

Distorting Jesus - Part 1

The distortion of Jesus is so commonplace today that very few people are concerned. It is simply accepted by publishers, the media, churches, and many seminaries. The truth about Jesus is being twisted, bent, warped, fabricated, tarnished and erased from the pages of history. While our Lord Jesus Christ walked this earth, He was constantly confronted by the Jewish religious leaders of His day. Most of the people praised Him, but the haters of Jesus verbally attacked Him, falsely accused Him, maligned Him in every way and eventually killed Him. However, their victory was short lived. After Jesus returned to life and then back to heaven, the apostles waged a never ending war against false doctrine and accusations about Jesus and divine truth.

When we come to the book of Acts, we find that Paul, Peter and Phillip while attempting to spread the good news about Jesus also had to deal with doctrinal errors or false teachings about Jesus. In Paul's epistles, the apostle deals with numerous false teachings about Jesus and things related to spiritual life. Unfortunately, some Christians digressed from the straight and narrow and became preoccupied with the sensational. The apostle wrote these words in I Timothy 1:3-4,

I urge you upon my departure from Macedonia, remain on an Ephesus, so that you may instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines, nor to pay attention to the myths and endless genealogies, which give rise to mere speculation, rather than gathering the administration of God, which is by faith. (NASB)

If we examine Peter's writings, we discover that he did the same thing and James and Jude did too! The apostle John warned fellow Christians to not even give a greeting or blessing to false teachers in 2 and 3 John.

If we look at the early church fathers, we discover that they dealt with heresy. False teachings and distortions related to Jesus have been an ongoing battle since the time of Jesus.

I own a book that is called "The Earliest Christian Heretics." It is authored by Arland J. Hultgren and Steven A. Haggmark. It cites eighteen heresies the early church battled. Unfortunately, we are battling some of those same heresies still today. They have been reintroduced by modern "biblical scholars."

In the last three hundred years the same problem has continued - heresy after heresy. In the last thirty to forty years, we have been seeing an intensified attack to distort what the Bible teaches about Jesus.

CURRENT VOICES OF DISTORTION. Some of those who over the last thirty to forty years are actively distorting the truth about Jesus have claimed that He tried to reveal God's feminine role. According to one writer, Jesus wanted us to understand that God had a feminine side. In order to accomplish this goal the author selectively used scriptures and stated that the church has been wrong all of these centuries.

Another recent writer wants us to understand that Jesus was nothing more than a teacher of wisdom and a social prophet. Another voice says Jesus was more than a teacher of wisdom and more than a social prophet; He was an escha-



tological prophet. Someone else declares that He was a revolutionary.

In recent years, Bart Ehrman, N. T. Wright, Elaine Pagels and Robert Funk have become notable voices espousing more of the same. But the gentleman right now who is significantly distorting the truth about Jesus and undermining the integrity of the Bible is Bart Ehrman. Therefore, the teachings of Mr. Erhman are the focus of this article.

Mr. Ehrman was born in a Christian home. He went to Moody Bible Institute for his initial Bible education. Then he went to Wheaton Bible College. Those are very credible Christian schools. Mr. Ehrman says he then went to Princeton Seminary and while there lost his faith. We should not be surprised since Princeton is no longer a citadel of the faith of Jesus and the apostles. Today, Mr. Ehrman is a nationally recognized expert in what is referred to as textual criticism.¹ The goal of textual criticism is to determine the true wording of the original manuscripts of the Old and New Testaments.

In one of Mr. Ehrman's books, he states that he lost his faith when he was studying the gospel of Mark. On another occasion, he says that he lost his faith when he was considering why evil is in the world and how a kind and loving God could allow evil and suffering to exist. The truth is Mr. Erhman never had a faith. He had a social faith. The scriptures tell us that he never lost his faith because he never had a faith in the first place. That is the message of the sower of the seed in Matthew 13:18-23. In that parable, the sower sowed the seed - the Word of God - in four soils. The first three soils do not produce fruit. On two of the soils, rocky and thorny soils, the soils respond initially but after affliction, persecution, worry, or the influences of the world, the seed withers and dies. That is, initially the seeds thrown on these soils look promising at first but eventually they die. Only the fourth soil produces fruit. It is called good soil. Mr. Erhman appears to be like the seed that fell on the soils that were not good.

Today, he's an agnostic, but he loves to study and write about the Bible. He is an agnostic writing books about the Bible. His books are being used in seminaries, colleges and taught in our churches today. By his own admission, he

speaks in churches, and congregations are listening to him and "discovering things they have never taught."

MR ERHMAN COMMENTS. Here is the audio of a video that Mr. Erhman produced.

