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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### MYTHOLOGIZING THE BIBLE: EHRMAN'S PARTISAN TEXTUAL CRITICISM

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#### ABSTRACT

The general argument here is that Ehrman's a priori stance towards Scripture leads him to employ the tools of contemporary biblical study prejudicially with the expressed purpose of converting selected content into an illusory creation of the human imagination or, in other words, to render it mythological, thereby justifying conclusions already held prior to rather than after analysis of biblical texts. In effect, the claim is that Ehrman's implicit goal prior to biblical study is to make of the Gospel no Gospel at all, ideologically in tune with his own personal life deconversion from Christianity and conversion to self-professed atheistic status. To support this argument, the essay adopts a broad multifaceted critical social-scientific approach which looks closely at Ehrman's personal life and attempts to make his sweeping pejorative theological claims about the Gospel intelligible in the light of these factors. The essay begins by providing a general overview of Ehrman's life and career in order to place analysis within some kind of personal historical context. Then it critically reviews and comparatively evaluates some of the central elements and motifs of textual criticism in general and Ehrman's preferred type of textual critical approach for studying New Testament manuscripts in particular. A small subset of Ehrman's writings from some of his most popular books is then critically assessed and examined for any possible links between personal biographical factors and general patterns in perspective and theological claims as well as links to broader American cultural trends. Lastly, several glaring ironies in Ehrman's major work are briefly discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

This essay attempts to assess the strengths and weaknesses of Bart Ehrman's textual critical analysis of New Testament writings in light of the literal deluge of severe criticisms that have emerged in response to his many books, scholarly and popular articles, and various interviews and televised debates with some of the most eminent and noteworthy scholars and theologians from across the world both within and outside of the parameters of the Christian religion (N.T. Wright, Alister McGrath, Peter Kreeft, and countless other religious and scholarly note-worthies from among the most-respected educational and seminarian institutions in the world including William Lane Craig, Dinesh D-Souza, Mike Licona, Craig Evans, Daniel Wallace, Richard Swinburne, Peter Williams, James White, Darrell Bock, Michael L. Brown, Robert M. Price, and many more).

In fact, there have been so many negative as well as glorifying positive responses to Ehrman's work on the New Testament and his particular perspective on Christianity that it's literally impossible to review all of them here in a comprehensive manner in the space of this brief essay. In addition, the fact that Ehrman himself as a scholar is so prolific would make such a task doubly impossible within the confines of this essay. Therefore, the much more modest task of this essay will be, first, to provide a general overview of Ehrman's life and career in order to set the present analytical task within some kind of historical context.

Next, we shall briefly review some of the central issues involved in textual criticism since it is Ehrman's primary methodological technique applied in his scholarly work of analyzing New Testament manuscripts. Then we shall examine a small subset of his writings in different books to determine if there are any general patterns in perspectives and methodologies that are applied from the beginning to the present. Here, among other things, we shall be interested to see any relations between any aspects of his biography to his present-day position and perspective as a New Testament scholar. Lastly, we shall try to assess and evaluate along the way what are his consistent weaknesses and strengths in overall theological perspective and in the application of the textual critical methodology to New Testament scholarship. Along the way, this essay will also include consideration of the assessments, evaluations and criticisms of Ehrman's work which exist in the professional and popular literature. In small measure, the essay will attempt to discern if, in fact, these scholarly and professional assessments find any support here.

**General Academic Background:** As intimated above, Bart Ehrman is an American New Testament scholar born in Kansas who was educated first at Moody Bible Institute and Wheaton College and then full graduate work at Princeton Theological Seminary. After teaching four years at Rutgers University, he is presently based in the Department of Religious Studies at the very prestigious University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, specializing in the textual criticism of the New Testament.

In addition, he also applies the textual critical approach to questions regarding the historical Jesus and the origin and development of Christianity from the early times. On the basis of the findings of his textual critical research on New Testament materials, he is most well-known for the thesis of irremediable Orthodox corruption of the Bible, which he himself has identified as the central motivation behind his own conversion from evangelical Christianity to “happy Agnostic”(1), as he terms it in popular media. He is an extremely prolific writer of books and scholarly articles as well as popular writings, and also appears frequently in both conventional mass media settings and contemporary social media to air his views on Christianity and to engage in heated debates with top theologians and seminarians from around the world on controversial religious issues. Therefore, he is a well-known fixture as a mass-media icon in the American cultural community from every type of academic and religious institution and organization, and much beyond. Although he had written a book prior to that point, the small treatise that put him on the map in the global scholarly and religious community was the well-known, “Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why” in 2005. Since that time, he has written many extended exegeses on various aspects of his New Testament research. Later, we shall take the opportunity to briefly review some of these works. However, even up until his latest “Heaven and Hell” book (2021), all of his writings have always contained a dominant theme or message tying them all together. The Ehrman leitmotif, as it were, is that the Bible being read today is hopelessly unreliable because all the materials it is based upon have been hopelessly plagued and corrupted by scribal errors along the way, and these scribal errors have given birth to endless contaminated textual variants. Therefore, the beginning and end of the Ehrman analysis of the New Testament is textual variation, and almost all of his conclusions can be sourced in this foundational principle. That is precisely why readers of his work need to be strongly versed in the strengths and weaknesses of textual criticism as a methodology before they can adequately assess and evaluate Ehrman's particular perspective and writings. Since Ehrman has made an entire academic career from the beginning employing the methodology of textual criticism to analyze New Testament materials, it goes without saying that it is crucial to an accurate evaluation of Ehrman's work. That is to say, a proper understanding, appreciation, and assessment of Ehrman's theological perspective and professional work cannot really be arrived at in the absence of a thorough understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of that methodology by itself, let alone how it is applied to New Testament studies. Later, a word or two needs to be mentioned here about this particular methodology.

