

Oakhurst Library Committee Book Review of Bart Ehrman's "Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why." November, 2006.

This week marks the first anniversary of the publication of Bart Ehrman's lively and instructive book, "Misquoting Jesus." The book is not really about "misquoting Jesus," but rather the first book published for the lay audience on the processes of New Testament textual criticism. The evocative title was selected by the publisher. Ehrman preferred "Lost in Transmission," which sounded, one reviewer noted, more like a book about stock-car racing. Ehrman has appeared on Oprah, the Daily Show, and the Colbert Report, which I happened to see. He has a sense of humor.

The book treats the formation of the Hebrew and Christian canon, the early copyists, the types of transcription errors made by these copyists--particularly in the first three centuries, the quest for "the original words," the historical and social contexts of intentional errors made in early transcriptions, and finally, a conclusion offering a theory of language that softens his criticism of the scribes' errors. This was heady stuff for me so I loved the book and highly recommend it to members of Harold Hoffman's Sunday School class.

I learned (at the late age of 67), that textual criticism of the New Testament is hum-drum stuff for most Biblical scholars who have known about these controversial interpretations and variant readings of scripture for 300 years. Three hundred years! I finally understand something that has long baffled me: why Thomas Jefferson felt self-authorized to scissor out all the parts of his New Testament that he decided were not authentic sayings of Christ, leaving him with a thin volume indeed. Many of the intellectuals of the Enlightenment were well aware of New Testament textual criticism.

Last April, when this unlikely book rose to Number 5 on the NY Times nonfiction best seller list, the Times' critic called it "this season's subversive best seller." Ehrman, a world-famous author of 18 previous books and chairman of the department of religious studies at the University of North Carolina, declares in the first chapter that he was raised in a conventional Episcopalian family, became a "born again" fundamentalist as a teenager, attended the Moody Bible Institute, and went on to Wheaton on Illinois. Ehrman then received his Ph.D. from Princeton. He now openly and without apology (and in my opinion, without proselytizing) admits that after learning several ancient languages and studying the textual variants of early manuscripts of the New Testament, he become an agnostic.

During an interview, Ehrman summarized what he writes on pages 11 and 12: "The problem of divining the meaning of the New Testament is that we not only don't have the originals, we don't even have copies of the copies of the originals. It would have been no more difficult for God to preserve the words of Scripture than it would have been for him to inspire them in the first place....The fact that we don't have the words surely must show, I reasoned, that he did not preserve them for us. And if he didn't perform that miracle, there seemed to be no reason to think that he performed the earlier miracle of

inspiring those words.” As one commentator put it, Ehrman “ looked deeply into the origins of Christianity and lost his faith.”

Ehrman’s admission of agnosticism, coming from a “fallen” biblical scholar, has produced fusillades of both praise and damnation. The critics are almost as lively and enjoyable to read as the book itself. To put the scale of the debate in perspective, if you enter the book’s short title into Google, you get over 6,000 results. The Amazon site that sells this book also publishes over 225 reader reviews, ranging from a few sentences of vilification or admiration to a multi-page treatise on Ehrman’s mistranslation of a single ancient Greek phrase. There are even two blogs devoted entirely to this book, one of them 76 pages long. The few divinity school faculty reviews that I read on the Internet were apologetic but firm. They belonged to the school of, “I know, love, and really really admire Bart, but....”

The most annoying review (for me) of Ehrman’s book comes from a theologian who sincerely and dourly warns his fellows that a lay person may not be able to understand the subtle nuances of textual criticism (as expressed in Ehrman’s book) and therefore his/her faith may be fatally endangered. After a good laugh, I repeated aloud an exclamation from a theologian in our own community on an entirely different matter: *Puhleeeeee!!!*

Ehrman offers in his closing chapter a humbling principle for every reader and, as I see it, a gentle forgiveness to the scribes who produced those thousands of variant “witnesses” down through the ages. We humans, absorbing any collection of words-- yes, even the New Testament--will derive sometimes wildly different views from those of our neighbor or our enemy; make unintentional errors and/or omissions of understanding; and therefore errors of transmission, depending on which “needs, beliefs, worldviews, opinions, loves, hates, longings, desires, situations, problems....” each of us brings to the process.

Thus, Ehrman argues, The New Testament, as evidenced by its variant readings and the irresolvable theological issues that those readings produce, is a very human set of books. I, myself, was an agnostic for more than forty years after being a member of a fundamentalist Methodist Church in California during my childhood and youth. Six years ago I found Oakhurst and the beginning of a new faith journey. This faith is unshaken— even strengthened-- by this book.

CJC

Ehrman, Bart D. *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who changed the Bible and Why*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005. (\$9.99 in hardback, including shipping, from www.zooba.com)