



# The Textual Reliability of the New Testament: A Dialogue

Bart D. Ehrman and Daniel B. Wallace

## OPENING REMARKS

### Bart D. Ehrman

Thank you very much; it's a privilege to be with you. I teach at the University of North Carolina. I'm teaching a large undergraduate class this semester on the New Testament, and of course, most of my students are from the South; most of them have been raised in good Christian families. I've found over the years that they have a far greater commitment to the Bible than knowledge about it. So this last semester, I did something I don't normally do. I started off my class of 300 students by saying the first day, "How many of you in here would agree with the proposition that the Bible is the inspired word of God?" *Voom!* The entire room raises its hand. "Okay, that's great. Now how many of you have read *The Da Vinci Code*?" *Voom!* The entire room raises its hand. "How many of you have read the entire Bible?" Scattered hands. "Now, I'm not telling you that *I* think God wrote the Bible. You're telling me that *you* think God wrote the Bible. I can see

why you'd want to read a book by Dan Brown. But if God wrote a book, wouldn't you want to see what he had to say?" So this is one of the mysteries of the universe.

The Bible is the most widely purchased, most thoroughly read, most broadly misunderstood book in the history of human civilization. One of the things that people misunderstand, of course—especially my nineteen-year-old students from North Carolina—is that when we're reading the Bible, we're not actually reading the words of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, or Paul. We're reading translations of those words from the Greek of the New Testament. And something is always lost in translation. Not only that, we're not reading translations of the *originals* of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, or Paul, because we don't have the originals of any of the books of the New Testament. What we have are copies made centuries later—in most instances, many centuries later. These thousands of copies that we have all differ from one another in lots of little ways, and sometimes in big ways. There are places where we don't know what the authors of the New Testament originally wrote. For some Christians, that's not a big problem because they don't have a high view of Scripture. For others, it's a big problem indeed. What does it mean to say that God inspired the words of the text if we don't have the words? Moreover, why should one think that God performed the miracle of inspiring the words in the first place if he didn't perform the miracle of preserving the words? If he meant to give us his very words, why didn't he make sure we received them?

The problem of not having the originals of the New Testament is a problem for everyone, not just for those who believe that the Bible was inspired by God. For all of us, the Bible is the most important book in the history of Western civilization. It continues to be cited in public debates over gay rights, abortion, over whether to go to war with foreign countries, over how to organize and run our society. But how do we interpret the New Testament? It's hard to know what the words of the New Testament mean if you don't know what the words were. And so [we have] the problem of textual criticism, the problem of trying to establish what the original authors wrote and trying to understand how these words got changed over time. The question is a simple one: "How did we get our New Testament?" I'll be spending my forty minutes trying to deal with that particular issue.

I'm going to start by giving an illustration of one of the books of the New Testament, the Gospel of Mark. Mark is our shortest Gospel. Many scholars think that Mark was the first Gospel to be written. We don't know *where* Mark was actually written. Scholars have different hypotheses about where it was written. Many scholars over the years have thought that maybe Mark was written in the city of Rome. Fair enough, let's say that the Gospel of Mark was written in the city of Rome. Somebody—we call him Mark, because we don't know his name and it doesn't make sense to call him Fred—sat down and wrote a Gospel. How did this Gospel get put in circulation? Well, it wasn't like it is today. Today, when an author writes a book, the book gets run off by electronic means and gets composed and produced and distributed so that you can pick up a copy of any book—*The Da Vinci Code*, for example—in a bookstore in New Orleans and another in California and another in New York, and it's going to be exactly the same book. Every word will be exactly the same because of our ways of producing books. But they didn't have these means of producing books in the ancient world. The only way to produce a book in the ancient world was to copy it by hand—one page, one sentence, one word, one letter at a time, by hand. Mass producing books in the ancient world meant some guy standing up in front dictating and three others writing down what he said. That was mass production, producing books three at a time. What happens when books are copied by hand? Try it sometime and you'll find out what happens: people make mistakes. Sometimes my students aren't convinced of this, so I tell them, "Go home and copy the Gospel of Matthew, and see how well you do." They're going to make mistakes.

So Mark's book gets copied by somebody in Rome who wants a copy. They don't want just one copy, they want another copy. So somebody makes a copy, and probably the person makes some mistakes. And then somebody copies the copy. Now, when you copy the copy, you don't know that the guy who copied it ahead of you made mistakes; you assume that he got it right. So when you copy his copy, you reproduce his mistakes—and you introduce your own mistakes. And then a third person comes along and copies the copy that you've made of a copy and reproduces the mistakes that you made and that your predecessor made, and he makes his own mistakes. And so it

goes. Somebody eventually visits the city of Rome—somebody from Ephesus, say—and decides, “We want a copy of that.” So he copies one of the copies. But he’s copying a copy that has mistakes in it, and he takes it back to Ephesus, and there in Ephesus, somebody copies it. And then somebody from Smyrna shows up and decides they want a copy. Well they copy the copy of the copy of the copy, and then somebody decides they want a copy in Antioch. And so they come, and they make a copy. Copies get made and reproduced. As a result, you get not just copies of the original but copies of the copies of the copies of the original.

The only time mistakes get corrected is when somebody is copying a manuscript and they think that the copy they’re copying has a mistake in it. And they try to correct the mistake. So they change the wording in order to make it correct. The problem is, there’s no way to know whether somebody who’s correcting a mistake has corrected it correctly. It’s possible that the person saw there was a mistake and tried to correct it but corrected it incorrectly, which means that now you’ve got three states of the text: the original text, the mistake, and the mistaken correction of the mistake. And then somebody copies that copy, and so it goes on basically for year after year after year after year. Mistakes get made en route, mistakes get copied and recopied, mistakes get corrected, but sometimes incorrectly, and so it goes.

Now, if we had the original copy of Mark, it wouldn’t matter, because we could look at the original and say, “Yeah, these guys made mistakes, but we’ve got the original.” But we don’t have the original. And we don’t have the first copy, or the copy of the copy. We don’t have copies of the copies of the copies of the copies. What do we have? We have copies that were made many, many years later.

The first copy of Mark that we have is called  $\mathfrak{P}^{45}$ . It’s called  $\mathfrak{P}^{45}$  because it was the forty-fifth papyrus manuscript discovered in the modern age and cataloged. Papyrus is an ancient writing material, kind of like paper today, only it was made out of reeds that grew in Egypt, and they made writing material out of it. The oldest manuscripts we have of the New Testament are all written on papyrus.  $\mathfrak{P}^{45}$  dates from the third century, around the year 220 C.E. Mark probably wrote his Gospel around 60 or 70 C.E., so  $\mathfrak{P}^{45}$  dates to about 150

years later—but it is the earliest copy we have. By the time P<sup>45</sup> was produced, people had been copying Mark year after year after year, making mistakes, reproducing mistakes, trying to correct mistakes, until we got our first copy. Our next copy doesn't come for years after that. Our first *complete* copy doesn't show up until around the year 350 c.e., 300 years after Mark was originally written. Starting with the fourth-century copies, we begin getting more copies. And there are, of course, lots of these later copies.

You hear sometimes that the New Testament is the best-attested book from the ancient world. That's absolutely right. We have more copies of the New Testament than we have of any other book from the ancient world. But you need to realize that the copies we have—by and large—are from later times, centuries after the copying process began. Now, you might say, “Well, look, you're talking about these mistakes and these copies, but God wouldn't let that happen.” Well, there's only one way to check, to see whether it could happen, that mistakes would be made. And that is by comparing the copies that survive with one another. It's striking that when you do that, you don't find two copies that are exactly alike. People were changing these manuscripts.

What can we say about these surviving copies of the New Testament? Let me give you just some data, some basic information. First of all, how many do we have? Well, we don't need to be overly precise for now. Basically, we have something like 5,500 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. As you know, the New Testament was originally written in Greek and was circulated in Greek. This is another thing I ask my students the first day of class. I give them this quiz the first day of class to see what their Bible knowledge is. The first question I ask is “How many books are there in the New Testament?” And that usually knocks off half the class right there. But then I ask what language it was written in, and about half of my students think the New Testament was written in Hebrew. Interesting. The other half thinks that it was written in English. So I think we're doing okay.

The New Testament was originally written in Greek. We have some 5,500 manuscripts in Greek from over the ages. When I say we have these manuscripts, I don't mean we have 5,500 *complete* manuscripts. Some are just little fragments, but if you have a little fragment, you count that as the manuscript. Some manuscripts are small

fragments; some of them are enormous tomes that were produced in the Middle Ages and were found in libraries or monasteries. We have some 5,500 Greek manuscripts.

What are the dates of these manuscripts? Well, they range in dates from the second century up through the invention of printing. You would think that once Gutenberg had invented the printing press, people would stop writing things out by hand because now you can produce things with the printing press. As it turns out, even after the invention of the printing press, some people didn't think that was going to catch on. So they still copied things out by hand. Just like today, even though you have a computer, sometimes you use a number two pencil. Even after the invention of printing, there still was the copying of things by hand. So we actually have manuscripts that go down to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and even into the nineteenth century. So they span from the second century up to the nineteenth century.

The earliest manuscript we have of any kind is a manuscript called P<sup>52</sup>. Again, it's on papyrus, that's why it's called P. It's 52 because it's



Fig. 1.1: P<sup>52</sup>.

the fifty-second papyrus manuscript discovered and cataloged. It measures 2.5 by 3.5 inches, about the size of a credit card. It's an interesting little piece. It was discovered by a scholar named C. H. Roberts, who was digging through the papyri collection at the John Rylands Library in Manchester, England.

Some of these libraries have these bushels or envelopes filled with papyri that have been discovered by archaeologists. These archaeologists find these little pieces of things in garbage dumps, and they don't know what texts they are. Sometimes they're too small to read, so they throw them in an envelope or put them in a bushel, and it goes to some museum. And then someone working through them will notice something. In the 1930s, C. H. Roberts pulled out a little triangular

piece (since named  $\mathfrak{P}^{52}$ ) and noticed that he could read some of the writing. For instance, the Greek word *oudenā* (*ουδενά*), which means “no one,” and *hina*, which means “in order that.” He realized that it sounded like the trial of Jesus before Pilate in the Gospel of John, chapter 18. So you know that the people who do this kind of thing are pretty smart. This is what they do for a living. (Strangely enough, there’s a living in it.) There’s writing on the back of the piece as well, which is significant, because it shows that the piece isn’t from a scroll, but from a book—a book like we think of books, written on both sides of the page and then sewn together at the binding. This came from a book, and since it is written on the front and the back, you can figure out—since you can see about how wide the letters are—that you’ve got a top margin here and a left margin here. You can figure how many letters you need to get to the end of this line [in order] to get to the beginning of the next line like that. So you can figure out how long the lines were. And since you have writing on the back, you can figure out how many lines this thing would have originally been, so when you turn it over, you can get to the top of the writing on the back. So just with this little writing, you can figure out how many pages were in this manuscript originally, just from this little 2.5-by 3.5-inch piece.