**Brief Biography:** As mentioned earlier Ehrman comes from Kansas, farmlands most popularly known in the history of American culture as the Midwestern heart of evangelical protestant Christianity. Growing up in that particular part of America is not like growing up in New York or Boston of any other major city, to say the least. Being largely farm country, it is largely rural with strong protestant religious influences permeating every part of local culture, much like the ancient Chinese folk religions infuse much of rural life in Taiwan, for example. Not unexpectedly, after participating in the state-wide champion debate team in 1973, he entered Moody Bible Institute (MBI) to study the Bible, Biblical theology, and interestingly enough, Biblical languages, earning his 3-year diploma in 1976 (‘diploma’ because it wasn't a 4-year baccalaureate ‘degree’, standard undergraduate university training for Americans). MBI is a private Christian Bible college located in Chicago, Illinois, founded by businessman evangelist D. W. Moody in 1886. After finishing Moody, Ehrman decided to enter Wheaton College in Illinois to work towards his official baccalaureate degree, finishing in less than the four-year standard semester workload but with no record as to his actual university ranking per degree (< cum laude, cum laude, Magana cum laude, summa cum laude on a 4.0 GPA scale) nor his major nor any other academic awards nor extra-curricular activities. We just know that the Baccalaureate at Wheaton (and later the Ph.D. at Princeton Seminary) were both magna cum laude. More importantly, once again we see the evangelical connection here with Ehrman since Wheaton College is an Evangelical liberal arts college with graduate school

founded by evangelical abolitionists in 1860. In fact, Wheaton, Illinois was a stop along the way on the so-called ‘underground railroad’ that carried Blacks out of slavery areas and some of them into higher education at university. For example, one of Illinois' first Black college graduates came out of Wheaton College. From Wheaton, Ehrman entered Princeton Theological Seminary to achieve a Ph.D. (1985) and a Master's in Divinity. It is here where he learned intensively textual criticism of the bible, not before, as well as the nature and development of New Testament canon and apocrypha under Bruce Metzger, one of the most influential New Testament scholars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century if not beyond. Metzger was a Biblical scholar who specialized in Bible translation and textual criticism. As a Bible editor, he was a highly esteemed scholar of Greek and served on the board of both the American Bible Society and the United Bible Societies. At Princeton as well as in his publications and teachings, he was well-known in the religious scholarly community for employing the methods of historical criticism and higher criticism to study the Bible. Basically, he attempted to explain the content of biblical text as shaped by the literary and historical origins of the Bible and biblical canon with a strong relativist philosophical interpretative bent. For example, he argued consistently for years that the early church which put together the New Testament did not formally view the issue of ‘divine inspiration’ to be a required criterion to meet in order to decide inclusion in the canon or not. In effect, he made it appear as if the early church either never considered the role of the Holy Spirit important in the canonical selection process of that ‘divine inspiration’ was never a primary consideration for inclusion into the Bible neither explicitly nor implicitly. Rather, texts written by followers or eyewitnesses were more important criteria to meet; orthodoxy, apostolicity, and consensus among the churches were the three chief criteria to determine inclusion in the bible, not ‘divine inspiration’.

A few more words need to be recounted here about Ehrman's career that bare considerable importance to his particular theological perspective and methodologies, not to mentioned the ideology he brings to bear upon them. He grew up in an Anglican family and originally a member of the Episcopal Church of America. As a teenager, he became a born-again evangelical Christian. In his first immensely popular book, “Misquoting Jesus”, he tells the personally revealing story of how he used to believe that God inspired the Bible, all the text of the bible, and he believed that God also protected those texts from contamination and error. From this, there developed in him a fervent desire to comprehend the original wording of biblical texts.

This is what lead him to Moody, then to Wheaton, then finally to Princeton, where he learned ancient languages (especially Koine Greek under Metzger) and textual criticism. He says that it was there at Princeton studying the old biblical manuscripts in ancient languages that he came face to face with the sudden realization that none of these biblical manuscripts could be harmonized or reconciled with each other to form a reliable canon. That's over 5,000 manuscripts! So, then, if God inspired biblical text, why didn't He protect it against scribal changes? It was a question he couldn't answer, so he abandoned evangelical Christianity and the Episcopal Church, remaining a kind of at-large liberal Christian for 15 years. During this time, he says, he struggled with the twin controversial issues of the existence of evil and suffering in the Christian faith. At the end of those 15 years, he finally declares himself to be a happy agnostic atheist (Ehrmanblog.org; Wikipedia; Alcorn, 2014).

**Textual Criticism:** Since Ehrman was professionally trained in textual criticism at Princeton by one of the most influential New Testament scholars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as described above (Metzger and Ehrman, 2005), a brief review of the essential features of this particular methodology is surely required. Before we can even halfway understand how he arrives at his conclusions about the authenticity and reliability of New Testament writings, we first need to understand the methodology he utilized to make interpretations of text and reach those conclusions. There are many highly acclaimed scholarly works that have been done on this methodology especially as applied to New Testament writings both critical and apologetic. Interested readers can check out some important references that informed the present essay

specified in the bibliography (Hixson et al, 2019; Wegner, 2006, 2004; Kruger, 2013; Bruce, 2018, 2003; Porter and Pitts, 2015; Black, 1994; Anderson and Widder, 2018; Kelemen, 2008; Greenlee, 1993; Fortner, 2020; McGann, 1992; Comfort, 2005; Aland and Delobel, 1994; Maas, 1958; Vincent, 2013). For understandable reasons, here only a general discussion of essential features directly applicable to the essay topic at hand can be reviewed. We also want to be able to comprehend Ehrman's approach to the study of biblical text in the larger context of profound American cultural trends in political ideology especially as it is applied to the study of New Testament manuscripts. After this methodological review, perhaps we may then be in a propitious position to evaluate the claims Ehrman makes about the origin and nature of the New Testament writings and to determine to what extent, if at all, personal or subjective and/or cultural influences may have entered into Ehrman's scholarly research, analyses and conclusions about the reliability of the Gospel. All along the way, hopefully, we will keep a firm focus on the positive aspects of Ehrman's scholarly work on the New Testament.

