books.

How does he know that? Was it customary for 1C books to circulate anonymously?

They were not eyewitnesses to the events they describe, and do not ever claim to be.

The narrator of John's Gospel claims to be an eyewitness. Moreover, you don't need to be an eyewitness to have access to firsthand informants.

For nearly 100 years scholars have realized that the Gospel writers acquired their stories about Jesus from the "oral tradition," that is, from the stories about Jesus's life, words, deeds, death, and resurrection that had been in circulation by word of mouth, in all the years from the time of his death. The Gospels were written between 70–95 CE — that is 40 to 65 years after the events they narrate. This means that the Gospel writers are recording stories that had been told and retold month after month, year after year, decade after decade, among Christians living throughout the Roman empire, in differing places, in different times, even in different languages.

i) He states that as if it's a demonstrable fact, but he doesn't explain how he knows that to be the case. For instance, people typically write autobiographies at the end of their public life. Yet that's a firsthand account. No intervening links. No word of mouth.

ii) Moreover, his dating scheme is hardly a given. Consider John Wenham's **REDATING MATTHEW, MARK, AND LUKE**.

There are lots and lots of detailed differences like this that you will find once you start reading the Bible horizontally. Just take another seemingly small instance. In Mark's Gospel, at his Last Supper, Jesus informs Peter that he, Peter, will deny Jesus that evening three times "before the cock crows twice" ([Mark 14:30](#)). In Matthew we have the same scene, but here Jesus tells Peter that he will deny him three times "before the cock crows" ([Matthew 26:34](#)).

Well, which is it? Is it before the cock crows or before it crows the second time?

That just means Mark is more specific than Matthew. A general statement doesn't contradict a specific statement. For instance: "the parking lot had a 100 cars"; "the parking lot had 10 red cars". The second statement doesn't contradict the first.

To say "before the cock crows" is not to assert it won't happen before the cock crows *twice*, as if "before the cock crows" is meant to deny or negate before the cock crows twice. That would only follow if you assume Matthew intends to contrast his statement with Mark's, or correct Mark's statement. But Matthew has a habit of simplifying Mark. He routinely abbreviates Mark—probably to free up space for his additional material. There's only so much you can fit onto a single scroll.

Again, it seems like a picayune detail: but why the difference? What is more interesting (and possibly important), is that in the different Gospels Peter actually denies Jesus to different people on different occasions. So, what is going on?

Why does Ehrman imagine that's a problem? If more than one person questioned Peter, he'd deny Jesus to more than one interrogator.

Indeed, it's easy to see how that could happen. Peter is standing around the fire with some other folks. Most of them don't pay any attention to him until one of them questions him. But now that he's been singled out, that exchange prompts others to take notice and question him. That's a perfectly natural dynamic.

So, first of all, probably most Jews today are descended from King David, given how genealogies work. Did half the Jewish population of the world descend on Bethlehem?

What's his basis for that claim? 1C Jews belonged to twelve different tribes. Even within David's tribe, to say someone descended from the tribe of Judah hardly means he descended from David. Although that's possible, that's not necessary or even probable. There's no presumption to that effect.

Finally, if Luke's account is right about the birth of Jesus, then the one other account that discusses it in the New Testament, the Gospel of Matthew, cannot also be right. Read Matthew's account: what happens after Jesus is born? In Matthew, Herod decides to kill all the children in Bethlehem because he doesn't want any competitors for his throne as "King of the Jews." But Joseph is warned in a dream and he escapes with Mary and Jesus to Egypt, where they stay until Herod dies. But if that's right, how can Luke also be right that they stayed in Bethlehem just 41 days (eight days till the circumcision; 33 days before the rites of

purification) and then returned to Nazareth? If Luke's right, then Matthew can't be, and vice versa.

This is just bizarre. In Matthew, Herod's order occurs over a year later. There's plenty of lead time for Jesus to be circumcised, and Mary to be purified, before the Holy Family skips town. It's as if Ehrman is so sure the Gospels must contradict that he can't even think straight.