The way you date these things isn’t by carbon-14 dating or something like that, but on the basis of handwriting analysis. The technical term is paleography (*paleo* meaning ancient, *graphie* meaning writing), a study of ancient writing. On the basis of paleography, scholars have dated this manuscript,  $\mathfrak{P}^{52}$ , sometime to the first part of the second century—say, the year 125 or 130, plus or minus twenty-five years. It’s from the Gospel of John. John was probably written in the 90s, so this manuscript is only about thirty years away from the Gospel of John. It’s just a little piece, but it’s only thirty years away, which is pretty good. This is the oldest manuscript of the New Testament that we have. Would that we had more ancient manuscripts of this age! But we don’t. This is the oldest. Most of the copies we have are written much later than this. Of our 5,500-some Greek manuscripts, over 94 percent were made after the eighth century. In other words, 94 percent of our surviving manuscripts were produced 700 years or more after the originals. So we have a lot of manuscripts, but most of them are not very close to the date of the originals. Most of them are from the Middle Ages.

How many mistakes are in these manuscripts? Scribes copied the books of the New Testament. Most tried to do a pretty good job of reproducing what they were copying. They didn't try to make mistakes, but sometimes mistakes happen. So how many mistakes are there in the 5,500 manuscripts we have? This did not seem to be a very big problem to scribes who were actually copying the texts in the Middle Ages. Some scribes knew there were mistakes, but I'm not sure they realized how big the problem was—that there were a lot of mistakes.

It wasn't until about 300 years ago that scholars starting realizing the enormity of the problem. There was a scholar named John Mill, who I believe is unrelated to the Victorian John Stuart Mill. John Mill was an Oxford scholar who in the year 1707—almost exactly 300 years ago—produced a printed edition of the Greek New Testament that he called the *Novum Testamentum Graece*, the Greek New Testament. This was an interesting book because of how it was constructed. Mill printed the lines of the Greek New Testament on the top of the page, and then on the bottom of the page, he indicated places where manuscripts that he examined had different readings for the verses that he cited at the top. Mill had access to about a hundred manuscripts, and he looked at how the church fathers had quoted the New Testament in places, and he looked at how different ancient versions of the New Testament—ancient translations into Latin, Syriac, and Coptic—presented the New Testament. He looked at all these materials—devoting thirty years of his life to this—and then produced his *Novum Testamentum Graece*, presenting the Greek text at the top and indicating some of the places where the manuscripts differed from one another at the bottom.

To the shock and dismay of many of his readers, John Mill's apparatus indicated 30,000 places of variation among the manuscripts he had discovered. Thirty thousand places where the manuscripts had differences! This upset a lot of John Mill's readers. Some of his detractors claimed that he was motivated by the devil to render the text of the New Testament uncertain. His supporters pointed out that he actually hadn't invented these 30,000 differences; he just noticed that they existed. He was just pointing out the facts that are there for anyone to see. Moreover, as it turns out, Mill did not cite everything that he found. He found far more variations than he cited in his apparatus.

So that was John Mill in 1707, 300 years ago, looking at a hundred manuscripts. What about today? What can we say about the number of differences in our manuscripts today? As it turns out, it is very hard to say exactly how many differences there are in our surviving manuscripts. We have far more manuscripts than Mill had. He had a hundred; we have 5,500. So we have fifty-five times as many manuscripts as he had. And this may seem a little weird, but in this field, the more evidence you have, the harder it is to figure out what you're doing, because the more evidence you have, the more manuscripts you have, the more differences you have. So, it turns out, half the time, evidence just complicates the picture. So we have 5,500 manuscripts. How many differences are there? The reality is, we don't know, because no one has been able to count them all, even with the development of computer technology. It is probably easiest simply to put it in comparative terms. There are more differences in our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament. That's a lot. There are more differences in our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament.

Some scholars will tell you there are 200,000 differences, some will tell you 300,000 differences, some say 400,000. I don't know. It's something like that; between 300,000 and 400,000 would be my guess. But what do we make of that fact?

But the first thing to say about these 300,000 or 400,000 differences is that most of them don't matter for anything. They are absolutely irrelevant, immaterial, unimportant, and a lot of them you can't even reproduce in English translations from the Greek. As it turns out, the majority of mistakes you find in manuscripts show us nothing more than that scribes in antiquity could spell no better than my students can today. The scribes can be excused on this; they didn't have spell-check. (I just don't understand students who have spell-check on their computer but have spelling mistakes in a paper. I mean the computer tells you! It's in red! This word is wrong!) If scribes had had spell-check, we might have 50,000 mistakes instead of 400,000, but scribes didn't have spell-check. And half the time, scribes frankly didn't care how they spelled things. We know that scribes often didn't care how they spelled things because sometimes the same word appears within a line or two, and the scribe spells it differently in the two places. It

also turns out that scribes didn't have dictionaries. Spelling wasn't a big deal for most of these people. So that's one kind of mistake, which of course doesn't matter for anything. What other kinds of mistakes do you have?

Often scribes will leave out things, often by accident—not planning to leave something out. They just mess up because they miss something on the page. Sometimes they leave out a word, sometimes a sentence, and sometimes an entire page. Sometimes scribes were incompetent, sometimes they were sleepy, and sometimes they were bored.

You can see how it would happen with this illustration from Luke 12:8-10:

And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before others,  
The Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God;  
But whoever denies me before others will be denied before the  
angels of God  
And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man . . .

And it goes on to say that blasphemy “against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.” Notice that the second and third lines end in the same words, “before the angels of God.” What scribes would sometimes do is copy the second line, “will acknowledge before the angels of God,” they look at the page, and then they copy it. Then their eyes go back to the page and inadvertently go to the [end of the] *third* line, which ends the same way, “before the angels of God.” The scribes think this was the line that they had just copied. So they keep copying with the following words, and the result of that is that they leave out the entire second line. So in some manuscripts, you have “will acknowledge before the angels of God,” followed by “And everyone who speaks a word against the Son.” They've left out the middle line. You see how that works? That kind of eye-skip goes under a technical name. An eye-skip is called *parablepsis*. *Parablepsis* happens because the words at the end of the line are the same. Lines ending with the same words is called *homoeoteleuton*. So, this kind of mistake, I try to teach my students, is *parablepsis* occasioned by *homoeoteleuton*.

This, then, is another accidental kind of mistake. Accidental mistakes are exceedingly common in our manuscripts, in part because

some scribes were completely inept. My favorite example of an inept scribe was a fourteenth-century scribe of a manuscript that's called MS<sup>109</sup>. Now this example is a little bit complicated. MS<sup>109</sup> is copying the genealogy of Jesus in Luke. There are two genealogies of Jesus in the New Testament. Matthew has a genealogy that takes Jesus back to Abraham, the father of the Jews. And Luke has a genealogy that takes Jesus back to Adam, as in Adam and Eve. This is an amazing genealogy when you think about it. I have an aunt who is a genealogist, who has traced my family line back to the *Mayflower*. The *Mayflower*? Pfoof! Adam and Eve! We're talking serious genealogy here!

The genealogy begins with Joseph and works backward. Joseph is supposedly the father of Jesus, and Joseph is son of so-and-so, who is son of so-and-so, son of so-and-so, who is son of David, who is son of so-and-so, who is the son of so-and-so, who is the son of Abraham, who is the son of so-and-so who is the son of Adam, son of God. So it actually traces Jesus' genealogy back to God, which is even better than tracing back to Adam. It's an amazing genealogy.

The scribe of MS<sup>109</sup> in the fourteenth century was copying a manuscript that had Luke's genealogy in two columns, but the second column didn't go all the way down the page. And instead of copying the first column and then the second column, the scribe copied across the columns, leading to some very interesting results. In this genealogy, in MS<sup>109</sup>, the father of the human race is not Adam, but some guy named Pherez, and as it turns out, God is the son of Aram. And so it goes.

There are all sorts of accidental mistakes in the manuscripts, and probably most of the mistakes we have in our manuscripts are accidental. In these cases, it is fairly easy to figure out what happened. Not a big problem. There are other mistakes in our manuscripts, though, that appear to be intentional. It's hard to say absolutely that a scribe intentionally changed the text because the scribe is not around for us to ask, "Did you do this on purpose?" But there are some changes that really look as though they had to be done on purpose. I'll give you a few examples of these because they tend to be rather important. These are the ones that most textual critics spend their time talking about. These big changes are the kind of things that if somebody has a New Testament class with me, they ought to know about by the time

the semester is over. First is the story that is probably the favorite story among Bible readers and has been for many years, the story of Jesus and the woman taken in adultery. One of my reasons for thinking that this is people's favorite Bible story is because it's in every Hollywood movie about Jesus. You simply can't make a Jesus movie without this story. Even Mel Gibson, wanting to do a movie about Jesus' last hours, had to sneak this scene in as a flashback. So you're familiar with the story: The Jewish leaders drag this woman before Jesus and say, "She has been caught in the act of adultery, and according to the Law of Moses, we're supposed to stone her to death. What do you say we should do?" This is setting up a trap for Jesus, because if Jesus says, "Well, yeah, stone her to death," he's breaking his teachings of love and mercy. If he says, "No, forgive her," then he's breaking the Law of Moses. So what's he going to do? Well, Jesus, as you know, has a way of getting out of these traps in the New Testament. In this instance, he stoops down and starts writing on the ground. He then looks up and says, "Let the one without sin among you be the first to cast a stone at her." He stoops down again and continues writing, and one by one, the Jewish leaders start feeling guilty for their own sins, and they leave until Jesus looks up, and it's just the woman there. And he says to her, "Woman, is there no one left here to condemn you?" And she says, "No, Lord, no one." And Jesus says, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more."