To begin with, textual criticism doesn't simply mean to criticize the text of any particular writing or manuscript, let's say criticizing the original manuscript of Shakespeare's 'Macbeth', for example, or criticizing the text of the New Testament. Textual criticism as a methodological technique is unrelated to the intellectual task of 'critiquing' a particular text like Shakespeare's 'Macbeth' or 'critiquing' New Testament text in the sense of finding faults or errors of logic, reason, and so forth. Therefore, textual criticism of the New Testament doesn't mean 'critiquing' the New Testament in this colloquial sense of the meaning. What it does mean is thinking in a vigilant manner while looking for signs or indications of variations within the source manuscripts of a text and then deciding which one is closest to the finished product. For example, there might be 50 hand-written copies of Shakespeare's 'Macbeth' in existence, but which one is the original that Shakespeare penned? Textual criticism would be applied to try to make that determination. Perhaps another example taken from the New Testament is more apropos.

In the scholarly literature, New Testament textual critical scholars have found lots of slight and major variations in the ancient manuscripts used as source material for New Testament canon, as indeed Ehrman has discovered. One of the typical examples used in academic texts on textual criticism of the New Testament are the differences found among ancient manuscripts pertaining to 1 Corinthians 13:3. In some of the Greek manuscript copies, the verse reads "if I give up my body to be burned". In other manuscripts, the same verse reads "if I give up my body that I might boast". Clearly, the meaning of "burned" does not correspond to the meaning of "boast". The textual critical scholar would note this variation or variant and begin to investigate why it occurred. The conclusions drawn about the meaning of the verse is that both words make rational sense when placed within an interpretative framework of contextual reading. So, then, perhaps the two verses differ from each other within the two manuscripts in question because the authors who copied it are translating from different Greek words because they look similar and share similar meanings in Greek. How well a biblical scholar knows the Greek language and culture is paramount in terms of choosing the correct shared meanings of Greek terms, and then translating them into English to make an accurate interpretation. However, when Paul penned it, which word did he use? Obviously, this is a problem which occurs in every language since one term or expression can have many shared meanings all of which may be technically correct in linguistic terms but not necessarily accurate contextually. For example, translations from English into one of the Asian or Oriental languages translating the meaning of the word 'gigantic' into Chinese or Japanese or Thai may have difficulty finding the exact word or expression in their own language to convey precisely what meaning is intended by the author in the original English language. If the original word and context within which it is found was employed in reference to the size of some physical object, perhaps it becomes a little easier to translate. But maybe not since the original English shares meaning with many variant meanings such as large, monumental, enormous, huge, and so forth.

Further, there is more complexity if the word 'gigantic' in the original English text was used in reference to abstract ideas or idea systems as in the expression, "that makes a gigantic difference in motivational sources", and not in reference to physical size. Obviously, here the word 'gigantic' in the phrase "gigantic difference" does not refer to the size of a large physical object. If we factor in other complicating factors such as idiomatic expressions and the like, we can see just how complex textual criticism can become and how personal judgments at all points along the textual critical process can be minimized but not avoided. For example, take the English expression 'piece of cake' often used in popular and academic text. If the translator is not that familiar with the colloquial expressions of the culture from which the expression emerged, then a literal translation would be the only option available, whereas another translator more familiar with the idiomatic expression may not arrive at the same translation in the same text especially if the expression is employed in a complicated manner. Therefore, this difference would appear as a 'variant' from a textual critical perspective. In any case, this is the job of the textual critic: to find the oldest and most accurate reading from the ancient manuscripts, in the earlier case of 1 Corinthians 13:3. Using well-defined precise methods, different 'variant' readings can be identified in the manuscripts with the goal of identifying the oldest and most original of all the manuscripts used as source material by the author. In this business, it is more a matter of degree than a matter of kind; more often time than not, the textual critic is trying to find the one closest to the original, not the original.

Now, so far this kind of scholarly investigation sounds very scientific, objective and unlikely to be irremediably tainted or corrupted by the personal experiences, opinions, beliefs, or politico-ideological-philosophical assumptions of the scholar. In actuality, however, nothing could be further from the truth in terms of how textual criticism is actually done. The impression the methodology provides is that it's science when, in reality, it's both science and art. As such it is rarely, if ever, untainted by the personal experiences, beliefs, values and predilections of the scholar using it. What's more, throughout history scholars have not really been known en masse to be perfectly aware of all the myriad ways in which powerful socio-cultural forces are hard at work in their thinking processes and writings, much less in a propitious position to negate or counter such influences. As a science, then, textual criticism relates to the finding and reading of writing material called manuscripts, organizing their contents into categories in a process called cataloguing, and usually comparing or collating texts within these manuscripts against other copies of the same manuscript. Textual critical scholars in New Testament studies are typically dealing with Greek-language manuscripts as they attempt to recover and publish the earliest possible writings. But the ART of textual criticism is another dimension of the methodology altogether. The 'art' or artistic or creative dimension of textual criticism partly, but significantly, occurs in the scholar's classification of these manuscripts into different types, the comparing and evaluating the different variations between manuscripts, and the establishment of a particular manuscript containing text deemed to be closest to the original manuscript. Again, at any and all points along the way in the textual critical process, the scholar applying this methodology is much more vulnerable to socio-cultural influences than what is typically assumed in the halls of academia. In other words, textual criticism as a methodology is much more likely than other strictly scientific methodologies to consciously or unintentionally mimic or trumpet broader and much more powerful historical-cultural trends, or to be strongly influenced or infused by such trends. For example, if the culture at large within which the textual critic was raised and educated is experiencing strong adverse reactions to Christian values due to wider philosophical trends of relativism, secularism, and pluralism, just to name a few contemporary trends in American culture, then some scholars may intentionally or unwittingly promote their own popularity and material well-being by engaging in interpretations of findings consistent or consonant with such perceived trends, and market or tailor their scholarly publications to take advantage of them. If the authority, authenticity, and reliability of the Christian Bible has fallen out of favor in the culture at large, for example, as it has in the