Who goes to the tomb? Is it Mary by herself, or with other women? If with other women, how many women? And what are their names? (As is true for this and all the other points I made, the answer in each case will appear to be: "It depends which Gospel you read!") Do they find that the stone is already rolled away from the tomb (before they arrive) or does it roll away after they get there? Whom do they see there? A man? An angel? Two men? Two angels? Do they ever see Jesus himself there? What are they told there – that they are to go tell the disciples that Jesus will meet them in Galilee? Or that they are to remind the disciples what Jesus told them when he was in Galilee? That is, are the disciples to go to Galilee (about a four-day walk north) to see Jesus, or are they to stay in Jerusalem to see him? Do the women tell anyone? (Take special note of [Mark 16:8](#). The original Gospel ended with that verse – as will probably be indicated in your Bible. It says, "And the women said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." And that's where it ends. If the author doesn't really mean that they never told anyone, why does he say that they didn't tell anyone? And if he thinks they did tell someone, why doesn't he say so?) Do the disciples ever learn that Jesus has been raised (take note of Mark's account)? Do the disciples

go to Galilee? Or do they stay in Jerusalem? Does Jesus appear to them just on the day of his resurrection, and then ascend to heaven? Or does he make appearances for a period of time? Does he ascend on the day of the resurrection or 40 days later (see Acts 1)?

You know, I've never been impressed by the alleged discrepancies regarding what happened on the first Easter (or thereafter). I've never felt it was a realistic expectation that we should be able to harmonize their accounts, even if all four accounts are completely accurate.

Take a comparison: suppose three or four people attend their high school reunion. After they return home that evening, they jot down a diary entry about what happened.

Unless you already knew that these were accounts of the same reunion, you might be unable to tell that from their respective entries. It's highly possible, even probable, that there'd be no overlap at all insofar as each diarist might mention having seen or spoken to different classmates than the other diarists. No two entries might even mention a single classmate in common. And even if they did, there's no expectation that they'd all mention the same set of classmates.

Each of them attends the reunion hoping to see certain classmates. They don't care about all the others. While they are there, they bump into other classmates. But they only have time to talk to a sample. There are many classmates at the event whom they never notice. They can honestly say they didn't see them, even though everyone was at the same event.

Likewise, people arrive at different times and leave at different times. There's no way we could reconstruct the

actual sequence from the diaries, not because they are contradictory, but because there are too many different possibilities to determine which represents the order things actually happened.

By the same token, it's not as though the women and the disciples had an appointment to reconnoiter at the tomb at say, 7AM on the first day of the week. Indeed, none of them was even expecting Jesus to rise from the dead. People arrived individually, or in small groups, at different times. It wouldn't be surprising if some people came back more than once to see it again. And the accounts are admittedly selective.

Here, it is very important to pay attention to Luke's explicit chronological statements. On the day of the event, the women tell the 11 disciples what they heard from the two men at the tomb (24:8). "That very same day" Jesus appears to two disciples on the Road to Emmaus (24:13–32). "At that same hour" they went and told the disciples in Jerusalem what they had seen (24:33–35). "As they were saying this" (24:36), Jesus then appears to the disciples, shows them he has been raised from the dead, and gives them their instructions, which include the injunction that they are to "stay in the city" until they receive the promised Spirit from on high (24:49). He then takes them to a suburb, Bethany, and ascends to heaven. The disciples then return to Jerusalem itself and worship in the temple (24:50–53). And that's where the Gospel ends, on the day of the resurrection, in Jerusalem.

i) Lk 24 reflects narrative compression. It's a summary of events that Luke will flesh out in Acts 1. By this point, Luke is probably running short of space on his scroll. And this is a

teaser for the more detailed account in Acts 1–like movie trailers.

ii) As one commentator notes, "although the events of vv1-35 are set on resurrection Sunday (see vv1,13,33), vv36-53 are absent time references. J. Edwards, **THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LUKE** (Eerdmans, 2015), 738.