This is a beautiful story, and it's rightly one of the favorite stories of readers of the Gospels of the New Testament—filled with pathos, teaching a very powerful lesson about the need for forgiveness and about not casting the first stone. The difficulty, as many of you know, is that this story, in fact, was not originally in the Bible. It is now found in John 7–8 (part of the end of chapter 7 and the beginning of chapter 8), but it's not found in our oldest and best manuscripts of the Gospel of John. And the vocabulary used in this story is unlike what you find elsewhere in the Gospel of John, and when you actually look at this story in its context, it seems to be badly placed in its context. It interrupts the flow of the context.

Scholars for centuries have realized that this story does not belong in the Gospel of John, and it is not found in any other Gospel. You'll still find it in a lot of your English Bibles, but in most English Bibles,

the editors will put brackets around it to tell you that it may be a really old and popular story, but it wasn't originally part of the Gospel. That's a pretty big change of the text. My assumption is that however that story got in there, it wasn't by pure accident. It might have been an accident, but I think somebody came up with a story and put in there. My hunch actually is that somebody found it in the margin of a manuscript. A scribe was copying his manuscript of John, and knowing the story, he decided to write it out in the margin. The next scribe came along and saw the story in the margin and thought that the scribe before him had inadvertently left out a story, so this second scribe put the story in the text itself. And the next scribe came along and copied that manuscript and left it in. Pretty soon, the story was propagated as being part of the Gospel of John, even though it originally was not part of the Gospel of John. That's a pretty big change, and I assume it is probably in some sense intentional.

Another example, a big example, is the last twelve verses of Mark. Mark, as I was saying earlier, is the shortest Gospel. It is probably my favorite Gospel. Mark doesn't beat you over the head with his theology. Mark is very subtle, and for that reason, I really like it. One of the best parts of Mark is how it ends. Jesus has been condemned to death, he's been crucified, he's been buried. On the third day, the women go to the tomb to anoint his body, but when they arrive, Jesus is not in the tomb. There's a young man there who tells the women that Jesus has been raised and that the women are to go tell Peter and the disciples that Jesus will precede them and meet them in Galilee. And then the text says, "But the women fled from the tomb and didn't say anything to anyone, for they were afraid." Period. That's it! That's where it ends.

You say, "Ai, yai, yai! How can it end there? Doesn't Jesus show up? Don't the disciples go to Galilee? Don't they see him?" You're left hanging. Well, scribes got to this passage that they were copying out, and they got to chapter 16:8, and it said, "The women fled from the tomb and didn't say anything to anyone, for they were afraid." And the scribes said, "Ai, yai, yai! How can it end there?" So the scribes added an ending. In your Bibles today, you'll find an additional twelve verses in which the women *do* go tell the disciples. The disciples do go to Galilee. Jesus does meet them there, and Jesus tells the disciples that they are to go out and make converts. And he tells them those

who believe in him will be able to handle snakes and that they'll be able to drink deadly poison, and it won't harm them. And then Jesus ascends to heaven. So now the Gospel has an ending that's more familiar. This ending, by the way, is used in my part of the world. We have these Appalachian snake handlers that base their theology on these last twelve verses. I've always thought that somebody in the ambulance on the way to the hospital ought to maybe tell one of these guys, "You know, actually those verses weren't originally in there."

The verses are not found in our two best and oldest manuscripts of Mark. The writing style of these verses is different from the rest of Mark. When you read it in Greek, there's a rough transition between that story and the preceding story. Most scholars, then, are pretty convinced that either Mark ended with verse 8 or the ending of Mark got lost—that we lost the last page. I personally think that it ended with verse 16:8—that the women didn't tell anybody. The reason is that throughout Mark's Gospel, unlike the other Gospels, the disciples never can figure out who Jesus is. Jesus is always frustrated with his disciples in Mark's Gospel. He keeps asking, "Don't you understand? Don't you get it?" At the end, they still don't get it. They're never told.

Moreover, it's interesting that in Mark's Gospel, whenever Jesus performs a miracle, he tells people, "Don't tell anybody." Or he'll heal somebody and say, "Don't tell anybody." Or he'll cast out demons, and he'll tell them, "Don't say anything." And then at the end, when somebody is told to say something, they don't say anything. When they're told not to say anything, they do say things. So I think Mark is interesting and it ended with 16:8.

I'll give you another example of a major change. Jesus heals a leper in Mark 1. The leper comes up to him, asks to be healed, and Jesus says, "I am willing." The text says, "Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. 'I am willing,' he said. 'Be clean!'" (Mk. 1:41, NIV) In some of our earlier manuscripts, though, instead of saying, "feeling compassion for the man," it says "Jesus got angry" and reached out his hand and touched him and healed him. He got angry? That's a big difference.

Well, which did the text originally say? Did it say that Jesus felt compassion or that he got angry? Now, you have to imagine that you're a scribe copying this text. If you're a scribe copying it, and you have the

word in front of you that Jesus “felt compassion,” are you likely to change it to say that he “got angry”? On the other hand, if you came across the word saying Jesus “got angry,” would you be likely to change it to say that “he felt compassion”? If you put it that way, the latter is the more likely possibility, which is why a lot of scholars think, in fact, that originally this text said that Jesus got angry and that scribes changed it to say he felt compassion. But what did he get angry at? That’s the big question. But my point is that you can’t interpret what the words *mean* if you don’t know what the words *are*. Textual critics try to figure out what the words are.

Is the text of the New Testament reliable? The reality is there is no way to know. If we had the originals, we could tell you. If we had the first copies, we could tell you. If we had copies of the copies, we could tell you. We don’t have copies in many instances for hundreds of years after the originals. There are places where scholars continue to debate what the original text said, and there are places where we will probably never know.

Thank you very much.

## OPENING REMARKS

### Daniel B. Wallace

Bart, as I expected, your presentation was energetic, informative, and entertaining. It was vintage Bart Ehrman. What many folks here probably don’t realize is that you and I have known each other for more than twenty-five years. Our academic paths, in fact, have been remarkably similar. I met you when you were just starting out in your doctoral program at Princeton. Six months later, you were *cruising* through the program while I was *driving* a truck to make ends meet. Similar activities. The year you completed your doctorate, I was just starting mine. Seven years later, in 1993, when you wrote your magnum opus, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, I began thinking about my dissertation, which should soon be published. But by the time you wrote your fifteenth book, I had already finished my fifteenth article. And when you were nominated to be Man of the Year for *Time* magazine, after writing *Misquoting Jesus*—when the name Bart Ehrman became a household word—most of my students knew my name. Yes, we have a lot in common.

Seriously, it's an honor for me to share the stage with Bart Ehrman. He's the only scholar I know who has been featured on NPR, BAR, SBL, CBS, NBC, and ABC. Not only this, but he's been on Jon Stewart's *Daily Show*—twice. And he's the only biblical scholar I know whom Stephen Colbert dissed with a classic line, which I can't repeat in mixed company.

I've tried to keep up with Bart's voluminous output, but it hasn't been easy. Normally, he writes in a clear, forceful style and punctuates his writing with provocative one-liners and a good measure of wit. I must confess, however, that his *Misquoting Jesus* left me more perplexed than ever. I wasn't sure exactly what he was saying. Reading it one way contradicted what he had written elsewhere, while reading it another way was hardly controversial—and certainly not the sort of book that would warrant being a blockbuster on the *New York Times* best-sellers list.

So, at the outset of my lecture, I acknowledge that I'm not sure what all the points of disagreement between us are. But I do know some.

I think that it would be good if I began by speaking about what we agree on. There is often a gulf between those “inside” a particular scholarly discipline and those on the outside. And when outsiders hear what insiders are talking about, sometimes they can get quite alarmed. Bart says in the appendix to *Misquoting Jesus*, “The facts that I explain about the New Testament in *Misquoting Jesus* are not at all ‘news’ to biblical scholars. They are what scholars have known, and said, for many, many years.”<sup>1</sup> He's right. So at the outset, I want to discuss our common ground. There are basically five things that we agree on:

1. The handwritten copies of the New Testament contain a lot of differences. We're not sure exactly what the number is, but the best estimate is somewhere between 300,000 and 400,000 variants. And this means, as Bart is fond of saying, that there are more variants in the manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament.
2. The vast bulk of these differences affect virtually nothing.
3. We agree on what we think the wording of the original text was almost all the time.<sup>2</sup>

4. Our agreement is even over several well-known or controversial passages:

- In Mark 16:9-20, Jesus tells his disciples that they can drink poison and handle snakes and not get hurt. If you are from West Virginia, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but both Bart and I agree that this passage is not part of the original text of Mark.
- We both agree that the story of the woman caught in adultery (Jn. 7:53—8:11) was not part of the original text of John. It's my favorite passage that's *not* in the Bible.
- 1 John 5:7 says, "For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one" (KJV). This would be the most explicit statement about the Trinity in the Bible, but it's definitely not part of the original text. And this fact has been known for more than half a millennium.
- As for Mark 1:41, although most manuscripts say that Jesus was moved with compassion when he healed a leper, we both agree that the original text probably said he was angry when he did so.

5. We both agree that the orthodox scribes occasionally changed the New Testament text to bring it more into conformity with their views.

All these agreements raise a fundamental point: even though we are looking at the same textual problems and arriving at the same answers most of the time, conservatives are still conservative, and liberals are still liberal.

What's the issue then? The *text* is not the basic area of our disagreement; the *interpretation* of the text is. And even here, it's not so much the interpretation of the text as it is the interpretation of how the textual variants arose, and how significant those variants are. That's where our differences lie. Bart puts a certain spin on the data. If you've read *Misquoting Jesus*, you may have come away with an impression of the book that is far more cynical than what Bart is explicitly saying. Whether that impression accurately reflects Bart's views is more difficult to assess. But one thing is clear: Bart sees in the textual variants something more pernicious, more sinister, more conspiratorial and therefore more controlled than I do.

My job is to paint a different picture than what one sees in *Misquoting Jesus*; my job is to tell you the rest of the story.

In the time allotted, I won't even try to discuss the many passages that Bart has brought up in his lecture, let alone his book. I will touch on one or two, but for the most part, I want to put the textual variants in their historical framework.

To begin with, there are two attitudes that I try to avoid: absolute certainty and total despair. On the one side are King James Only advocates: they are absolutely certain that the KJV, in every place, exactly represents the original text. To be frank, the quest for certainty often overshadows the quest for truth in conservative theological circles. And that's a temptation we need to resist. It is fundamentally the temptation of modernism. And to our shame, all too often evangelicals have been more concerned to protect our presuppositions than to pursue truth at all costs.