broader context of secular society in America, then scholars choosing to make interpretations of findings and to publish writings which can be interpreted as support for such a cultural trend would be more likely to be well-received in the popular media and in the halls of academia, and certainly well-recompensed. What's equally problematic is that there's many ways to actually 'do' textual criticism of a manuscript whose central features are still being hotly debated today in scholarly and professional circles. In terms of New Testament studies, scholars today tend strongly to employ the 'eclectic' type of textual critical methodology because it tends to be multifaceted in nature. First, all the manuscripts are examined to determine their significance to the task at hand, altogether defined as the 'external evidence' by textual critics. In the earlier Corinthians verse, for example, all the manuscripts containing the term "burn" and "boast" or some form of it would be considered part of the external evidence. However, quality matters more than quantity or number of manuscripts in this discipline; more manuscripts is not automatically viewed as a prime indicator of quality since all manuscripts will not be equally important. And usually, several documents over time consistently prove to be more reliable than other documents, so comparison to other documents outside of the manuscript in question is in order. Second, by the same token, 'internal evidence' also has to be looked at including the author's normal writing style and even the kinds of mistakes that scribes or copyists usually made when they copied manuscripts. For example, Paul never mentions the term 'burn' anywhere else; rather, he consistently uses the word 'boast' in other texts. So, then, again, comparison to other texts within the same manuscript or comparable manuscripts or documents can clarify many questions in this regard (2). Much of the adverse reaction to textual criticism as one among many methodologies that can be legitimately applied in New Testament studies has been due to how it has been used by some scholars and popular media to cast doubt upon or undermine the reliability of New Testament writings (if not the entire Bible) since its inception in the Enlightenment shortly after the invention of the printing press. Even well-known scholars at that time were using textual criticism to promote Enlightenment ideals to counter both biblical and church authority over secular life such as Erasmus.

Contemporary scholars have proven themselves to be all-too-willing to use their profession in every way possible to advance secular values and to bend textual criticism to fit the cultural mandates of the times in which they live. Many scholars are very active within culture assertively and confidently using every available institutional tool at their disposal to espouse and champion their own agnostic or atheistic views perfectly in tandem with powerful cultural trends (such as Ehrman, Jenkins, Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, and even the famous wheelchair genius Hawking himself when alive), while others are relatively contemporary but championing their beliefs from the grave (Derrida, Russell, Dewey, Hume, Foucault, Sartre, Camus, Rand, Skinner, and endless others) (3). Ehrman himself has been a fixture on both traditional and social media landscapes across the world trumpeting his own "happy agnostic atheist" worldviews many times in heated debates against arguably some of the best theologians alive today such as John Lennox, N.T. Wright, Alister McGrath, and Peter Kreeft. Playing fiddle to the tune of popular culture has endeared Ehrman to the youth in that culture who are most vulnerable to the adverse effects of broader cultural trends for obvious reasons. However, the endearment received by youth in an increasingly godless America has been more than rivaled by widespread intense antagonisms in top-down scholarly and religious circles, as noted above. The essential point to notice here is that such adverse global scholarly notoriety received by a top American New Testament scholar is not exactly the ideal marketing ground for championing the strengths nor the legitimacy of *textual criticism* as a method for studying the Bible. The bulk of the adverse reaction to Ehrman's use of textual analysis to study New Testament manuscripts has more to do with provocative books and articles with provocative titles and subtitles marketed equally provocatively in order to, once again, tap into broader and powerful cultural trends. In these books and articles, he has also made many shocking statements and conclusions consonant with inflammatory statements he has made in the popular

press in world-class newspapers, televised debates, and the like. To be sure, this is not exactly the best way to market the usefulness and importance of textual criticism as a methodological technique for studying the Bible or anything else, for that matter. More about this point later. Now, beyond those already noted and discussed above, let's briefly cite some of the major strengths and weaknesses of textual criticism especially as a methodology for the study of the Bible. Then finally, we will take a look at some of the statements Ehrman has made in some of his published writings especially those which have launched him into the scholarly atmosphere of fame.

**Textual Criticism: Some Key Critical Issues:** Generally speaking, textual criticism contains many laudable strengths compared to other methodologies, not only weaknesses. Although in the restricted space of a brief essay, we cannot provide a comprehensive listing and discussion of strengths and weaknesses (which would demand a full essay in and of its own right), the attempt is to provide a brief overview. The technique itself aims to restore or reconstruct New Testament manuscripts to their original form as nearly as possible. Surely it is a laudable goal, that is, aiming to authenticate sources used to construct an original, highly significant, and culturally precious document such as the New Testament or Shakespeare's *Macbeth* or Dante's *Divine Comedy* or the *Magna Carta* or any other well-known document. However, it needs to be kept in mind that its central techniques were first conceived, developed and applied in relation to analysis of the Bible during the Enlightenment period. The secular concern was with ensuring the highest level of authenticity of what was being read. Supposedly, at that time people wanted to know that what they were reading was reliable and authentic, truthful to the perspective of the author(s) who wrote it. When people read Shakespeare, they wanted to be sure they were actually reading Shakespeare, not some forgery. So, if it could be shown or proven that what people were reading was an authentic version of the author's writings, then the reader was thought to surely benefit more from reading authentic views than unknown 'other' views on the topics discussed within that document. To a certain extent, this concern is understandable at least among the educated classes of society.

We would all like to be sure that we're actually reading Shakespeare when we are reading *Macbeth*, not some other person's rendition of *Macbeth*. Presumably, the same logic applies to the New Testament. If we read many manuscripts which purport to be Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and there are very few variants or variations between them, then we may be closer to the original Shakespeare manuscript. The greatest weakness would be inability to resolve many variants if they existed which may lead us to believe that the *Macbeth* we are currently reading in our class English Literature at university is perhaps not authentic and thoroughly unreliable. Since the foundational presumption of textual criticism is that variation or variance occurs inevitably whenever a text is transmitted from one form into another or copied from one manuscript to another, the fundamental investigative predisposition of the scholar investigator is to look for variance or textual differences. So, then, the first likelihood of error would be to over-emphasize the presence and importance of variations in text. Here the fallibility of human beings is assumed to be operating in many ways. Through distractions of conversations or local events occurring during the copying process, accidental additions or omissions from texts, grammatical or linguistic misunderstandings, lack of intimate familiarity with the language of the manuscript or the subjects discussed within it, not to mention intentional efforts to conform the meaning of statements within manuscripts to personal points of view or politically and culturally more acceptable points of view than to the views expressed in the text itself. These could be considered some of the major sources of error explaining variations between different hand-written copies of the same document. It's the textual critic's professional occupation to detect these variations as much as possible and to remove their effects upon the meaning of texts given that, in most cases, the original author's manuscript no longer exists. Instead, what exists is an artifact, not a fact, strictly speaking. All that survives is a number of textual variations, and the task at hand is for the textual critic to reduce the number of these variations to the lowest possible

denominator. All this having been said about textual criticism, we can now move forward to examine Ehrman's use of it to produce some of his most popular writings in popular and scholarly American culture.