As you probably know, the same author who wrote the Gospel of Luke also wrote the book of Acts. It is interesting, and puzzling, to read the first chapter of Acts immediately after reading the Gospel of Luke. Even though Jesus ascends to heaven on the day of his resurrection in Luke, we are told explicitly in Acts that in fact he stayed on earth for another 40 days...

Acts *doesn't* "explicitly" (or even implicitly) say that he stayed on earth for another 40 days. It says nothing about his whereabouts in-between appearances to the disciples.

According to Matthew, at the moment when Jesus died there were a number of enormous, cataclysmic, mind-boggling events that took place: the curtain in the temple was ripped in half (we have no record of this occurring, by the way, even though Jewish authors talk extensively about the temple at the time and would have been very interested indeed, if part of it had been destroyed!);

i) There's nothing "enormous, cataclysmic, mind-boggling," about a torn curtain.

ii) The temple had two curtains. One screened the sanctuary from the outer court. Tearing that curtain would

be more public. The other screened the sanctuary from the inner sanctum. Only priests would be privy to that.

iii) Since this is a sign of divine judgment (and portent of future judgment) on the religious establishment, it's not something the establishment would broadcast, although rumors would leak out.

iv) A torn curtain is hardly equivalent to "destroying" part of the temple. It's not like structural damage.

v) Ehrman is disingenuous. For instance, Josephus narrates ominous portents on the eve of the temple's destruction, but Ehrman surely dismisses that as superstitious legend. So why would he take corroboration of this event any more seriously?

there was a massive earthquake; "the rocks were split" (it's hard to know what that means exactly);

How is a local earthquake "enormous, cataclysmic, and mind-boggling"? I've lived through two dramatic earthquakes, but they weren't "enormous, cataclysmic, or mind-boggling."

and, most breathtaking of all, "the tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many" ([Matthew 27:52-53](#)).

No doubt that's mind-boggling. It was meant to be. But it's not "enormous" or "cataclysmic". Ehrman indulges in hyperbole.

Really? Are we supposed to think that masses of people came back to life and started walking around Jerusalem on the day that Jesus was raised? And no one else — whether Jews at the time, or Romans, or Christians, or even the other Gospel writers — thinks this is important enough to say something about? What is going on here?

i) Matthew doesn't say "masses of people" came back to life. Notice how Ehrman deliberately exaggerates [Mt 27:51-53](#) to make it less believable.

ii) They'd be unrecognizable to strangers. Imagine if your grandfather rose from the grave. How many people would have any idea who he was? How many people would even know that he rose from the grave? Only surviving friends, neighbors, or relatives would realize what had happened. And it would depend on who they appeared to.

Yahweh and evil

Bart Ehrman: This is obviously a very difficult issue to address in 300 words or less!!! I have devoted a book to the question, *God's Problem* (HarperOne, 2008), and even that is very much only barely scratching the surface.

So, let me give just a brief background. When I was teaching at Rutgers in the mid-1980s, I was asked to teach a class on the problem of suffering as presented in different parts of the Bible. That was a revolutionary experience for me, as I realized in teaching the class just how many explanations for human suffering can be found in the Bible. Some of them are at odds with one another. I explain all that in my book.

When I taught the class, I was a deeply committed Christian. And I continued to be for years afterward. But I began to wrestle deeply with the problem of suffering. There are some kinds of suffering that make sense (to me): humans do wicked things to one another, involving such awful experiences as incest, rape, torture, mutilation, killing, war, and so on. Those things one can explain on the basis of free will. If we weren't free to do such things, we would not be fully human (I think that explanation is problematic, as I detail in my book, but it would take too long to explain why here).