On the other side are a few radical scholars who are so skeptical that no piece of data, no hard fact is safe in their hands. It all turns to putty because *all views are created equal*. If everything is equally possible, then no view is more probable than any other view. In Starbucks and on the street, in college classrooms and on the airwaves, you can hear the line, "We really don't know what the New Testament originally said, since we no longer possess the originals and since there could have been tremendous tampering with the text before our existing copies were produced."

But are any biblical scholars this skeptical? Robert Funk, the head of the Jesus Seminar, seemed to be. In *The Five Gospels*, he said:

Even careful copyists make mistakes, as every proofreader knows. So we will never be able to claim certain knowledge of exactly what the original text of *any* biblical writing was.

The temporal gap that separates Jesus from the first surviving copies of the gospels—about one hundred and seventy-five years—corresponds to the lapse in time from 1776—the writing of the Declaration of Independence—to 1950. What if the oldest copies of the founding document dated only from 1950?<sup>3</sup>

Funk's attitude is easy to see: rampant skepticism over recovering the original wording of any part of the New Testament. This is the temptation of postmodernism.<sup>4</sup> The only certainty is uncertainty itself. It's the one absolute that denies all the others. Concomitant with this is an intellectual pride—pride that one "knows" enough to be skeptical about all positions.

Where does Bart stand on this spectrum? I don't know. On the one hand, he has made statements like these:

If the primary purpose of this discipline is to get back to the original text, we may as well admit either defeat or victory, depending on how one chooses to look at it, because we're not going to *get* much closer to the original text than we already are. . . . At this stage, our work on the *original* amounts to little more than tinkering. There's something about historical scholarship that refuses to concede that a major task has been accomplished, but there it is.<sup>5</sup>

In spite of these remarkable [textual] differences, scholars are convinced that we can reconstruct the original words of the New Testament with reasonable (although probably not 100 percent) accuracy.<sup>6</sup>

The first two statements were made at the Society of Biblical Literature, in an address to text-critical scholars. The third statement is in a college textbook. All of this sounds as if Bart would align himself more with those who are fairly sure about what the wording of the text is.

But here's what Bart wrote in his immensely popular book, *Misquoting Jesus*:

Not only do we not have the originals, we don't have the first copies of the originals. We don't even have copies of the copies of the originals, or copies of the copies of the copies of the originals. What we have are copies made later—much later. . . . And these copies all differ from one another, in many thousands of places . . . these copies differ from one another in so many places that we don't even know how many differences there are.<sup>7</sup>

We could go on nearly forever talking about specific places in which the texts of the New Testament came to be changed, either accidentally or intentionally. . . . The examples are not just in the hundreds but in the thousands.<sup>8</sup>

And here's what he wrote in another popular book, *Lost Christianities*:

The fact that we have thousands of New Testament manuscripts does not in itself mean that we can rest assured that we know what

the original text said. If we have very few early copies—in fact, scarcely any—how can we know that the text was not changed significantly *before* the New Testament began to be reproduced in such large quantities?<sup>9</sup>

The cumulative effect of these latter statements seems to be that not only can we have no certainty about the wording of the original, but that, even where we are sure of the wording, the core theology is not nearly as “orthodox” as we had thought. The message of whole books has been corrupted in the hands of the scribes, and the church, in later centuries, adopted the doctrine of the winners—those who corrupted the text and conformed it to *their* notion of orthodoxy.

So you can see my dilemma. I’m not sure what Bart believes. Is the task done? Have we essentially recovered the wording of the original text? Or should we be hyperskeptical about the whole enterprise? It seems that Bart puts a far more skeptical spin on things when speaking in the public square than he does when speaking to professional colleagues. I am hoping that he can clarify his position for us this evening.

These two attitudes—total despair and absolute certainty—are the Scylla and Charybdis that we must steer between. There are three other questions that we need to answer.

1. The number of variants—how many scribal changes are there?
2. The nature of variants—what kinds of textual variations are there?
3. What theological issues are at stake?

Let’s begin with a definition of a textual variant: any place among the manuscripts in which there is variation in wording, including word order, omission or addition of words, even spelling differences. The most trivial changes count, and even when all the manuscripts except one say one thing, that lone manuscript’s reading counts as a textual variant. The best estimate is that there are between 300,000 and 400,000 textual variants among the manuscripts. Yet there are only about 140,000 words in the New Testament. That means that on average for every word in the Greek New Testament, there are between

two and three variants. If this were the only piece of data we had, it would discourage anyone from attempting to recover the wording of the original. But there's more to this story.

Two points to ponder: First, the reason we have a lot of variants is that we have a lot of manuscripts. It's simple, really. No classical Greek or Latin text has nearly as many variants, because they don't have nearly as many manuscripts. With virtually every new manuscript discovery, new variants are found.<sup>10</sup> If there was only one copy of the New Testament in existence, it would have zero variants.<sup>11</sup> Yet several ancient authors have only one copy of their writings in existence. And sometimes that lone copy is not produced for a millennium. But a lone, late manuscript would hardly give us confidence that that single manuscript duplicated the wording of the original in every respect. To speak about the number of variants without also speaking about the number of manuscripts is simply an appeal to sensationalism.<sup>12</sup>

Second, as Samuel Clemens said, "There are lies, damn lies, and statistics." A little probing into these 400,000 variants puts these statistics in a context.

In Greek alone, we have more than 5,500 manuscripts today. Many of these are fragmentary, of course, especially the older ones, but the average Greek New Testament manuscript is well over 400 pages long. Altogether, there are more than 2.5 million pages of texts, leaving hundreds of witnesses for every book of the New Testament.

It's not just the Greek manuscripts that count, either. The New Testament was early on translated into a variety of languages—Latin, Coptic, Syriac, Georgian, Gothic, Ethiopic, Armenian. There are more than 10,000 Latin manuscripts alone. No one really knows the total number of all these ancient versions, but the best estimates are close to 5,000—plus the 10,000 in Latin. It would be safe to say that altogether we have about 20,000 handwritten manuscripts of the New Testament in various languages.

Now, if you were to destroy all those manuscripts, we would not be left without a witness. That's because the ancient Christian leaders known as church fathers wrote commentaries on the New Testament. To date, more than one million quotations of the New Testament by the church fathers have been recorded. "If all other sources for our

knowledge of the text of the New Testament were destroyed, [the patristic quotations] would be sufficient alone for the reconstruction of practically the entire New Testament,”<sup>13</sup> said Bruce Metzger and Bart Ehrman.

These numbers are breathtaking! But they also, if left by themselves, would resemble Samuel Clemens’s quip about statistics. I’m tempted to say that these numbers are reminiscent of membership rolls at a Southern Baptist church, but I dare not use such an analogy in this company.

Far more important than the numbers are the dates of the manuscripts. How many manuscripts do we have in the first century after the completion of the New Testament, how many in the second century, the third? Although the numbers are significantly lower, they are still rather impressive. We have today as many as a dozen manuscripts from the second century, sixty-four from the third, and forty-eight from the fourth. That’s a total of 124 manuscripts within 300 years of the composition of the New Testament. Most of these are fragmentary, but collectively, the whole New Testament text is found in them multiple times.

How does the average classical Greek or Latin author stack up? If we are comparing the same time period—300 years after composition—the average classical author has no literary remains. Zip, nada, nothing. But if we compare all the manuscripts of a particular classical author, regardless of when they were written, the total would still average less than twenty, and probably less than a dozen—and they would all be coming much more than three centuries later. In terms of extant manuscripts, the New Testament textual critic is confronted with an embarrassment of riches. If we have doubts about what the original New Testament said, those doubts would have to be multiplied a hundred-fold for the average classical author. And when we compare the New Testament manuscripts with the very best that the classical world has to offer, it still stands head and shoulders above the rest. The New Testament is far and away the best-attested work of Greek or Latin literature from the ancient world.

There’s another way to look at this. If all of the New Testament manuscripts of the second century are fragmentary (and they are), how fragmentary are they? We can measure this in several different

ways. First, three out of four Gospels are attested in the manuscripts, as well as nine of Paul's letters, Acts, Hebrews, and Revelation—in other words, most of the New Testament books. Another way to look at this is that over 40 percent of all the verses in the New Testament are already found in manuscripts within a hundred years of the completion of the New Testament.<sup>14</sup>

Now, Bart in one place seems to say that we don't have *any* second-century manuscripts.<sup>15</sup> In an interview in the *Charlotte Observer*, he declared, "If we don't have the original texts of the New Testament—or even copies of the copies of the copies of the originals—what do we have?" His response is illuminating: "We have copies that were made *hundreds* of years later—in most cases, many hundreds of years later. And these copies are all different from one another."<sup>16</sup> He is saying that we don't have *any* manuscripts of the New Testament until hundreds of years after the New Testament was completed. He even repeated this statement again tonight. But that is not the case. The impression Bart sometimes gives throughout the book—but especially repeats in interviews—is that of wholesale uncertainty about the original wording, a view that is far more radical than he actually embraces.

In light of comments such as these, the impression that many readers get from *Misquoting Jesus* is that the transmission of the New Testament resembles the telephone game. This is a game every child knows. It involves a line of people, with the first one whispering some story into the ear of the second person. That person then whispers the story to the next person in line, and that person whispers it to the next, and so on down the line. As the tale goes from person to person, it gets terribly garbled. The whole point of the telephone game, in fact, is to see how garbled it can get. There is no motivation to get it right. By the time it gets to the last person, who repeats it out loud for the whole group, everyone has a good laugh.

But the copying of New Testament manuscripts is hardly like this parlor game:

- The message is passed on in writing, not orally. That would make for a pretty boring telephone game!
- Rather than one line or stream of transmission, there are multiple lines.

- Textual critics don't rely on just the last person in each line, but can interrogate several folks who are closer to the original source.
- Patristic writers are commenting on the text as it is going through its transmissional history. And when there are chronological gaps among the manuscripts, these writers often fill in those gaps by telling us what the text said in that place in their day.
- In the telephone game, once the story is told by one person, that individual has nothing else to do with the story. It's out of his or her hands. But the original New Testament books were most likely copied more than once, and may have been consulted even after a few generations of copies had already been produced.
- There was at least one very carefully produced stream of transmission for the New Testament manuscripts. And there is sufficient evidence to show that even a particular fourth-century manuscript in this line is usually more accurate than *any* second-century manuscript.