**Textual Criticism in the Ehrman Gospel:** The intense widespread popular fervor and scholarly response to Ehrman's assertions in many books and scholarly articles as well as mass-mediated forums (televised debates, social media, and so forth) goes a long way towards providing major support for the positive link between Ehrman's use of textual criticism to arrive at conclusions time and time again consistent with his own agnostic atheistic religious views which, in turn, provide support for wider cultural trends questioning the reliability, authenticity, and authority of the Bible over human conduct. In other words, it's not by coincidence that such conclusions appear to feed secular trends that have been occurring in America especially since the 1960s, with the specific effect of advancing the de-Christianization of American culture. The point is that there is a significant American cultural link to Ehrman's New Testament studies, writings, and publications which desperately needs to be incorporated into any discussion that attempts to answer these questions as they pertain directly to changes in foundational religious beliefs: "Why Ehrman and why now in American culture?"; and "How can we explain the popular and scholarly reactions to Ehrman without taking into consideration the much broader American cultural trends over the last generation or so?" Most of all, scholars and theologians cannot talk intelligently and compellingly without introducing and properly integrating into their exegeses this American historical cultural factor. Unfortunately, as is the case elsewhere, scholars located geographically and culturally outside of developments within the American culture are all too quick to impose foreign theoretical models devoid of domestic cultural relevance and consideration to achieve an understanding of the nature of cultural events, such as the Ehrman phenomenon. In other words, they tend not to place them within the historical cultural context from which they emerged. Yet, paradoxically, the very same scholars would argue that events occurring within their own culture cannot be adequately comprehended apart from their relationship to that culture. It is with these thoughts in mind that we try to understand Ehrman's claims in some of his books.

**Leading Motifs in Some of Ehrman Writings:** Let's first look at the book that put Ehrman on the American cultural map, as it were, if not on the global academic landscape. It did so by angering not only many mainstream and especially evangelical Christian believers, but even more so many well-known not-so-evangelical scholars especially world-renowned experts and scholars from both inside and outside of expert circles in textual criticism (including his own world-renowned Ph.D. thesis advisor at Princeton), New Testament studies, and religious studies, at the very least. The fact that a few well-known evangelical scholars bitterly criticized Ehrman for selectively using textual criticism seemingly to justify his own personal agnostic atheistic perspective derived from personal experience painted a superficial impression that evangelicals were expressing opposition to the methodology of textual criticism itself and not specifically to Ehrman's religious views. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, in 2005 just after Ehrman's book was published, a blogspot was created by a few eminent evangelical scholars titled, "evangelicaltextualcriticism.com", to provide an academic forum to discuss controversial issues surrounding the source manuscripts of both the Old and the New Testaments as well as textual history from the point of view of historic evangelical theology. Now, that was in 2005, and that blogspot is still around today having grown by leaps and bounds, in addition to many other blogspots and websites dedicated to textual criticism from both within and outside of evangelical Christianity. Apparently, it turns out that evangelical Christians favor textual criticism after all, just not the value-biased Ehrman kind. Essentially, Ehrman's argument in "Misquoting Jesus" is that the ancient source manuscripts of the New Testament were copied by hand mostly on rather flimsy papyrus material and the originals were lost to time and antiquity. We don't have originals to start work with in the textual critical examination. And for nearly 1,500 years they have been copied by hand over and over again, and

in that process many errors were made. The New Testament is irremediably riddled with errors of all kinds, many of them significant, some of them intentional, some of them accidental. In his estimation, the fact that we don't have the originals and the manuscripts are riddled with scribal errors means that many widely-held Christian beliefs about the divinity of Jesus, the Trinity, and the divine inspiration believed to be the origin of the Bible, have all been intimately shaped by these scribal errors. In *Misquoting Jesus*, Ehrman demonstrates where the changes were made in the surviving manuscripts and how these changes came to be as well as why only certain manuscript versions came to be included in the canon of the New Testament. Along the way throughout the book, Ehrman explains how his study of the Greek manuscripts at Princeton compelled him to abandon once-cherished views of the Bible like the belief that it was inspired by God, for example. Throughout the book, Ehrman refers to evidence presented in an earlier book, "The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture", in which he examined how the early struggles between heretical and orthodox religious figures and groups seriously compromised the effective and accurate transmission of the source documents over which many of the conflicts were played out. His basic point in this book is that sages or scribes effectively transformed the meaning of the documents they copied. They didn't just copy word-for-word. The Ehrman message that the Bible was neither reliable nor authentic nor authoritative because scribes had intentionally or not corrupted the meaning of its narratives and texts by committing errors in all of their manuscripts, not just one or two. The extent to which this claim about the unreliability of the Bible played into the vulturous hands of leading Atheistic and Agnostic opponents to Christianity well-institutionalized in the American culture at the time goes without saying.