I couldn't believe that there was a God who cared about his people and was active in the world and intervened on behalf of those in need and answered prayer, when there is an innocent child who starves to death every five seconds. Other things are less explicable: famine, drought, hurricanes, tsunamis, birth defects, and so on — all leading to horrible,

unimaginable suffering. How do we explain these things? I used to have explanations (based on what I had read in biblical scholars, theologians, philosophers, and so on). But I got to a point where I just didn't think it made sense any more. I couldn't believe that there was a God who cared about his people and was active in the world and intervened on behalf of those in need and answered prayer, when there is an innocent child who starves to death every five seconds.

I certainly don't buy the Augustine view. It's all well and good to say that suffering makes us better, makes us more noble, brings a greater good. But what about that poor three-year-old child who starved to death since you started reading this paragraph? She had to experience such gut-wrenching agony to make my life, or anyone's life, the world's life better? And that's true of all the children who have starved to death — millions of them, just over the past few years (not to mention all the years since Augustine was writing). I came to a point where I just didn't believe it.

<http://www.thebestschools.org/special/ehrman-licona-dialogue-reliability-new-testament/bart-ehrman-interview/>

This is, of course, well-trodden ground. There's a lot I could say. And I've said it before. But for now one observation will suffice: By Ehrman's own admission, the Bible contains many accounts of moral and natural evil. In addition, Bible writers were undoubtedly acquainted with many other examples of moral and natural evil that they never have occasion to write about in Scripture. It's illogical to say the existence of evil is incompatible with the existence of Yahweh when, in fact, the Bible constantly depicts Yahweh coexisting with evil. Indeed, you have unbelievers who think Yahweh commits or commands evil. So how could moral

and natural evil even count as evidence for Yahweh's nonexistence?

The argument from evil typically uses an abstract philosophical construct as the standard of comparison, rather than the concrete deity of living religion and historical revelation. Not Yahweh, but perfect being theology.

Did Jesus die four times!

I was converted from a non-Christian background, so I didn't grow up hearing the Gospels. The first time I read through the Gospels as a new believer, I was shocked. Matthew was great, but then Jesus got crucified again at the end of Mark. "How often is this going to happen?" I wondered.

<http://www.craigkeener.com/differences-in-the-gospels-part-1/>

This is an unintended parody of Bart Ehrman's case for Gospel contradictions. A reductio ad absurdum of his approach. Ehrman is always telling people to read the Gospels horizontally.

So you read Matthew's crucifixion account, then you slide over to Mark—and Jesus dies again! Then you slide over to Luke and John and it keeps on happening. Jesus died four times!

Just do the math! He dies in each Gospel, so if you add them up, he was crucified and resurrected four different times! Ehrman's case for Gospel contradictions isn't much more sophisticated than that.

Greek Gospels

Immigrant English

I'd like to say a bit more about Bart Ehrman's oft-repeated contention that the traditional authorship of the Gospels is wrong because they were written in literary Greek, which would be impossible for Aramaic-speaking peasants to emulate. Ehrman also uses the example of Josephus, who learned Greek later in life, to write books for his Roman patrons. Yet Josephus also admitted that he needed assistance.

One of Ehrman's many problems is that he doesn't stop to consider obvious counterexamples to his claims. He lacks a flexible mind.

Consider the immigrant experience in America. Take the stereotypical case of adult foreign speakers (parents, grandparents) who move to America. Sometimes they bring little kids with them. Sometimes their kids are born here. Or both.

Adult immigrants often struggle with the language of the host country. They may speak broken English. That's in part because many of them are too busy working (which is admirable) to have time to study the language. But the primary reason is that it's very hard to master a new language in adulthood.

By contrast, young kids sponge up languages. If their kids are born here, or come here at an early age, they can learn English just by listening to TV shows and hanging out with Anglo playmates.

Kids of immigrants typically speak fluent, idiomatic, unaccented English. Their command of conversational

English is flawless.

Now, that's not the same thing as literary English. However, I daresay that if you have a native command of the spoken tongue, it's much easier to learn literary or academic English. You have that foundation to build on.