We can illustrate this [last point] with two manuscripts that Bart and I would both agree are two of the most accurate manuscripts of the New Testament, if not *the* two most accurate. I am referring to Papyrus 75 (P<sup>75</sup>) and Codex Vaticanus (B). These two manuscripts have an incredibly strong agreement. Their agreement is higher than the agreement of any other two early manuscripts. P<sup>75</sup> is 100 to 150 years older than B, yet it is not an ancestor of B. Instead, B copied from an earlier common ancestor that both B and P<sup>75</sup> were related to.<sup>17</sup> The combination of both of these manuscripts in a particular reading goes back to early in the second century.

Bart has asserted, "If we have very few early copies—in fact, scarcely any—how can we know that the text was not changed significantly *before* the New Testament began to be reproduced in such large quantities?"<sup>18</sup> I'm not sure what large quantities he's speaking about, since there are more manuscripts from the third century than there are from the fourth or fifth century.

But how can we know? It's a legitimate question. There is a way to be relatively confident that the text of the fourth century looked remarkably like the earliest form of the text.  $\mathfrak{P}^{75}$  has large portions of Luke and John in it—and nothing else. Codex B has most of the New Testament in it. If B and  $\mathfrak{P}^{75}$  are very close to each other yet B often has the earlier reading, we can extrapolate that the text of B is pretty decent for the rest of the New Testament. And when it agrees with a manuscript such as Codex Sinaiticus, which it usually does, that combined reading almost surely goes back to a common archetype from deep in the second century.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, Bart has carefully and ably described the transmission of the text. He has detailed how the winners succeeded in conquering all with their views and emerged as the group we might call “orthodox.” What he has said is fairly accurate overall. The only problem is, this is the right analysis, but the wrong religion. Bart's basic argument about theological motives describes Islam far more than Christianity. Recent work on the transmissional history of both the New Testament and the Qur'an shows this clearly.

Within just a few decades of the writing of the Qur'an, it underwent a strongly controlled, heavy-handed editing geared toward “orthodoxy” that weeded out variants that did not conform. But the New Testament, as even Bart argues, did not suffer this sort of control early on. Instead, Bart has often suggested that the earliest decades were marked by free, even wild copying.<sup>20</sup> You can't have it both ways. You can't have wild copying by untrained scribes *and* a proto-orthodox conspiracy simultaneously producing the same variants. Conspiracy implies control, and wild copying is anything but controlled.

On the one hand, there *was* uncontrolled copying of manuscripts in the earliest period. But this was largely restricted to the Western text-form.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, there was a strand of early copying that may appear to be controlled. This is the Alexandrian family of manuscripts. Yet the reason that manuscripts of this text-form look so much like each other is largely that they were in a relatively pure line of transmission.<sup>22</sup> There was no conspiracy, just good practices. What Westcott said over a century ago is relevant to this discussion:

When the Caliph Othman fixed a text of the Koran and destroyed all the old copies which differed from his standard, he provided

for the uniformity of subsequent manuscripts at the cost of their historical foundation. *A classical text which rests finally on a single archetype is that which is open to the most serious suspicions.*<sup>23</sup>

What we see in the New Testament copies is absolutely nothing like this. Bart tries to make out a case for significant theological alterations to the text of the New Testament *by a group that did not have control over the text from the beginning*, but the historical ingredients for his hypothesis are missing. It's like trying to bake a cake with romaine lettuce and ranch dressing.

In another respect, when Ehrman discusses whether God has preserved the text of the New Testament, he places on the New Testament transmissional process some rather unrealistic demands—demands that Islam traditionally claims for itself with respect to the Qur'an but that no bona fide theologian or Christian scholar would ever claim was true of the New Testament manuscripts. As is well known, most Muslims claim that the Qur'an has been transmitted perfectly, that all copies are exactly alike. This is what Ehrman demands of the New Testament text *if* God has inspired it. Methodologically, he did not abandon the evangelical faith; he abandoned a faith that in its bibliological constructs is what most Muslims claim for their sacred text.

Let's sum up the evidence from the number of variants: There are a lot of variants because there are a lot of manuscripts. And even in the early centuries, the text of the New Testament is found in a sufficient number of manuscripts, versions, and fathers to give us the essentials of the original text.

How many differences affect the meaning of the text? How many of them are plausible or viable—that is, found in manuscripts with a sufficient pedigree that they have some likelihood of reflecting the original wording? The variants can be broken down into the following four categories:

1. Spelling differences and nonsense errors
2. Minor differences that do not affect translation or that involve synonyms
3. Differences that affect the meaning of the text but are not viable

#### 4. Differences that both affect the meaning of the text and are viable

Of the hundreds of thousands of textual variants in New Testament manuscripts, the great majority are spelling differences that have no bearing on the meaning of the text.<sup>24</sup> The most common textual variant involves what is called a movable *nu*. The Greek letter *nu* ( $\nu$ ) can occur at the end of certain words when they precede a word that starts with a vowel. This is similar to the two forms of the indefinite article in English: a book, an apple. But whether the *nu* appears in these words or not, there is absolutely no difference in meaning.

Several of the spelling differences are nonsense readings. These occur when a scribe is fatigued, inattentive, or perhaps does not know Greek very well. For example, in 1 Thess. 2:7, the manuscripts are divided over a very difficult textual problem. Paul is describing how he and Silas acted among the new converts in their visit to Thessalonica. Some manuscripts read, “We were gentle among you,” while others say, “We were little children among you.” The difference between the two variants is a single letter in Greek: *nēpíoi* vs. *ēpíoi* (νήπιοι vs. ἤπιοι). A lone medieval scribe changed the text to “We were horses among you”! The word *horses* in Greek *hippoi* (ἵπποι) is similar to these other two words.

After spelling differences, the next largest category of variants are those that involve synonyms or do not affect translation. They are wordings other than mere spelling changes, but they do not alter the way the text is translated, or at least understood. A very common variant involves the use of the definite article with proper names. Greek can say “the Mary” or “the Joseph” (as in Luke 2:16), while English usage requires the dropping of the article. So whether the Greek text has “the Mary” or simply “Mary,” English will always translate this as “Mary.”

Another common variant is when words in Greek are transposed. Unlike English, Greek word order is used more for emphasis than for basic meaning. That’s because Greek is a highly inflected language, with a myriad of suffixes on nouns and verbs, as well as prefixes and even infixes on verbs. You can tell where the subject is by its ending, regardless of where it stands in the sentence. Take, for example, the sentence, “Jesus loves John.” In Greek, that statement can be expressed

in a minimum of sixteen different ways, though every time, the translation would be the same in English. And once we factor in different verbs for “love” in Greek, the presence or absence of little particles that often go untranslated, and spelling differences, the possibilities run into the hundreds. Yet all of them would be translated simply as “Jesus loves John.” There may be a slight difference in emphasis, but the basic meaning is not disturbed.

Now, if a three-word sentence like this could potentially be expressed by hundreds of Greek constructions, how should we view the number of *actual* textual variants in the New Testament manuscripts? That there are only three variants for every word in the New Testament when the potential is almost infinitely greater seems trivial—especially when we consider how many thousands of manuscripts there are.

The third largest category [of variants] involves wording that is meaningful but not viable. These are variants found in a single manuscript or group of manuscripts that, by themselves, have little likelihood of reflecting the wording of the original text. In 1 Thess. 2:9, one late medieval manuscript speaks of “the gospel of Christ” instead of “the gospel of God,” while almost all the other manuscripts have the latter. Here, “the gospel of Christ” is a meaningful variant, but it is not viable because there is little chance that one medieval scribe somehow retained the wording of the original text while all other scribes for centuries before him missed it.

The final, and by far the smallest, category of textual variants involves those that are both meaningful and viable. Less than 1 percent of all textual variants belong to this group. But even saying this may be misleading. By “meaningful,” we mean that the variant changes the meaning of the text to some degree. It may not be terribly significant, but if the reading impacts our understanding of the passage, then it is meaningful.

For example, consider a textual problem in Rev. 13:18, “Let the one who has insight calculate the beast’s number, for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666.” A few years ago, a scrap of papyrus was found at Oxford University’s Ashmolean Museum. It gave the beast’s number as 616. And it just happens to be the oldest manuscript of Revelation 13 now extant. This was just the second manuscript to

do so. (This manuscript, not quite so early, is a very important witness to the text of the Apocalypse and is known as Codex Ephraimi Rescriptus.) Most scholars think 666 is the number of the beast and 616 is the neighbor of the beast. It's possible that his number is really 616. But what is the significance of this, really? I know of no church, no Bible college, no theological seminary that has a doctrinal statement that says, "We believe in the deity of Christ, we believe in the virgin birth of Christ, we believe in the bodily resurrection of Christ, and we believe that the number of the beast is 666." This textual variant does not change any cardinal belief of Christians—but, if original, it would send about seven tons of dispensational literature to the flames.

Although the quantity of textual variants among the New Testament manuscripts numbers in the hundreds of thousands, those that change the meaning pale in comparison. Less than 1 percent of the differences are both meaningful and viable. There are still hundreds of texts that are in dispute. I don't want to give the impression that textual criticism is merely a mopping up job nowadays, that all but a handful of problems have been resolved. That is not the case. But the nature of the remaining problems and their interpretive significance is probably far less monumental than many readers of *Misquoting Jesus* have come to believe.

Finally, we need to ask, "What theological issues are involved in these textual variants?" Bart argues that the major changes that have been made to the text of the New Testament have been produced by "orthodox" scribes; they have tampered with the text in hundreds of places, with the result that the basic teachings of the New Testament have been drastically altered. Before we look at his evidence, I should point out that his basic thesis that orthodox scribes have altered the New Testament text for their own purposes is one that is certainly true. And this occurs in hundreds of places. Ehrman has done the academic community a great service by systematically highlighting so many of these alterations in his *Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*. However, the extent to which these scribes altered these various passages and whether such alterations have buried forever the original wording of the New Testament are a different matter. Indeed, the very fact that Ehrman and other textual critics can place these textual variants

in history and can determine what the original text was that they corrupted presupposes that the authentic wording has hardly been lost.<sup>25</sup>

In the concluding chapter of *Misquoting Jesus*, Bart summarizes his findings as follows:

It would be wrong . . . to say—as people sometimes do—that the changes in our text have no real bearing on what the texts mean or on the theological conclusions that one draws from them. . . . In some instances, the very meaning of the text is at stake, depending on how one resolves a textual problem: Was Jesus an angry man [Mark 1:41]? Was he completely distraught in the face of death [Hebrews 2:9]? Did he tell his disciples that they could drink poison without being harmed [Mark 16:9-20]? Did he let an adulteress off the hook with nothing but a mild warning [John 7:53–8:11]? Is the doctrine of the Trinity explicitly taught in the New Testament [1 John 5:7-8]? Is Jesus actually called the “unique God” there [John 1:18]? Does the New Testament indicate that even the Son of God himself does not know when the end will come [Matthew 24:36]? The questions go on and on, and all of them are related to how one resolves difficulties in the manuscript tradition as it has come down to us.<sup>26</sup>

I have dealt with these passages in detail in my essay “The Gospel according to Bart,” published in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*.<sup>27</sup> What I will present here will be much briefer and more selective.

