

# Straight Bible Talk

Manchester Church of Christ, Share Christ's Love and Share His Message

## The Book

April, 2008

Volume 3 Issue 4

Perhaps you may be from another planet and are not familiar with the devotion that some of us earthlings have to a particular book. We call this book, "The Bible," which comes from a Greek word that means, (you guessed it) "book."

Now I am not saying that all of us are equally devoted to this book. In fact one might make a case that none of us are truly devoted to this book. I say this because this book makes what many would consider to be rather extravagant demands on us humans. Some would say that it is impossible to do everything right as this book, the Bible, defines right.

Nevertheless, there are a lot of us who at least give some kind of "lip service" to following the teachings that are found in this book. Our response would be something like "do as I say, not as I do." (I am not advocating this as a principle. Just explaining what many Christians do!)

If there are people who are "for" the Bible, then you can be certain that there are others who are equally "against" it. One of the strange things about this for and against is that church affiliation, or lack of it, seems to have no affect on the position a person takes. Some of the most rabid opponents of the Bible have come from the ranks of those who are church leaders! "Reverends," priests and rabbis have led the attacks on the Bible. Meanwhile atheists have sat by and watched with glee, applauding those who were striving to destroy confidence in the book that supplies evidence for Christian faith.

The success of the attackers may be seen in the popularity of such views as, "it does

not matter what you believe," "one religion is as good as another," "we ought to be tolerant (accept) all religions as equally valid paths to heaven" (even when the religion does not believe in the Christian view of heaven).

Bart Ehrman wrote a book with the title, "Misquoting Jesus," and a subtitle, "The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why." With such a title, it is not at all strange that the front cover would proudly announce, "New York Times Bestseller!"

It seems as though if someone writes a book in favor of the Bible, it languishes on the back shelves of bookstores, gathering dust (or perhaps not published at all.). If one writes an attack on the Bible, people rush out to get it immediately.

Ehrman's book is filled with factual errors, opinions masquerading as facts and conclusions unsupported by the evidence. One has to wonder whether the editor at HarperCollins slept while reading the draft copy.

The writer asserts that the Gospel of John differs from the other Gospels because it contains no parables from Jesus. Nave's Topical Bible (a standard reference book for Christians for over 100 years) lists two parables of Jesus in John. In chapter 10 is found the parable of the good shepherd and in chapter 15 is found the parable of the vine. That is clear evidence of a factual error.

I fail to see the importance of including or excluding parables. If John chose to write about Jesus without relating any

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Sun Worship—10 AM  
Sun Eve Worship—6:00 PM  
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"Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead."

Acts 17:31

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parables, would that change our minds about John's conclusion. John's conclusion is that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." Yet it is strange that someone with the purported scholarly credentials of Ehrman could make such a simple mistake to assert that John contains no parables.

One is hard put to explain how someone with such sterling credentials could make such a silly mistake. It would seem that he has either not read the gospel of John, or, he does not recognize a parable. Perhaps there is another explanation, but it escapes me as to what it might be.

Yes, Jesus told parables. That is one of his methods of teaching. What Jesus taught is important. I fail to see where his **manner** of teaching might change that understanding.

Ehrman tells us that "it has been clear to most scholars since the nineteenth century that Mark was the first Gospel written, and that Matthew and Luke both used Mark as one of the sources for their stories about Jesus." He then made the claim "that Luke changed the tradition he inherited." "The idea that Luke changed the text before him—in this case the Gospel of Mark—does not put him in a unique situation among the early Christian authors. This, in fact, is what all the writers of the New Testament did."

It is hard to know where to begin in wading through this statement. Let us begin with his statement about "most scholars." This is "code" for "I have more guys on my side than you have on yours, ha, ha." Does anyone actually believe that he has polled all the scholars and counted the ones for and against his theory. And what exactly makes one a "scholar?"

History is littered with the debris of failed theories that were believed by "most" scholars. Consider the theory that the earth is the center of our solar system and the abuse that was heaped on Galileo when he dissented. In fact it was the religious scholars who thought they had a corner on understanding the Bible who stood against him.