Ironically, the Jewish uppercrust education that Josephus received was an impediment to his learning literary Greek. From what I've read, Jews of his station didn't consider Greek to be a prestige language. After all, they had Greek-speaking slaveboys.

By contrast, a Jew who learned street Greek growing up would actually be in a much better position to learn literary Greek later in life. Keep in mind that for many Diaspora Jews, Greek was their mother tongue. And some of them moved to Palestine. Take Barnabas, a native of Cyprus, who was the uncle of John Mark.

Perhaps Matthew was a tax collector because he was bilingual (or polyglot). Surely that would be a marketable skill for a tax collector in Palestine.

Finally, although Matthew's Greek is a notch above Mark's Greek, it's not fancy Greek.

Does God know Greek?

Der Spiegel

Micky Maus: Herr Doktor Ehrman, you used to believe in the verbal inspiration of Scripture. How did you lose your faith?

Ehrman: I was a student at Princeton, taking a course in Classical Hebrew. And it suddenly hit me like a ton of bricks: "Unless Yahweh knew Hebrew, how could he inspire the Hebrew Bible?"

Micky Maus: Could you flesh that out a bit?

Ehrman: Literacy was very rare in the ancient Near East. So how did Yahweh learn literary Hebrew? I couldn't locate any school records of Yahweh attending yeshiva. And Hebrew Union College didn't exist in the Second Millennium BC. So Yahweh might have been high school dropout, for all I know.

Micky Maus: Isn't it possible, if not probable, that the records were lost?

Ehrman: Yes, but history is about what you can *show*. So unless you can show that Yahweh attended yeshiva, that's not a historical datum. And how else could he learn Hebrew? He didn't have parents. So it poses an insoluble conundrum for Christians.

Micky Maus: What about the NT?

Ehrman: Same problem. How did Yahweh learn literary Greek? There's no documentary evidence that he attended

Plato's Academy. And I couldn't find a library card with Yahweh's name on it for the Royal Library of Alexandria.

Micky Maus: Suppose it's a miracle?

Ehrman: If it's a miracle, then it can't be a historical datum. Historians can only establish what probably happened in the past, and by definition a miracle is the least probable occurrence. And so, by the very nature of the canons of historical research, we can't claim historically that a miracle probably happened. By definition, it probably didn't. And history can only establish what probably did.

If I saw Jesus multiply fish with my own eyes, I wouldn't believe it. I mean, what am I gonna believe—Hume or my lying eyes?

Micky Maus: But if you saw Jesus multiply fish with your very own eyes, how could you *not* believe it? In that event, what do you think really happened?

Ehrman: If I saw Jesus multiply the fish right before my eyes, I'd assume he was hiding them under his cloak.

Micky Maus: Isn't 5000 fish a whole lot of fish to hide under his cloak?

Ehrman: I didn't say it was going to be easy, but anything is more likely than a miracle. So it must be Jesus pulling 5000 fish out of his loincloth.

Micky Maus: You think *that's* more probable than a miracle?

Ehrman: Absolutely! Didn't you hear my definition?

Micky Maus: What if someone rejects your definition?

Ehrman: They can't. By definition, my definition is true!

Literary Greek

Bart Ehrman repeatedly says the traditional authorship of the canonical Gospels must be false because they are written in sophisticated literary Greek whereas the disciples of Jesus were Aramaic-speaking peasants. He also judges 1 Peter to be pseudonymous for the same reason.

The way Ehrman frames the argument is false on the face of it.

i) According to traditional authorship, only one of the four Evangelists would even be a candidate for "an Aramaic-speaking peasant": John. Certainly that description doesn't fit Matthew, Mark, or Luke.

ii) It's simplistic to say John was an Aramaic-speaking peasant. For one thing, he had entree with the high priest. That suggests he moved in higher social circles. He was well-connected.

The next question is whether the Gospels are even written in sophisticated literary Greek. Keep in mind that this is only germane to Jewish authors. Since Luke was gentile, there's be no incongruity in his writing in literary Greek.