This summary paragraph gives us seven passages to consider:

- Mark 16:9-20
- John 7:53—8:11
- 1 John 5:7 (in the  $\kappa\text{J}\nu$ )
- Mark 1:41
- Hebrews 2:9
- John 1:18
- Matthew 24:36

The first three passages have been considered inauthentic by most New Testament scholars—including most evangelical New Testament

scholars—for well over a century. The presence or absence of these passages changes no fundamental doctrine, no core belief, in spite of the fact that there is much emotional baggage attached to them. In the next three passages, Bart adopts readings that most textual critics would consider spurious. I think he's right in one of them (Mk. 1:41) but probably not in the other two. Nevertheless, even if his text-critical decisions are correct in all three passages, the theological reasons he gives for the changes are probably overdone. But because of time, I will focus only on the last passage, Matthew 24:36.

In Matthew's version of the Olivet Discourse, we read, "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (NRSV). The words "nor the Son," however, are not found in all the manuscripts. And this raises a significant issue: Did some scribes omit these words from the text of Matthew, or did other scribes add these words? Bart is firmly convinced that the words were expunged by proto-orthodox scribes who bristled at the idea of the Son of God's ignorance.

Bart often refers to this passage. He discusses it explicitly at least half a dozen times in *Misquoting Jesus*.<sup>28</sup> And in an academic publication, he calls it "the most famous instance" of doctrinal alteration.<sup>29</sup> In *Misquoting Jesus*, he argues, "The reason [for the omission] is not hard to postulate; if Jesus does not know the future, the Christian claim that he is a divine being is more than a little compromised."<sup>30</sup> Bart does not qualify his words here; he does not say that *some* Christians would have a problem with Jesus' ignorance. No, he says that *the* Christian claim would have a problem with it. Now, if he does not mean this, then he is writing more provocatively than is necessary, and he's misleading his readers. And if he does mean it, he has overstated his case.

Bart suggests that the omission would have arisen in the late second century, as a proto-orthodox response to the Adoptionist heresy.<sup>31</sup> This is possible, but there are three problems with this hypothesis:

1. It is somewhat startling that no church father seems to have any problem with the words "nor the Son" until the fourth century,<sup>32</sup> yet several comment on this very passage. Irenaeus (late second century), Tertullian (late second, early third century), and Origen (early third century) all embraced

the deity of Christ, yet none of them felt that this passage caused any theological problems.<sup>33</sup> Irenaeus goes so far as to use Christ's ignorance as a model of humility for Christians.<sup>34</sup> If the scribes were simply following the leads of their theological mentors, then the lack of any tension over this passage by second- and third-century fathers suggests that the omission of "nor the Son" either was not a reaction to Adoptionism or was not created in the late second century.

2. If the omission was created intentionally by proto-orthodox scribes in the late second century, then it most likely would have been created by scribes who followed Irenaeus's view that the four Gospels were the only authoritative books on the life of Jesus.<sup>35</sup> But the parallel passage in Mark 13:32 definitely has the words "nor the Son." (We know of almost no manuscripts that omit the phrase there.) And even though Mark was not copied as frequently as Matthew in the early centuries of the Christian faith, by the end of the second century, the proto-orthodox would have regarded it as scripture. The question is, Why didn't they strike the offensive words from Mark?

3. If the scribes had no qualms about deleting "nor the Son," why did they leave the word "alone" alone? Without "nor the Son," the passage still implies that the Son of God does not know the date of his return: "But as for that day and hour no one knows it—not even the angels in heaven—except the Father *alone*." Since the Father is specified as the only person who intimately knows the eschatological calendar, it is difficult to argue that the Son is included in that knowledge.<sup>36</sup>

This point is not trivial. It cuts to the heart of Bart's entire method. In *Orthodox Corruption*, he argues that the reason the same manuscript can vacillate in the kinds of theological changes it makes is "the individuality of the scribes, who, under their own unique circumstances, may have felt inclined to emphasize one component of Christology over another."<sup>37</sup> But he immediately adds, "It strikes me as equally likely, however . . . , that the same scribe may have seen different kinds of problems in different texts and made the requisite changes depending

on his perceptions and moods at the moment of transcription.”<sup>38</sup> If this kind of logic is applied to Matthew 24:36, we would have to say that the scribe had a major mood swing, because just four words after he deleted “nor the Son,” he couldn’t bring himself to drop the “alone.”

A recent critique of Bart’s overarching method at this juncture did not mince words:

If this view is accurate, then how can we have any possibility of determining the theological motivations involved in textual changes? With statements such as these, it becomes nearly impossible to falsify any hypothesis regarding theological tendencies. . . . Rather than verify his conclusions through the rigorous work of evaluating individual manuscripts, the major prerequisite in Ehrman’s methodology is the alignment of a favorable theological heresy with particularly intriguing variants.<sup>39</sup>

Another reviewer complained about the wax nose on Bart’s pronouncements over theological *Tendenz* of the orthodox scribes with these words:

No matter what textual problem one finds which relates to the central theme and soul of the Bible (i.e., the Trinitarian God), one can always postulate a motivation for an orthodox corruption, whether or not it is probable. This disingenuous method can be applied because no matter whether an article is left off or added, a word slightly shifted or removed, due to orthographic errors or any other unintentional type, it often changes the meaning just enough that there is bound to be a heresy which would benefit from the change. If an article is missing, it may seem that the unity of the Godhead is in danger. If the article is present, it may appear to threaten their distinct personalities. If a phrase exemplifying Jesus’ humanity is removed, it was obviously to combat the heresy of Adoptionism. If it is added, it was obviously to combat the heresy of Sabellianism.<sup>40</sup>

My point on Matthew 24:36 is not that Bart’s argument about the omission of “nor the Son” is entirely faulty, just that it’s not the only option and doesn’t tell the whole story. In fact, several aspects of the problem have apparently not been considered by him, yet this is his prime example of orthodox corruption. It strikes me that Bart is often

certain in the very places where he needs to be tentative, and he is tentative where he should have much greater certainty. He's more certain about what the corruptions are than what the original wording is, but his certitude about the corruptions presupposes, as Moisés Silva has eloquently pointed out, a good grasp of the original wording.<sup>41</sup>

To sum up, although Bart's reconstructions of the reasons for certain textual corruptions are *possible*, they often reveal more about Bart's ingenuity than the scribes' intentions. Or, as Gordon Fee said, "Unfortunately, Ehrman too often turns mere *possibility* into *probability*, and probability into *certainty*, where other equally viable reasons for corruption exist."<sup>42</sup>

It would have been an impossible task for me to try to address all the passages that Bart puts forth as examples of early orthodox corruption of the text. But I have tried to raise some questions about his method, his assumptions, and his conclusions. I do not believe that the orthodox corruptions are nearly as pervasive or as significant as Bart does. And I have tried to show that there is no ground for wholesale skepticism about the wording of the original text, and even that Bart is far less skeptical than the impression he gives in the public square.<sup>43</sup>

So, is what we have now what they wrote then? Exactly? No. But in all essentials? Yes.

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

**Question:** You said that the Bible is the most accurate of all the documents in antiquity but we still can't know what it originally said, then how can we determine what actually happened in any part of antiquity?

**Ehrman:** Well, I don't actually think that I said the Bible was the most accurate book from antiquity. I said that we have more manuscripts of the Bible than any other book in the ancient world. Then I said that we have difficulty determining what the New Testament authors originally said. The question is then how can we decide what anybody in the ancient world said. We can't. We wish we could. It would be nice if we could. You would like to think that because you can go to the store and buy an edition of Plato that you are actually reading Plato, but the problem is that we just do not have the kind of evidence that we need in order to establish what ancient authors actually wrote. In some cases, we have all these data, and sometimes we have just one manuscript. Sometimes we have a manuscript that was written two-thousand years later, and that's it! So, as much as we would like to be able to say that we know what ancient authors actually wrote, we often just do not know.

**Question:** Dan, I have a question. If scholars who are believers have known about the things that Bart writes about for a long time, why do so many in churches have to wait until someone like Bart comes along to tell them?

**Ehrman:** Yeah, I want this answer too.

*Audience erupts in laughter.*

**Wallace:** I think that what Bart has done for the Christian community is a great service. I said so in my review of his *Misquoting Jesus* in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society (JETS)*, with the wonderful title "The Gospel According to Bart." At least *I* thought it was a good title. In his book, in his interviews, and in his talk tonight Bart has used as a first example the story of the woman caught in adultery. I think

he has done that calculatingly as a shock value for people, but I think on the other side of it that most Christian leaders will not address that. You might hear a pastor on Sunday say that he does not believe the story to be literarily authentic—that is, the evangelist did not write this story—but that he believes it to be historically authentic. Now Bart and I both agree that it is probably not entirely historically authentic either. The article Bart wrote in *New Testament Studies*<sup>49</sup> was a great piece that demonstrated to me that this story was a conflation between two different stories. I think what has happened is that there has been a tradition of timidity among evangelical scholars for many years. Several years ago, a Bible put the story of the woman caught in adultery at the end of John's Gospel rather than its normal place. They just weren't selling enough of those Bibles, and so they decided to put it back in its normal place with one marginal note: "the oldest manuscripts don't have this." I think one of the things Bart has done is to demonstrate that people are not reading those marginal notes because they are shocked when they hear that this is probably not authentic. And so what I suggested in the *JETS* article is that it is time to quit following this tradition of timidity. Let's get out there and say what we believe, which is that the story of the woman caught in adultery—as fascinating as it is, as interesting as it is—is not part of John's Gospel. I would propose putting it in the footnotes. Now, it's not in the footnotes of evangelical Bibles. It's not even in the footnotes of broader theological spectrum Bibles like the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). But I think that's where it belongs—in the footnotes. When we did the New English Translation (net) Bible (I'm the senior New Testament editor for the NET Bible) we wrestled with this at first, and we finally settled on a compromise. The compromise was to put it in brackets, to have a lengthy discussion about why we don't think it is authentic, and to reduce the font size by two points so that it could not easily be read from the pulpit.