Hi. I'm Bart Ehrman, Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina, at Chapel Hill, and author of the books, "Misquoting Jesus" and "God's Problem." I think this book is bigger than either "God's Problem" or "Misquoting Jesus." In "Misquoting Jesus," I dealt with how scribes have changed the text of the New Testament over time.

In this book, I talked about what happened before the scribes even got to the text. I talked about the original version of the New Testament and the problems that it poses. There are a large array of problems that I deal with in the book, such as the contradictions and discrepancies that you can find among the authors of the New Testament. For example, both Mark and Luke portrayed Jesus, of course, as being crucified, but his attitude toward his death differs remarkably, depending on which gospel you're looking at. In Mark's gospel, Jesus is in despair going to his death. He's silent throughout the entire proceeding, and he cries out only one thing during the entire time. He cries out, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" And he dies.

In Luke's Gospel, which was written later, Jesus is not in despair at all. Jesus is calm and in control until the very end and rather than crying out, "My God, why have You forsaken me?" He cries out, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." He's calm and in control until the very end. This isn't a discrepancy, per se. What it is, is a different perspective on who Jesus was, depending on which gospel you happen to read.

I deal with historical problems in doing what Jesus actually said and did. The historical problem of knowing how it is we got these 27 books in the first place and not some other collection of Christian writings. This is all material that scholars have been talking about for 200 years, yet oddly enough, it's material that people simply don't know about. I often get asked to give talks in churches, and one of the most frequently asked questions I get is why have I never heard this before. Well, the reason is scholars

1. Wikipedia

haven't done a very good job in communicating their information (inaudible). This book is designed to help people on all levels, whether people in the church or people on the street or anybody simply interested in the Bible to help all people understand better what scholars have been saying about the Bible for the past 200 years.²

He refers to "scholars" - what scholars have been talking about for 300 years. What he should have said is "heretics" or those who have a very low view of scripture - the Bible. The same material has also been taught by scholars who believe that the Bible is the Word of God. They have a high view of scripture, but they are not disparaging of the Bible.

THE AGENDA. It appears that Mr. Erhman is deceptive in his writings as we will soon demonstrate. The following is a quote from his book, "Jesus Interrupted"

My hunch is that the majority of students coming into their first year of seminary training do not know what to expect from courses on the Bible. These classes are only a small part of the curriculum of course. There are required courses in Church History, systematic theology, Christian education, speech, homiletics (preaching), and church administration. It's a lot to squeeze into three years, but everyone is required to take introductory and advanced courses in Biblical studies, and most students expect these courses to be taught from a more or less highest perspective showing them how, as future pastors, to take the Bible and make it applicable to people's lives and their weekly sermons.

Such students are in for a rude awakening. Mainline Protestant seminaries in this country are notorious for challenging student's cherished beliefs about the Bible, even if these cherished beliefs are simply a warm and fuzzy sense that the Bible is a wonderful guide to faith and practice and to be treated with reverence and piety. These seminaries teach serious hard-core Bible scholarship. They don't pander the piety. They are taught by scholars who are familiar with what German and English speaking scholars have been saying about the Bible for the last 300 years. They are keen to make students knowledgeable about the Bible, rather than teach what is actually in the Bible. Bible classes in seminary are

usually cut from a purely academic, historical perspective, unlike anything most first-year students expect, and unlike anything they've heard of, they've heard at home, at church, or in Sunday School.³

Mr. Erhman is a professor at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

FIRST CLAIM - DISCIPLES WERE UNEDUCATED. Mr. Erhman's claims in his writings that the Bible was not written by the disciples, but was written centuries after Jesus Christ. That is a very provocative statement. The authors were not eye witnesses at all. One of the ways he attempts to demonstrate this claim is by citing Acts 4:13. In this passage, Peter and John are standing before the Sanhedrin, and verse 13 says,

Now, as they observed the confidence of Peter and John and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus.

Bart Ehrman says Peter and John were uneducated and untrained. So, how could they write anything. How could Peter write 1 and 2 Peter? How could John write 1, 2 or 3 John, Revelation or the gospel of John. His point is that they were ignorant men. They were just peasants without any scholastic training. They were poor people. They were uneducated. They were illiterate. They were really nobody. They weren't professionals. You should not expect these men to be able to write anything such as we have in the New Testament. They could not have written any of the books in the New Testament. That's his basic point.

Matthew 4:18-21; Mark 1:14-20 and Luke 5:1-11 present a much different perspective of Peter, James and John. The gospel of Luke reveals that Peter, James and John were in business together and the gospel of Mark reveals that they had hired servants. Peter, James, and John were not poor. Mark 1:29-34 also suggests that Peter may have had a large home. In short, there is no data to indicate they were poor and consequently it is not very likely they were ignorant men

2. YouTube.com (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qADxEspNE-Q>)

3. Bart Erhman. Jesus interrupted. Harper One. 2009., pp. 3-4.

who were not able to read or write. Acts 1:15-20 reveals that Peter could read since he quotes Psalms 69:25. The early church fathers attest that Luke, a medical doctor, wrote these words.