I'm going to quote the analysis of Nigel Turner in **A GRAMMAR OF THE NEW TESTAMENT GREEK; VOLUME IV: STYLE** (T&T Clark, 1980). I'm just giving samples of his detailed analysis.

Unlike Ehrman, Turner is a Greek scholar by specialization. That's his area of expertise.

Mark

Howard concurred with Lagrange that the Greek was translation Greek (11).

There is considerable evidence favoring influence of an exclusively Aramaic kind upon the style of Mark, but the case for the translation of documents is somewhat weakened by the fact that here in the same gospel are instances both of exclusive Aramaisms and exclusive Hebraisms side by side (15).

Mark's style is conspicuously different from the Ptolemaic Papyri and closer to the LXX, following the order: article>noun>article>genitive (54 times). He never has the position which is common in non-Biblical Greek: article>article>genitive>noun (17).

Some features of Markan style recall Latin constructions and vocabulary. That they are probably more frequent in Mark than in other NT texts, except the Pastoral epistles, may raise the question whether Mark was written in Italy in a kind of Greek that was influenced by Latin. However, supposing that his language is influenced in that way, we presume that it could have happened as well in the Roman provinces (29).

Matthew

On the whole, Matthew is not as Septuagintal in style as Luke (36).

It is sometimes assumed that Matthew writes Greek of a less Aramaic quality than Mark, and that he tends to soften the Semiticisms in general. That is not always true: we have found already many Semiticisms which may be attributed to Matthew independently of Mark.

If we examine the Markan sections of Matthew we shall find the contrary evidence, suggesting that Matthew has altered Mark to something more Semitic, conforming what we have already found...It would seem then that there is very little to choose between the relative Semitism of Mark's and Matthew's style (37).

Luke

Hebrew influence: This is far more extensive, and is not confined to the Infancy narrative (46).

The literal translation of Hebrew infinitive absolute comes into Biblical Greek from the LXX (47).

Physiognomical expressions: The large proportion of its occurrences are not in the Koine, but in Biblical literature, and the papyri instances are relatively slight when compared line by line with the LXX, Testament of Abraham, Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, Greek Enoch, Psalms of Solomon, and other works of this kind. There are 34 instances in Luke Acts, 31 in Revelation. In view of its place in Luke's own composition, it is not only a word of translation Greek but belongs to Jewish Greek (49).

Semitic influence: This is vast, enabling the respective advocates of Aramaic and Hebraic sources to claim the features as Aramaic or Hebrew to suit their purpose (50).

And (or for) behold! An exclusively Biblical Septuagintal phrase, perhaps also from Aramaic, it is frequent in the LXX, and Luke and Paul probably obtained the expression from here. As it occurs in the possibly "free" Greek of the Testament of Solomon (seven times) and Testament of Abraham (ten times) it may be a feature of free Jewish Greek, derived perhaps from the translated books. It is scattered throughout Luke-Acts... (53).

John

The Shepherd of Hermas [has] the same kind of Greek, influenced by Jewish idiom and marked by an over-use of asyndeton, though to a less extent than John (70).

The place of the verb is important: in Luke and John it is so often in the primary position that it is no longer secular Greek (72).

The Gospel vocabulary is limited to 1011 words, only 112 which are NT hapax. Many of these words are repeated, so that the vocabulary is only 6 1/2 percent of total word-use, almost the lowest in the NT (76).

We conclude that John's language throughout is characteristic of Jewish Greek, syntactically very simple, dignified but without the flexibility of the secular language, pointlessly varied in syntax and vocabulary... (78).

[Jewish Greek] appears in some free-Greek books of the LXX (e.g. Tobit), and some Jewish works as far away in time as the Testament of Abraham and the Testament of Solomon, which cannot be shown to be translations of Semitic originals. Ignorance of Greek as a cause of Jewish Greek, is altogether less probable than the influence of the

Greek Bible through widely scattered synagogues, forming a new community language (78).