**Question:** Dr. Ehrman, you kept talking about the limits of our knowledge, saying, "We don't know, we don't know." It seems like there are some philosophical presuppositions that are going into your evaluation of the evidence that we have. There seems to be a lot of evidence that suggests we could know something even if it is not with absolute certainty. Is there something in your personal life or in your philosophical

reading outside of New Testament studies that has led you to say that “I really can’t know what the New Testament says with any sort of reliability just because it’s just not the evidence that I want”? Is there something that has pointed you in that direction that you can’t move past?

**Ehrman:** That’s a good question. The short answer is no. We can know some things with relative certainty. We can know what Bibles looked like in the twelfth century. We can know what Christians churches in the twelfth century read—what their Bibles looked like. We can know what Bibles look like in some areas in the seventh century. We can know what one community’s Bible looked like in the fourth century. The farther you go back, the less you can know. So, it isn’t that my mother deprived me of something when I was a child and that I’m just working this out now. It’s the nature of historical evidence that you have. You have to go with the evidence. If you’re going to be a historian, you can’t fill in the gaps when you don’t have evidence. And so, we have the problem: in the early period, we have very few manuscripts. But not only that: the other striking phenomenon is that the manuscripts we do have vary from one another far more often in the earlier period than in the later period. The variation is immense, and there just aren’t very many manuscripts! So, the historical result, whether we like it or not, is that we just can’t know.

**Question:** Multi-spectral photography and imaging seems to be turning up some interesting things in ancient documents. I have a question about that. I hope I’m not propagating an urban legend here, but on the internet someone suggested that in Codex B where Mark ends there’s a blank spot and then maybe somebody pumiced it out. That would be the first question; is that an urban legend or not? If multi-spectral imaging can potentially reveal things not visible to the naked eye, would the ending of Mark in Codex B be something worth testing with multi-spectral imaging (MSI)? If not, are there any manuscripts you would like to try multi-spectral imaging on?

**Wallace:** Great question. Let me explain real quickly what multi-spectral imaging, or MSI, is to everybody. It is camera technology that was developed for NASA so they could examine camouflaged military

installations from outer space. Later, it was applied to ancient manuscripts. A few years ago in Europe there was a group known as *Rinascimento virtuale* that conducted a three-year study involving twenty-six nations doing multi-spectral imaging on ancient manuscripts. They were trying to read what is known as a palimpsest. The study of palimpsests is where the real value of MSI is in the study of manuscripts. A palimpsest is simply a manuscript that was scraped over again and reused by someone else, typically centuries after it was originally used. Imagine a writer getting to the last two leaves of his book and he runs out of parchment. He has to make a decision between killing a goat and making a couple more leaves or ripping leaves out of an older book—certainly a cheaper solution. So, he reuses those leaves in his book. In one of the manuscripts we discovered in Constantinople, the last two leaves were a palimpsest and it may well be the second manuscript of Mark recovered from the third century. I don't know yet; I suspect not. Just two leaves. I doubt that. It's probably fifth century. We'll find out one of these days.

Now as far as using MSI for Codex B and the ending of Mark's Gospel, first of all, I would say it's absolutely impossible that the scribe of Codex B at the end of Mark's Gospel would have put in the twelve verses and then erased them. The reason I say this is because there's not enough room in that place in Codex B to put those twelve verses in. The Codex has three columns, and at the bottom the second column, there's a gap of about three or four lines. Then in the third column, there is not nearly enough room to put those twelve verses. Several people have tested it. It couldn't be done. What is interesting about Codex B along these lines is that there are three other places in the manuscript where it has a gap at the end of the book, and they're all in the Old Testament. And that gap appears each time because we're shifting genres from historical documents to prophetic or something like that or something along those lines. And what may well be the case—this is something that Dr. J. K. Elliot suggested to me—is that the original form of the Gospels—when they were collected into one piece—may have been in what's called the Western order of Matthew, John, Luke, and Mark. Now, if that's the case, and Mark was the last of those Gospels, I suspect that what we have in Codex B is a very early form of the text that the scribe is copying—a form of the text

where it had been in the Western order. He could simply be retaining the gap at the end of Mark, even though he had changed the order (or someone before him had changed it), and it no longer made any sense there. So, it seems to me that there's a lot of evidence that suggests that he is going back very close to the original with that change; even the order of the material suggests that with the gaps that are in there.

**Question:** Dr. Ehrman: You said you were a historian, and I was just wondering if you put the same emphasis on other texts, such as Plato, as you do the New Testament, and if so, can you prove to me that all those texts are correctly written and that you can interpret that?

**Ehrman:** I don't personally study these. I'm not a classicist. I'm a scholar of the New Testament, and so the texts I work on are the New Testament. So the answer would be no. I can't show you that Plato is accurately transmitted any better than the New Testament. In fact, it's probably transmitted worse. So it is harder actually to know the words of Plato than it is Paul.

**Question:** This question is for Dr. Wallace. This relates to a question or actually a comment made by Dr. Ehrman about the preservation of the text. If God has given his word to man, how can he not preserve it faithfully so that we can know it with close to one hundred-percent certainty? Given that you have denied a doctrine of preservation yourself, Dr. Wallace, how would you respond to that? How would you recommend the church deal with this?

**Wallace:** First of all, let me explain why I don't believe in a doctrine of preservation. There are two fundamental reasons why I do not. There are typically five passages used to argue that the text has been preserved. For example, in Matthew's Gospel, we have the Lord saying that not "one jot or tittle" is going to pass from the law until all is fulfilled (Mt. 5:18). And "heaven and earth may pass away but my words will not pass away" (Mt. 24:35). Well, when you read the end of John's Gospel it says that if the evangelist recorded everything Jesus did, and presumably for some of those things he did he actually spoke in those contexts, it would fill all the libraries of the world. It's a bit hyperbolic I

suspect, but nevertheless what we've got is John telling us that there's a whole lot more he could tell you about what Jesus said. Consequently, we have not preserved all of his words. So, however we are going to take that kind of text, like those from Matthew, we need to recognize that it is not talking about the preservation of the words of Jesus in our Gospels. If you read through the Gospels at a reverential pace, just the words of Jesus—get an old King James, a red-letter edition; they're easier to find this way—you can get through everything Jesus said in about two hours. I highly suspect he spoke more than two hours worth in his whole life! So, it's rather doubtful that these texts mean what people want them to mean.

The second reason I would argue against the doctrine of preservation, which, by the way, is not an ancient doctrine (the first time it is mentioned is in the Westminster Confession in the seventeenth century!), is that it does not work for the Old Testament. There are places in the Old Testament where we simply do not know what the original wording was, and we have to move to conjecture without any textual basis to say, "We think it said this here, but we're just not sure." Before the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, there were several places that were the product of conjecture and many of them were cleared up once the scrolls were discovered. But there are still several places left in the Old Testament. I don't want to be bibliologically Marcionite and claim that the New Testament is more inspired than the Old or that the New Testament was inspired while the Old was not. I think that's schizophrenic.

Here are two points I'd raise concerning the doctrine of preservation. First of all, what I think Dr. Ehrman has said, when he mentioned in his presentation tonight, is: If God inspired the text, why didn't he preserve the text? That's the very kind of question that Muslims have asked, and they have answered it by arguing that God has preserved the text. But I know of no *bona fide* Christian theologian who has ever said that God has preserved the text exactly as the original. The only people I know that claim that are *Textus Receptus* people—King James Only-type folks—and we know that they're just a little bit weird. So we probably don't give them much credibility.

I would suggest one other thing. C. S. Lewis made the interesting argument about miracles that when Jesus Christ changed the water into

wine, immediately it had alcohol in it.<sup>50</sup> Oh, I'm sorry, this is a Southern Baptist seminary! (*Audience laughs*) I'm sorry, I agree with Lewis on that point! Well, it seems to me what Lewis is saying is that when Jesus makes the wine it's going to become alcoholic. When you raise Lazarus from the dead, he's still going to die. When miracles are done, after the miracle is done, then natural processes take over. And if the Bible is originally inspired, the natural processes due to humans rewriting this text, copying it, or whatever, are going to take over. I think I can argue for a general pre-severation of the Scripture based on the historical evidence, but I cannot do so on the basis of any doctrine.

**Question:** This question is for Dr. Ehrman. You asked the question why study variants if they don't make a significant difference. But since many people abandon their faith because they don't believe the truths taught by Scripture can be relied on, wouldn't one of the most important reasons for Christians to study textual criticism be to defend its integrity against people like you?

**Ehrman:** Good luck.

*Audience roars with laughter.*

**Ehrman:** My personal belief about this is, as I said before, that given the kind of evidence we have, I don't think that there's any hope of getting closer to an original text. So, there's going to be no defense against people who say we don't know what the original is because we don't know what the original is. Ten or fifteen years ago my interests in textual criticism shifted away from trying to figure out what the original is to trying to figure out *why* the text got changed. For me, this a very interesting question. Why did scribes change the text? And that's why I wrote *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, to show why it was, in some instances, that scribes felt motivated to change the text. At least one of the other presenters has been quite outspoken in his writings in saying we should give up talking about the original text. I don't know if he'll be saying that in his lecture, but he should! So, I think there are lots of reasons to study the text other than trying to establish the original to protect the text against skeptics, because I think that if that's the goal,

it's really going to run into roadblocks. I think there are other good reasons for doing textual criticism.

**Question:** My question is going toward intentional changes in texts. In comparison to Thomas Jefferson's Bible—where he leaves Christ in the grave—have either one of you found any texts that leave Christ in the grave?