The existence of an oral tradition could as readily explain the similarities between Matthew, Mark and Luke as the theory that Matthew and Luke borrowed from Mark. The power of oral tradition to accurately transmit history has been adequately demonstrated by others (for example, Alex Haley in "Roots"). Because there were multiple witnesses chosen by Jesus could account for the circulation of stories that differed in some details. There also could have been stories that were similar, but based on different incidents (for example, "the rich young ruler" where none of the accounts uses all three of the words, rich, young and ruler). There all sorts of explanations for the differences and similarities between Luke and Mark without resorting to the charge, "Luke changed Mark."

Did Luke change what Mark wrote? Consider what Luke, himself, tells us. "Inasmuch as many have undertaken to

compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught."

One ought to at least allow Luke to speak in his own defense. He claims to write the exact truth about Jesus. While Luke tells us things that are not in Mark and omits things that Mark includes that does not logically lead to the conclusion that Luke changed Mark. Where I grew up we called that "hogwash." Now "hogwash" passes for scholarship!

To assert that all the writers of the New Testament changed some pre-existing text is such a blatant assumption that it is incredible that anyone could believe such. Yet Ehrman states it as fact without ever having seen the texts that were supposedly changed. He has not seen those texts because they only exist in his imagination!

Many "scholars" refer to a document that they have labeled "Q." This document is claimed to be some sort of summary of the teaching of Jesus. The document has never been found yet these "scholars" refer often to it in explaining the origin of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Another "scholar" refers to "Q" as "really nothing more than a literary device to designate non-Markan materials common to both Luke and Matthew." So much for the existence for any "Q." One has to wonder what the "scholarly" community thinks of one of their own who dismisses their pet theory of "Q" as a fiction of the imagination.

Christians, for hundreds of years, have suggested another possibility for all of the New Testament. They have claimed the Holy Spirit as the source of the teachings of Jesus. This claim is based on several passages in the Bible. For example there is this passage from the gospel of John: "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you." Ehrman does not even consider that this might be true. He does not consider this passage, or many other such passages, at all. If he had considered this possibility he would have to have written a different book.

Long ago, the "scholars" decided that there was no such thing as inspiration, in the sense that God was the author of the Bible. They decided that miracles could not have happened. They decided that foretelling the future under the inspiration of God was impossible.

They then set about explaining the Bible on the basis of these presuppositions. Ehrman's book is one such result.

Ehrman has also drawn conclusions that contradict the evidence. One such example comes from his citation of the manuscript evidence for Mark 1:41.

Surviving manuscripts describe Jesus in two different ways. Some manuscripts describe Jesus as having compassion on the leper. Other manuscripts describe Jesus as angry. Ehrman shows us that the pagan view of God was that God could not be angry because that would be a vice. He then argues that some copyist has changed the passage so that Jesus would not appear to be angry. Since Jesus is often said to have had compassion, that, supposedly, provided the amending copyist a ready alternative to insert in the text.

There are three major problems with Ehrman's analysis. First, the copyist did not amend the text of Mark 3:5 where Jesus is again said to be angry. There exists no manuscript evidence for any other reading in Mark 3:5. There remains, then, in the gospel of Mark a need to explain the anger of Jesus which has not been resolved by the "change" in chapter one. Second, the God of the Bible is often described as angry as any reading of the Old Testament will quickly show. And, third, other scholars are not convinced that the change was from anger to compassion so they have retained the reading of compassion as most likely the original. Thus some copyist must have changed compassion to anger.

Ehrman's obsession with this passage shows that he is grasping at straws in his attempt to show that there are significant issues involved in the variations among manuscripts. Even if his analysis were correct, our view of Jesus would not be changed because of what remains in chapter three. Our conclusion is that if this is his best shot at destroying our confidence in the text of the New Testament, then we have nothing to fear from the "scholars."

There are simple explanations as to why Jesus was angry on this occasion. Or, one might simply shrug one's shoulders and admit that one does not understand, and go on reading. Regardless of what scholars may conclude about Mark 1:41, we may continue to believe in a Jesus who may sometimes show compassion and a Jesus who may sometimes be angry. It is difficult to see how this passage (or any other that Ehrman cites) could cause one to move from a convicted believer to an agnostic as Ehrman has done.