We must conclude that 1 Peter wears a veneer of good stylistic revision upon a basic draft of the same kind of Greek that is found elsewhere in the NT. It is tempting to ascribe the veneer to an amanuensis, not necessarily Silvanus (130).

Palestinian Jews and Diaspora Jews

Bart Ehrman's basic objection to the traditional authorship of Matthew is the improbability that a Palestinian Jew could write literary Greek. This raises several issues:

i) For many Jews, Greek was their native tongue. Indeed, that was so widespread that it necessitated Greek translations of the OT like the LXX.

ii) "Palestinian Jew" is ambiguous. The fact that Matthew was living in Palestine at the time Jesus summoned him doesn't imply that Matthew was a native of Palestine. As the religious capital of Judaism, Jerusalem was a magnet for Diaspora Jews. There's no presumption that Matthew was born and raised in Palestine just because he happened to be there as an adult when Jesus summoned him.

A textbook example is St. Paul, a bilingual Diaspora Jew who took up residence in Jerusalem—as did his sister ([Acts 23:16](#)). Barnabas is another example of a Diaspora Jew living in Palestine ([Acts 4:36](#)).

iii) Likewise, Matthew's job as a minor gov't employee doesn't tell us much about his background, aside from the fact that he needed to be bilingual to communicate with Greek-speaking Roman officials (his employers) and Aramaic-speaking Jews.

Paul was a tent-maker. That gives you absolutely no indication regarding Paul's social class or education.

Unless you were an aristocrat, or you were born rich, you had to take what you could get to support yourself.

iv) There are different levels of proficiency in a language. An ability to understand the spoken word. An ability to speak it. Read it. And/or write it.

Suppose Matthew lacked the educational background to compose Greek. He could still dictate to a scribe.

Paul used scribes even though he had the educational background to do his own writing if he wanted to. The fact, moreover, that both Peter ([1 Pet 5:12](#)) and Paul used scribes tells you something about the availability of Christian scribes to assist early church leaders.

Translation Greek

I'd like to revisit one of Bart Ehrman's objections to the historicity of the NT. He says the disciples were illiterate, Aramaic-speaking peasants. He says 1 Peter and the four Gospels were written in literary Greek. Hence, that disqualifies the disciples as their authors.

1. To begin with, it's a straw man argument. Of the four Gospels, only Luke has any literary panache. And that's traditionally attributed to a well-educated, Greek-speaking Gentile author, not an illiterate, Aramaic speaking peasant.

Only one of the four Gospels is even directly attributed to one of the Galilean disciples. And John's Gospel is written in simple Greek.

Moreover, Galilee wasn't the backwoods place that Ehrman depicts. It had urban centers like Sepphoris, within easy walking distance of Nazareth, and Tiberias, a coastal town on the shore of Lake Kinneret, a few miles from Capernaum. Moreover, Galilee had a road system. And the region is still dotted with Greek inscriptions. And these are just the inscriptions that happen to survive. Cf. C.

Evans, **FABRICATING JESUS** (IVP, 2006 133ff; "Galilee" 391-98; "Tiberias" 1235-1238, **DICTIONARY OF NEW TESTAMENT BACKGROUND** (IVP 2000).

Mark was an urbanite in highly literate, multi-lingual Jerusalem. As a tax-collector, Matthew hardly matches the profile of an illiterate, Aramaic speaking peasant. We'd expect him to be able to read commercial and

administrative documents. We'd expect him to be a polyglot to some degree.

Of course, there's a lot we don't know about the authors, but that cuts both ways. That means Ehrman's dogmatism is unjustified.

2. But I'd also like to discuss the issue of translation Greek. Take the cryptic statement of Papias that "Matthew set in order the logia in a Hebrew dialect" (i.e. Aramaic). A stock objection is that Matthew's Gospel doesn't read like translation Greek. The same objection might be raised to the possibility that Peter dictated his letter Aramaic, which his bilingual scribe rendered into literary Greek. I'm not saying I agree with that. I think it highly likely that Peter knew conversational Greek. I'm just responding to Ehrman on his own terms.