**Wallace:** I suppose you could almost argue that for Mark 16, except for the fact that even if it ends at verse 8, you still have the angelic announcement that Jesus is risen. You don't have any human witnesses to it. He may have still stayed in the grave. The problem that we've got with that is that three times in Mark's Gospel Jesus prophesied that he will suffer and that he will rise again from the grave. And it seems to me, and I think Bart would agree with me on this, that the abrupt ending you have to Mark's Gospel is really profound. [This tactic] wasn't used in ancient literature that often, but it was used. Basically, the tactic was to stop the text right in mid-sentence and have somebody keep reading, although there's nothing to look at. The [text says the] women were afraid, and it ends. Period. Consequently, it is moving the reader into the place of the disciples. What Mark's Gospel is trying to do is to get these readers to answer the question, "What are you going to do with Jesus?" The fulcrum of Mark's Gospel is in Mark 8, where Peter makes his confession that Jesus is the Christ. When he does so, Jesus then says, "Do you know that the Son of Man is going to suffer and die?" And Peter pulls him aside and rebukes him. *Now, look Peter, if you know he's the Christ, why are you doing this?* Whatever Peter's thinking, it's not on the level of what we think of when we think of Jesus as the Christ. I think he was thinking of a military conqueror who was going to kick some Roman butt back in Jerusalem. The point is that Peter doesn't have a good grasp on what it means for Jesus to be Messiah. *He wants Jesus in his glory but will not accept him in his suffering.* So, all the way through the rest of Mark, we see Jesus as the suffering servant of Isaiah. He's the one who's going to come and die for us. And the question ultimately gets asked at the end of Mark 16: Okay, did you accept Jesus in his suffering? If you did, you will see him in his glory. If you didn't, you won't.

So, that's the closest we have of any text that might even suggest that he wasn't raised from the dead, but it doesn't even come close to even suggesting that.

**Question:** When the church considers the New Testament text, how should we approach it? Are they the exact divine words of God, are they the words of followers of Jesus inspired by God or the closest we have to that, or are they simply brilliant ideas for teaching and encouraging a good life? Simply put, what is a righteous and scholarly responsible way to approach the New Testament text?

**Wallace:** This may surprise you, but the basic view that I would give has to do with my bibliology—my doctrine of the Bible. I have a three-tiered bibliology. The foundational tier is that the Bible tells us of the great acts of God in history. The second level is that the Bible is normative for faith and practice, what is sometimes called infallibility. The top level is that the Bible is true in what it teaches, and I would call that inerrancy. Most evangelicals today, I'm afraid, flip that pyramid on its head, and then it can come crashing down if someone finds what they think is a mistake in the Bible. I don't think that is the proper way for us to view this. I think a righteous—and I'm not sure I would use that term—or better, a more orthodox scholarly approach to it would be to recognize that we are dealing with something that has been considered to be the word of God throughout the history of the church. But even then, the way I approach my own method in dealing with the text is this: I hold in limbo my own theological views about the text as I work through it; it makes for an interesting time! In one respect I have an existential crisis every time I come to the text, and that's fine because the core of my theology is not the Bible, it's Christ. Now you say, how can you have Christ without the Bible? I'd say, how can they have Christ in the first century without the New Testament? But they did. The way I approach this is to recognize the primacy of Christ as Lord of my life, as sovereign master of the universe. And, as I look at the Scriptures, they first and foremost have to be those documents that I regard as relatively trustworthy to guide us as to what Christ did and what God has done in history. On that basis, on that foundation, I begin to look at it in more ways than that.

**Question:** Dr. Ehrman, at this point in scholarship, does the earliest reconstructible form of the text portray an orthodox understanding of the resurrection and the deity of Christ?

**Ehrman:** I'm not sure what the orthodox understanding of resurrection is. You mean that Jesus is bodily resurrected from the dead?

**Question:** Yeah, that Jesus was bodily resurrected from the dead and that he's both God and man.

**Ehrman:** I don't think that the texts affect those views one way or another. My own view is that the biblical authors thought Jesus was physically resurrected from the dead but that most of the biblical authors did not think Jesus was God. The Gospel of John does. I think Matthew, Mark, and Luke do not think Jesus was God. It is hard to know what Paul's view about Jesus' divinity is, in my opinion. So, I think different authors had different opinions, but I don't think in most cases that is affected by textual variation.

**Question:** Dr. Ehrman, I was just wondering if you ascribed to a particular theory [of New Testament textual criticism], such as reasoned eclecticism, because I don't see a consistency in how you are dealing with issues methodologically.

**Ehrman:** The reason you don't see a consistency is because usually the way I argue is I figure out what I think is right and then I argue for it. (*Audience erupts in laughter.*) Actually, I would call myself a reasoned eclectic. But that's why you don't see a consistency, because that's the way reasoned eclecticism works. (Sorry if this is coded language for the rest of you!) You look at the external evidence. You look at what kind of manuscripts support a particular reading. You look for the earliest manuscripts. You look for the best quality manuscripts. But you also look at intrinsic probabilities and you look at transcriptional probabilities. The reason you don't detect a certain method in my argumentation is because for every variant you have to argue all the best arguments. For some variants, the transcriptional argument is going to be superior to the manuscript argu-

ment. And in other variants, the manuscript argument is going to be superior to the intrinsic evidence. You have to argue it out in every instance and come up with the most convincing argument. If I were just sticking with transcriptional probability the whole time, then you would see that kind of consistency, but precisely because I'm a reasoned eclectic, you don't see it. Whereas with David [Parker], for example, you would clearly see a genealogical method and probably transcriptional probability but he would never use intrinsic probability. Is that right?

**Ehrman:** They're just not reasoned enough. It's not the method, though. I learned my method from Bruce Metzger, who is completely a reasoned eclectic. I put more weight on intrinsic probability and transcriptional probability than Metzger did. As years have gone by, I've placed less weight on manuscripts for precisely the reasons I've laid out for you. The manuscripts generally are many hundreds of years later than the original and they are not very useful for what the earliest form of the text is.

**Question:** Dan, I have some questions about the story of the woman caught in adultery.

**Wallace:** I've heard of that story.

**Question:** We've heard of it several times this weekend, and it made me think: Do textual critics have any idea when this story was inserted into the Gospel of John? Do you have any idea of the possible authenticity of this story? Is there any possible connection to a genuine story from the ministry of Jesus or is it just creative writing? And, I think probably the most important question concerning how to apply textual criticism to what we do every day as ministers is: If you were preaching a series of sermons through the Gospel of John and came to this story, would you preach a sermon on this text as if it has authority for the Christian life?

**Wallace:** Those are great and very practical questions that Bart can answer far better than I, so I'll turn it over to him.

**Ehrman:** No, I would not preach on that.

*Audience roars with laughter.*

**Wallace:** Bart has actually done some of the very best work on the pericope of the woman caught in adultery. I am relatively convinced not only that the story is not literarily authentic, but also that it is not entirely historical. Bruce Metzger thought that it had all the earmarks of historicity. The way that I've been looking at it is that it seems that it was a conflation of two different stories that finally coalesced in the third century. I've been very impressed, frankly, with Ehrman's academic work on this subject in his very fine article in *New Testament Studies*.<sup>51</sup> It's hard to read because it's so detailed, but it has some really good information. One of the things that I've wrestled with on the *Pericope Adulterae* is that it looks to me as if there are an awful lot of Lukanisms in it. It looks far more Lukan or Matthean than it does Johannine in terms of its style of writing, the language, the vocabulary, and so forth. And there is a group of manuscripts that has this story after Luke 21:38. It seems to me that if we have a historical kernel to this story it would have gone after Luke 21:38. That seems to be a likely place for it. There is some work that has been done on the style and grammar of Luke. Working with this, what I've been wanting to do—it's one of those backburner projects—is to take this story and look at it through Luke's syntax and style and reduce it down to what it would have looked like if Luke had access to this or had actually written the story. Then I would ask the question, why didn't he put it down in his Gospel? At least at this stage, my guess—and that's all it is, it's not even on the level of a hypothesis—is that he probably had access to a story like this but much shorter. I rather doubt that the Pharisees peeled out from the oldest to the youngest. That looks like a later accretion. I think what Luke had was a shorter form that ended up being a little bit too bland. There's a little more work that needs to be done on this.

Now as far as the major question you're asking, should we preach this? I would personally say no. When I get to this place when I am working through John, I have taken an entire Sunday, or sometimes two, to talk about whether we should preach this passage. Is it authentic? Prepare people to think about this. One of the deep concerns I have

for the church today is that there is such a huge difference between the pulpit and the pew and between the pulpit and professors. We need to educate our people and let them know that these are the issues that are going on. So, when I did this one year, I went through and talked about the passage, talked about textual criticism for two weeks, and when we got to the text I said, "It's probably not authentic, let's go on." Nobody had a problem. But if you just walk in there and say that this passage is not authentic; if you do not prepare people to think about that, they're just going to think that the sky has fallen and that you've picked and chosen which passages you didn't want to be original.

**Question:** Dr. Ehrman, my question is regarding John 1:1 and the reading "and the Word was God." I was curious as to what your view is on that textually. You've mentioned it in the footnote of one of your books. And I was curious what your opinion was on that with regard to the new information that has come to light based on W<sup>Sup</sup> and the presence of the article before *theos*. It seemed to support your view and I was hoping you could tell me what you think the original reading is there.

**Ehrman:** I wish I could remember what I said in my footnote. Remind me. What did I say?

**Question:** I think you were making the case that the reading *ho theos en ho logos* was original.

**Ehrman:** Wow! Really?

**Wallace:** I think it was Codex L he was talking about, not W<sup>Sup</sup>,<sup>52</sup> though.

**Question:** It was an eighth-century manuscript that you were talking about.

**Ehrman:** I said that was the original reading?

**Question:** No. I don't know what you were saying, that's why I am asking.

**Ehrman:** Oh. It sounded like a brilliant insight.

**Wallace:** It's in *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*.<sup>53</sup>

**Ehrman:** I have no recollection. [Bart laughs.] I don't think it had the article, no. How's it go? *Theos ēn ho logos*, right? Is that how it goes? I think it still means the "Word was God," capital G. I think the Gospel of John understands that Jesus is the Word of God that has become incarnate, and as the Word of God he is in some sense God. At the end of the Gospel in John 20:28, Thomas says "My Lord and My God." Jesus is identified as divine at the beginning and at the end of the Gospel and so the Gospel of John understands that in some sense—not in a Nicene sense or a full trinitarian sense—Jesus is God. Am I answering the question?

**Question:** Yeah, so you think the original is anarthrous there?

**Ehrman:** Yes, I think it is originally anarthrous there. I'm sorry, for the rest of us mortals what we're saying is that there was not a definite article there. The issue is that normally when you talk about God, capital G in Greek, you say *ho theos*—literally "the God." But in John 1:1 it just says *theos* without the *ho*. There are grammatical reasons for it doing that, but I think that it means capital G, God. It's not surprising to me that scribes on occasion would stick an article in there to make sure you understood that in fact this isn't small-g gods or divine but it actually means God.

**Stewart:** Our time has come to an end. Let's thank our speakers for great presentations and great answers to good questions.