Generally speaking, no one moves from believer to agnostic in one step. Change usually comes slowly and involves a lot of little things that accumulate over time. It would seem that a person moves from looking for reasons to believe to looking for reasons not to believe.

When one closes one's mind in either direction, then the outcome becomes certain.

It is not my intention here to answer every objection to the Bible. It has been my intention to consider the objections of one (Ehrman) who says that we cannot know that we have the text as it was originally written for the New Testament. He has failed miserably in his attempt.

Others have noted that there are thousands of variations in the text of the New Testament. Most of these involve simple matters like spelling and word order and other things of little or no consequence. I have seen no one successfully contend that there are variations that affect essential doctrines of the New Testament.

### **A Simple Explanation**

The doctrines of the New Testament are rather simple. They consist of ideas that are repeated over and over again. A change that affects something at one point will easily be corrected by many other passages that teach the true doctrine. The ideas that God wants us to understand do not require a training in theology in order to comprehend. They are simple enough that a child can understand, believe and live a life that is pleasing to God.

Consider, for example, an objection made by Ehrman and others that the New Testament writers invented stories about Jesus so that he would appear to fulfill prophecies from the Old Testament. My question would be, "why bother?" If Jesus did not fulfill Old Testament prophecy then why invent a Jesus who did? Of course, the simple answer is that he did fulfill Old Testament prophecy and the New Testament writers simply record that fact.

Consider this: which idea is easier to believe? The New Testament writers describe a Jesus predicted by Old Testament prophecy, or, they made up a Jesus who fulfilled Old Testament prophecy and then gave their lives for this imaginary Jesus whom they had made up!

We could continue to come up with objections to the New Testament that might seem valid to many. The only problem with all of these objections is that there is no evidence to support them. As long as we do not have to prove that our objections are true, then they look good to many people.

There are two differing views of the Bible held by those who claim to be Christians in some way or another. One view is that the Bible contains the word of God. In other words one might come to believe in God and know God from what's in the Bible. The other views the Bible as the very Word of God. It not

only contains the word of God but it is, in fact, the very Word of God.

There are numerous claims by writers of the Bible that what they were writing was God's Word. For example, Ezekiel makes the claim over and over in words such as, "The word of the Lord came to me." Another example comes from Moses in the passage that describes God speaking to the people of Israel at Mount Sinai. In other words the Ten Commandments came from God.

Here are some examples from the apostle Paul. "For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. Here's another, "if anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let them recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment."

Here's an interesting quotation from the letter of Jude, "Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints." Jude obviously wrote from a conviction that there was a body of truth to which Christians subscribed. As far as Jude knew there seems to have been no confusion about what they ought to believe. It was "once for all delivered to the saints."

Consider these two statements from Peter and Paul about the Old Testament. "But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteous-

Whatever we might say about people today, the writers of the Bible believed that God spoke to people. They believed in the Old Testament that God was speaking to them. And, the writers of the New Testament labored under that same understanding that God indeed speaks through men whom he has chosen.

Consider these truths from the Bible. The Old Testament teaches us that from the beginning God has required a sacrifice for atonement. Whether it is in the sacrifices of Cain and Abel, or the sacrifice of Noah, or the sacrifices of Abraham and his descendants, sacrifice has always been a part of God's plan.

The idea that someone would die for the sins of others was predicted by God in the Old Testament. Isaiah wrote about Jesus 700 years before he was born here is what he said, "But the Lord was pleased to crush him, putting him to grief; if he would render himself as a guilt offering, he will see his offspring, he will prolong his days, and the good pleasure of the Lord will prosper in his hand. As a result of the anguish of his soul he will see it and be satisfied; by his knowledge the righteous one, my servant, will justify the many, as he will bear their iniquities."

Jesus, then, became the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world in fulfillment of prophecy. The apostles preached that Jesus had died in fulfillment of prophecy. Those who believed were baptized and forgiven for their sins. Thus it was believed in the first century. Thus it was written in the Bible. Thus we believe now.

### Conclusion

The Bible is God's book. He is responsible for its contents. He is responsible for its preservation. We believe because of what God has caused to be written by those men whom he chose. Amen!

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