3. I find the common claim that something couldn't originally be in a different language because our text doesn't read like a translation is grossly simplistic.

i) To begin with, that's an issue of translation philosophy. Translators are typically confronted with a choice: should they produce a more literal translation, or a more literary translation? A word-for-word translation, that preserves the original sentence structure (as much as possible), or a smooth idiomatic translation?

It depends, in part, on the nature of the document. Is this a literary document? A legal document? Is accuracy more important than elegance, or vice versa? We don't want a translator to indulge in literary license with a legal contract.

ii) It can also depend on whether the receptor language is cognate with the donor language. Suppose a translator

renders a German author into English. English is a mongrel language. Because it has many words and forms of Germanic derivation, a translator could preserve more of the Germanic flavor of the original by using Germanic English words and forms where possible. But if he were to use more words and forms of Romance derivation, that would obscure the Germanic original.

Or suppose he's translating a German author into Italian. The diction and syntax will be so different that the original language might be undetectable. Not to mention rendering a Chinese or Japanese text into a European language. Take the difference between fusional languages and agglutinative languages.

iii) Or take the KJV. That's a pretty literal translation of the Greek and Hebrew. By that token, you might say it's translation Greek or translation Hebrew. Typically, literal translations are stilted.

Yet the KJV is extolled as a model of English style. That's in part because it benefits from the luxuriant wealth of Germanic and Latinate vocabulary available to the translators. It was a vibrant period for the English language. And the range of synonyms gives the translators an opportunity to render the Greek and Hebrew into euphonious sentences that read aloud so well.

iv) In many cases, the primary qualification for a good translator is to be proficient in the donor language and receptor language. However, some translators are notable stylists in their own right. Take Alexander Pope's celebrated translation of the Iliad, or Dryden's classic translations of Virgil. That transmutes the style of Homer into the style of Pope, or the style of Virgil into the style of Dryden.

That raises an issue: when rendering a stylish work of literature, a translator may consciously adopt a more neutral translation to avoid imposing his own style on the original. Dryden and Pope were open to criticism for effacing the style of the original by substituting their own. Do you read Homer for Homer, or Homer for Pope? Do you read Virgil for Virgil, or Virgil for Dryden?

But in their defense, they might say it's preferable to render the best Greek and Latin into the best English. To render the best Greek and Latin into inferior English is a demotion, misrepresenting the quality of the original. They should be at the same level. Moreover, they might say that they are cross-contextualizing the original. Making it accessible to readers in their own time and place.

My immediate point isn't to debate the merits of competing translation philosophies, but to demonstrate how simplistic and unreliable it is to claim that something can't be a translation because it doesn't read like a translation. But there are many factors that feed into that assessment. The translator's skill. The translator's aim. How much the two languages have in common. The range of available synonyms.

Holy Ghost Greek

A common objection to the traditional authorship of some NT books is that Palestinian Jews or "fishermen" lack the requisite command of Greek. I've discussed this before, but I'd like to approach it from a different angle. Even conservative scholars who defend traditional authorship usually offer naturalistic explanations.

But what about xenoglossy? I think the best interpretation of glossolalia in Acts is xenoglossy. That's a supernatural understanding of a foreign language. The individual didn't acquire his command of that language by natural means.

If we take that phenomenon seriously, then why would NT writers be exempt? If one or more NT writers needed to be able to write in competent Greek, but didn't have natural proficiency in the language, what's to prevent God from endowing him, at least temporarily, with a supernatural grasp of the language (i.e. xenoglossy)?

Indeed, that isn't sheer speculation. Isn't that exactly what God did with the disciples on the day of Pentecost ([Acts 2:1-12](#))?

This needn't be a permanent endowment. Perhaps it comes and goes as the need arises. Perhaps there is such a thing as "holy Ghost" Greek after all, if not in the traditional sense.

For Further Reading

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