Even today on the largest online bookselling website in the world by far, it is highlighted that those who purchased Ehrman's *Misquoting Jesus* then as now also bought all of the books by the leading atheist authors publishing books and other writings AGAINST the Christian faith such as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, Elaine Pagels, and all of the other atheist scholars previously mentioned. Now, in cultural terms, it would be rather foolish to argue that this is simply a coincidence or a figment of our imagination. The overall agnostic atheist message of Ehrman's book(s) is being comprehended loud and clear by the atheistic community in America as well as around the world quite apart from Ehrman's stated or unstated intentions. Why wouldn't we expect agnostic and atheist scholars to read and assess Ehrman's dominant messages accurately? After all, what we're talking about here is agreement and support from the most educated and scholarly individuals within the contemporary atheistic community in America and elsewhere. Listen more attentively to Ehrman's argument here. Thesis: God inspired the original words in the source documents of the New Testament, and therefore the original words of the New Testament itself. If this is true, then God acted to protect and preserve those original words from destruction or disappearance or contamination. If indeed those original divinely-inspired words had been protected by God, then they should be available presently. However, the truth is that we don't have those original words because they were corrupted or changed by scribes in the copying process. That means that God didn't act miraculously to protect them from deletion nor corruption. Conclusion: the original words of the New Testament were not inspired by God. Now, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that this message is virtually music to an atheist's ears, to be sure! Besides feeding atheist fervor in popular American culture, there seems to be at least three misunderstandings in Ehrman's argument. First, he appears to have an extremely narrow conception of 'divine inspiration' based on perfectionistic criteria that leads him unwittingly into creating or imagining false dilemmas. He claims that the doctrine of inspiration and inerrancy is not only "irrelevant to the Bible as we have it", but "probably wrong" (p. 211), so the New Testament is not divinely inspired. If it was not divinely inspired, then the Gnostic Gospels, other writings by early Christian groups are also not divinely inspired. Therefore, they are all equally valid or invalid. There is nothing in Christianity except the plural, Christianities, not the one True Christianity, but many Christianities

that were lost. In fact, that phrase “Lost Christianities” came to be the title of one of his books afterwards. As well, since there is no one True Christianity, there is no bedrock of truth, no truth per se; rather, there is only “orthodoxy” or the power to impose truth. The overall message is that the powerful “orthodox” groups win the battle for truth and earn the right thereof to write history and to exclude, persecute, and destroy the “unorthodox” heretics. The powerful “orthodox” groups employ effective unchallenged political control in such a way that diverts the Holy Spirit from its intended function (pp. 25-6; 28-29; 33-36; 153-155). Even if this is true, does that mean that we have lost all the inspired words? Why do we need to have the standard of “100%” certitude (p. 59) in order to achieve divine inspiration? Why can't we have a reasonable degree of certitude with the help of textual criticism? Ehrman is not interested. It's either 100% correct or its irrelevant. The second misunderstanding consists of his position on the absence of God's intervention in the protection and preservation of His own inspired words. But again, the response to this position is to question the range of degree Ehrman is applying. Is it reasonable for us to expect God to 100% protect divinely-inspired words from destruction or contamination by human mistakes, human beings with free will? Should human beings expect God to protect the 100% purity of His inspired words? Perhaps through the consistent efforts of honest, hard-working textual critics, at some point God will decide to recover His words perfectly as handed down. Until that time, divinely-inspired manuscripts have entered into human history subject to some extent to the ravages of time and the imperfection of human agents. The last misunderstanding exhibited within Ehrman's perspective here is his failure to understand clear distinctions between inerrancy and infallibility. Ehrman does not provide a comprehensive detailed discussion of either one. The reader looks forward to a scholarly discussion of the differences between the merits and weaknesses of one versus the other, but no discussion is forthcoming. There seems to be only a number of statements that misunderstand or misrepresent inspirational expressions. Divine verbal inspiration of the Bible, for example, is not divinely-inspired written words of the Bible. Even divinely-inspired means something different to most Christians, evangelical or not, than what it appears to mean to Ehrman. To most Christians, it means some kind of supernatural force believed to be sourced in a deity which causes an individual or group of individuals to experience an intense creative desire. For millennia, it has been reported by the adherents of many different religions. In Christianity, it has been tied closely to the notion of ‘revelation’ or the belief that secret information is being ‘revealed’ through direct communication with a deity or another kind of supernatural entity. Interestingly, divine “inspiration” is a concept actually found in the Bible, where “infallibility” and “inerrancy” are much more recent terms not found in the Bible. Since Ehrman does not at all operationally define what he means by any of these terms as they relate to his own New Testament studies, confusion about the precise nature of these terms abounds throughout his book.

The typical low-level argument by hardcore fundamentalist Christians is that in order for the Bible to be divinely inspired, it must also be infallible. Why? Answer: It is unthinkable that a perfect God would misdirect His people away from the Truth. However, authentic infallibility can only mean 100% free of error since even the most insignificant error may result in misdirection away from God's Truth or at least to develop serious doubt about the authenticity of God's Word. To a certain extent, arguments of this kind make sense except when we are not in possession of the original manuscripts, as Ehrman argues, and the copies of manuscripts we do have contain irremediable errors. That means that no truly inerrant manuscript exists containing inerrant text, perfectly correct text. Does that mean everything in all the copies of all the manuscripts we do have in our possession are entirely fraudulently misleading? Does that mean that these manuscripts say nothing at all about the divinely-inspired Word of God? Does it mean that the Bible doesn't merit a unique place in Christian worship? Does it mean that the Bible is wholly unreliable, inauthentic, or fraudulent? Not necessarily. Since Orthodox Corruption and Misquoting Jesus, Ehrman has come out with a series of publications each one of which severely questions at least one core Christian doctrine. In Ehrman's work titled, *How Jesus Became God*,

Ehrman argues that the incarnational view of Christ was not accepted by the early Christian church. Rather, it accepted an exalted view of Jesus, Jesus as a human being exalted to an angelic God-like status, effectively denying the divine nature of Christ. The early church only came to agree to the divine nature of Christ only after a great deal of conflict and power struggles with other non-Orthodox groups. Ehrman claims that the divinity of Christ was later imposed upon Christ by His followers. Among other stupendous claims, Ehrman asserts in this book that Jesus was never buried by the Romans without ever reviewing all of the historical evidence on this point. And not once does Ehrman deal with the many references in the Synoptic Gospels, let alone statements made in John's Gospel, which suggest rather strongly that Jesus viewed Himself as divine, even by applying terms to Himself connoting divine status such as, for example, “Son of Man”. Another Ehrman book expressly attacking the Christian faith that has become immensely popular in America's increasingly liberal, secular, relativist, pluralist, and, consequently, atheistic culture now in the full throes of intense de-Christianization is titled, *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question – Why We Suffer*. Although there will be serious reservations about Ehrman's perspective in this book, surely readers will benefit greatly from his invitation to think honestly about the Bible's plurality of views on human suffering. However, says Ehrman, while the Bible expresses a great deal about human suffering, it fails to specify exactly WHY we do.