Also consider Matthew who was a tax collector. How does a tax-collector keep records and submit reports to Roman authorities if he does not know how to read and write? In the time of Jesus he was a very successful business man. Are we to consider only computer analysts, aerospace engineers, attorneys and professors to be capable of reading and writing?

What does the passage mean when it says that they were uneducated and untrained? John 7:14-15 helps us to answer this question. This passage reveals that the Jews, an expression referring to the religious leaders, were surprised with Jesus' teaching. Here is the passage,

And when it was now the midst of the feast, Jesus went up into the temple and began to teach, and the Jews then were astonished saying, how has this man become learned, never having been educated?

The religious leaders of Jesus' day considered Jesus to be uneducated. But if we look at Luke 4:16 we discover that when Jesus returned to Nazareth sometime during His ministry, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath and read from Isaiah 61:1-2. How did Jesus do that if He was uneducated? If he could not read or write? Later in John 8:8 we are told that Jesus wrote something on the ground. These passages reveal that Jesus could read and write. Yet, He was called untrained or uneducated. Why? The answer is found in the fact that from a rabbinic viewpoint, Jesus and his disciples were not educated in one of the rabbinic schools. Consequently, they were considered to be uneducated by the religious leaders. From a rabbi's viewpoint, they were uneducated. They were untrained by rabbinic scholars.

SECOND CLAIM - THERE WERE NO EYEWITNESSES. Mr. Erhman also claims that the gospel writers were not eye witnesses. It is a fair question to ask if any of the apostles were eye witnesses, that is, had they really seen Jesus? But to conclude that none of them did by quoting a few statements

made by the early church fathers assumes that we who are living more than two millennia later and were not present know more.

Do we have any proof that the writers of the Bible actually saw, experienced and witnessed what Jesus did? And when they wrote, were they writing about things that they had seen themselves?

At first it would seem that the early church father Eusebius, who quoted the early church father Papias as stating that Matthew was an eye witness, would have put the issue to rest. Here is Papias' statement,

*Matthew put together the oracles [of the Lord] in the Hebrew language, and each one interpreted them as best he could.*⁴

*Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome and laying the foundations of the church.*⁵

But Mr. Ehrman and others believe that the early church father Papias is not accurate since he states that Matthew wrote the gospel of Matthew in the Hebrew tongue. Mr. Erhman claims that Papias is inaccurate because the existing copies of Matthew are not written in Hebrew but in Greek. Therefore, Mr. Erhman concludes that we cannot trust his statement that Matthew was an eye witness.

Unfortunately, Mr. Erhman has committed several serious errors. First, Mr. Erhman was not present when Papias wrote his document. Maybe Papias is correct and Mr. Erhman is wrong. Maybe Matthew wrote his gospel in Hebrew and it was later translated into Greek with the Hebrew copies having been lost. Today, most biblical scholars believe that none of the original documents are in our possession and all that we have are copies. So we should not be surprised that we do possess the original documents. Second, to conclude that Papias made one mistake and therefore, he is not trustworthy in all of his other statements is illogical. Since when do writers produce flawless works? Shall we discount entire books because of one mistake? Shall we dismiss Papias' work

4. Eusebius. Ecclesiastical History, 3.39

5. Eusebius. Against Heresies, 3.1.1

if he did in fact make a mistake? Annually, it is reported that school textbooks are filled with errors.⁶ Since this is a known fact, should we eliminate all textbooks? These are not casual authors but writers of school textbooks. Yet, in spite of errors they are commonly used by schools of lower and higher education. One error does not mean that all other statements in the textbook are wrong. If one assumes that Papias was wrong that Matthew was written in Hebrew, that does not logically imply that we should conclude that Papias was in error when he said Matthew wrote the gospel of Hebrew.

Dr. Richard Buckham, professor of New Testament studies and Bishop Wardlaw Professor at the University of St. Andrew, Scotland, and a fellow of both the British Academy and the Royal Society of Edinburgh provides a different conclusion when he states,

In the case of Matthew's Gospel, Matthew himself wrote in Aramaic or Hebrew (herbraidi dialecto could be either) and others translated into Greek.⁷

Mr. Erhman has revealed his bias. He does not appear to want a logical discussion. He wants to distort the Bible and Jesus.

To be continued next month . . .

6. DallasNews (<http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/news/texasouthwest/stories/111607dntextbooks.268c6c7.html>)

7. Richard Bauckham. Jesus and The Eyewitnesses. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006. p. 223.