After an introductory chapter about his own “crisis of faith” sparked by unanswered questions about human suffering, Ehrman devotes each of the following chapters surveying five distinct Biblical answers to the suffering question that he has identified. He feels more comfortable with some of these answers than with others but, in the end, none of them cut the mustard, so to speak; none of them are “intellectually or morally” satisfying (p. 274). For Ehrman, the question of suffering is deeply personal because it strongly compelled him in his own life to question his faith and eventually to abandon it entirely. Therefore, suffering is not an abstract theoretical question to be analyzed and debated in some kind of emotionally detached manner. Theologians, philosophers, and other scholars who are quite content to remove the human experience of suffering that assaults their lives by analyzing it in the abstract will find little sympathy from Ehrman here, and rightfully so. This book, like all of Ehrman's books, is worth reading just on this basis alone since it directly confronts and struggles with issues of human existence such as suffering and the like as actually experienced rather than as abstract analytical exercises. In the final chapter, Ehrman makes clear his position vis-à-vis his survey of the five different Biblical positions or “answers” on human suffering, coming out in favor of the ‘mystery’ view. God Himself suffered as Christ on the cross; Ehrman's theology is a sort of theology of the cross in this sense. From his perspective, we have to try to understand human and all other types of suffering in this world through the lenses of the book of Ecclesiastes, more or less. There are simply too many things in this life within this world that humans do not now and cannot ever know for certain. A lot of what happens in our lives simply makes no sense whatsoever, and no matter what we do justice does not and will not always prevail (Bartusch, 2011). The Ecclesiastic world message comes across loud and clear; not Job, but Ecclesiastes. Sorry, but this life of mystery and uncertainty and “no sense” and “no justice” is all there is, retorts Ehrman. But that is absolutely no reason to despair, he continues. The fact that this is all there is to life should be a cause for celebration, for dreaming, for enjoyment. We should find joy in living for the moment, drink and be merry. All there is IS this life, nothing more, nothing afterwards. So, we should enjoy it to the fullest and at least try to make it a better place for ourselves and others. We should try to love life as best we can by recognizing it as “a gift” to celebrate if only for a short time. Koheleth of Ecclesiastes would surely nod in favor, or would he?. As noted above, there is a great deal to praise Ehrman about in this book, as indeed in all of his writings, although there may be serious disagreement about many of his conclusions. It is perfectly understandable why such touchy controversial issues as those he discusses would meet with considerable consternation by many readers regardless of their religious ilk. It's rather uncomfortable for

anyone to come to the conclusion that the Bible is a virtual reservoir of answers to such a central issue in human life as real suffering, let alone diehard Christian believers. Here once again Ehrman forces Readers, Christians and otherwise, to confront the central issues involved in a biblical understanding of suffering, not to mention evil. Still, he limited his survey of the Bible to where it explicitly refers to suffering as an incidence of a “type” that he constructed rather than taking an integrated wholistic biblical perspective on that issue. For example, he doesn’t really deal with certain parts of the Bible that are crucial elements of a Christian understanding of human suffering, like the Psalms. In the Psalms, readers hear the voice of great lament right in the throes of a suffering that is attributed to God or to a slew of others or simply to human failings. Although the Psalms were not supposedly written as a final word of wisdom to explain human suffering or evil afflicting human beings with pain, they do illustrate quite powerfully that the God-believer or the true Christian believer does not turn their face away from God in the suffering moments of life anymore than a child abandons a parent after harsh punishment for wrongful behavior. Not all faithful believers abandon God due to the suffering moments of their material lives. Perhaps Ehrman’s personal agnostic atheistic perspective leads him a priori to avoid dealing organically with many parts of the Bible implicitly related to the suffering question and/or to discount the importance of many theological constructions in the Bible that are related to suffering in the human condition. It’s possible that “theology” for Ehrman is wrongly equated with the Bible in a literal or fundamentalist manner of interpreting it given his early evangelical Christian training, as noted above. Under these circumstances, the Ehrman theology becomes a rude but frustrating awakening to the fact that the Bible may not contain all of the explicit answers to all of our hard questions about human life.

**Some Central Ironies:** Lastly, here it’s important to recast this critical but partial review of some of Ehrman’s best-known theological writings in terms of the central issues first raised in his *Misquoting Jesus*, lest readers lose sight of some dominant themes that don’t usually make the front-page news in American culture. With all the whiplashing excitement emerging from popular culture, it’s easy to forget that Ehrman explicitly intended that book to be an introduction to the methodology of textual criticism. However, there is no comprehensive professional scholarly review of the historical foundations of this methodology, its origins and development, its foundational philosophical assumptions, its different types, its strengths and limitations, and so forth – all this despite countless references to textual criticism cited in the book’s index. There is no sustained, objective, comprehensive, systematic presentation of textual criticism as a methodology as presented above. Rather, what we do find is a peppering of brilliant insights in relation to it that are immensely effective and helpful. As a scholar, he is an unusual brand of communicator that is easily understandable at any level. Despite all of the wonderful insights, however, even the philosophically naïve must admit that the book was not written to introduce people to the wild and wonderful world of textual criticism, as it were, a world which most of them have no comprehensive educational training to even begin to understand (let alone the required linguistic, religious, and methodological training – at the very least). The central irony about this book, therefore, is that it was not expressly written as an introduction to textual criticism. One need not only peruse other truly introductory books on this topic available in the scholarly marketplace in order to arrive at this conclusion. Ehrman himself states his intentions quite clearly from the very beginning and proliferating throughout his book. Whether intentional or not, in any case, as mentioned earlier all of the major renowned atheist scholars of the world heard his message loud and clear:

“The fact that we don’t have (God’s) 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” (p. 11)

Ehrman states he wants to pass on this message “to non-scholars, to average, normal, ordinary readers of the Bible...who...are...entitled to know...where the Bible came from...” (p. 261). Indeed, Ehrman comes across as if he has a monopoly on ‘the truth’. He may have shifted his evangelical zealotry and allegiance from the God of Christianity to the god of the secular university, but he apparently hasn’t shifted the form in which that allegiance is expressed – it’s apparently still firmly evangelical. At the very least, the cumulative cultural effect of such statements (and related pronouncements) is to discount or devalue Christian belief in the tenets and principles contained in the Bible among themselves regardless of denominational affiliation and to undermine their confidence in the New Testament itself, if not the entire Scripture. It’s important to see here that such an effect is not dependent on the intentional motivations of the author, although in this case Ehrman states his intentions quite clearly not only in *Misquoting Jesus* but also as a running theme in all of his writings. That is certainly one of the most pivotal reasons why they are so important to read, not simply for academic purposes. Well-trained methodologists and theorists would be the last to deny that such a strong ideological stance towards the existence of God doesn’t enter into every phase of Ehrman’s research and writing process from inception to published product.

Another pointed irony in Ehrman’s *Misquoting Jesus* is that the title gives the impression the book is literally bursting with various word-for-word sayings of Jesus that have been altered in some corruptible and irremediable ways by unscrupulous scribes over time. However, very little of the book is actually devoted to clear-cut statements by Jesus at all, let alone anything that have been shown to be misquoted down through the centuries by various scribes. What’s more, there are never any original manuscript texts to look at, translated or not, that would allow the reader to make their own interpretation as to the nature, origin, and development of alterations in the text. So, then, the title (and subtitle) of the book itself does not appear to accurately reflect its actual contents (Blomberg, 2006; Wallace, 2006; Roberts, 2007).

Still another huge irony derives from the considerable number of variations or “variants” that exist up-to-date among the New Testament manuscripts. At several places throughout the book, Ehrman states something to the effect that the number of differences between these many thousands of manuscripts has created such a great number of variants that “no one has yet been able to count them all” (p. 89); or “there are more variations among our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament” (p. 11, 90). Again, Ehrman doesn’t say it explicitly at these points of reference, but in light of how much time he spends on the issue of differences among manuscripts heavily underscoring the sheer size of them and in the context of associated discussions about theological implications, the implied theological message is that the reliability level of these manuscripts is untrustworthy, to say the least. Although he qualifies these implied assaults on the reliability of the manuscripts with one or two statements in the Conclusion of his book, it doesn’t mesh well with its central message import and dominant theme of the actual content of the book, implied or intended, a theme consistent throughout all of his writings. Perhaps one of the greatest ironies of Ehrman’s *Misquoting Jesus* lies in what is arguably the main point of his research for this book from a scholarly point of view, namely, that scribes or copyists substantially altered the manuscripts upon which the New Testament was founded down through the ages, purposefully, accidentally, maliciously. Time and time again, the theme of “we cannot be certain” rears its ugly head, and the heavily repeated theme of uncertainty provides fuel to conclude that we can never know for sure with 100% certainty exactly what the writers of the New Testament actually wrote. On the basis of this heavily repeated theme of uncertainty, readers might expect Ehrman to present them with dozens and dozens of examples where it is simply not known at all what the “autographs” or original texts in the original manuscripts actually said. The irony here is that, in fact, *Misquoting Jesus* is filled with professionally certified examples which provide telling evidence for exactly the opposite conclusion. Indeed, he presents many variant cases and then, in virtually every case, firmly explains what the change actually consisted of compared to what was written in the earlier manuscript, and even what probably motivated

the scribe in making that change. If the intent was to promote the reader's uncertainty about the reliability of the New Testament per the references cited earlier, the actual explanation of the variants themselves would seem to operate in the opposite direction. Further, this argument would seem to provide pretty good support for the effectiveness of the textual criticism methodology. In other words, once all of these antiquated or ancient manuscripts have been put through a very rigorous textual critical analysis, readers can know with a fairly high level of accuracy what the writers of the New Testament actually said. Perhaps this is a major reason why there are so many eminent Christians, even distinguished evangelical Christians, who are professionally committed to doing textual critical work on the Bible.

### Footnotes

Ehrman has described himself from the very beginning, and continues to do so in several different media (print, digital, television, academic, etc.) as an agnostic. Even in *Misquoting Jesus*: "I typically describe myself, now, as a happy agnostic" (p. 258), following up these comments with: "How can a good God be in charge of this world if pain and misery are so rampant?"; "I could no longer believe in God"; "I lost my faith"; and so forth. Now, if that by self-proclamation is not atheism pure and simple, then brainlessness is surely just another art form no different than clever. For this reason, many world-renowned scholars and other celebrity theologians, not to mention a plethora of not-so-celebrity ones, have noted in published scholarly books and professional journals that the central organizing principle of all Ehrman's work is precisely this self-professed agnostic atheism. Scholars would have to be either quite naïve indeed or sympathetic to the atheist cause itself in some form not to see what many other eminent theologians see clearly.

External evidence in textual criticism is when the investigating scholar looks at the evidence of each physical manuscript (called 'witness'): the date, source, and relationship to other known manuscripts (or witnesses). Internal evidence is when the investigating scholar looks at evidence that derives from the actual text itself independent of its physical features. The ultimate aim of the scholar is to construct a 'critical text' or the best approximate to what is believed to be the original manuscript.

It is important to note here that almost from the start Ehrman has been and continues to be championed and literally idolatized by pop atheistic culture and by eminent atheistic scholars and institutions in America and across the globe, although he doesn't always find 100% favor among top atheistic scholars because he doesn't always show their explicitly subversive political agenda (Price, 2018; Carrier, 2013).

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