As you know, books on controversial topics get reviewed by all sorts of readers; some reviews are glowing and others are, well, nasty. About a month or so ago several reader sent me an online review of my book Heaven and Hell on patheos.com (check it out: it’s a website dealing with issues connected with religious faith) by Randy Alcorn, a prominent evangelical author with a high public profile, who has written a number of books about Heaven from his faith perspective.

You can check him out online:

Randy Alcorn is the founder and director of Eternal Perspective Ministries (EPM) and the author of more than 55 books, including Heaven and If God Is Good: Faith in the Midst of Suffering and Evil. More than 11 million copies of his books have been sold. They’ve also been translated into 70 languages.

Randy’s review was, shall we say, of the harsh variety. But now that I’m getting older and the body-joints aren’t working as well as in the days of my youth, my knee doesn’t seem to jerk as much as it used to when reviewers object to my work, and rather than erupting into a fit of cursing rage and firing off a nasty email telling the reviewer they don’t have a clue what they’re talking about, I tend to sit back and say, “Huh!”

So I decided to write Randy, whom I’ve never met and really didn’t know much about (I’m not in those circles any more, as you may have noticed), and ask if he’d be willing to have me post his review on the blog, so that blog readers might see a very different view of the issues I discuss. We ended up having a very pleasant email exchange over a period of weeks. When it comes to matters of religious faith, understanding the Bible, social and political issues, or, well, the nature of the universe and reality more broadly, we have very firm disagreements, to put the matter rather mildly. But it’s possible to have these without going for each other’s throats, and I’m finding as I enter into maturity that it’s better just to have civil disagreements. I’ve never yet changed anyone’s mind by hitting them with a sledge hammer.

In any event, Randy was indeed willing for me to post his review. So here it is. You can probably figure out places where I disagree, sometimes rather vigorously. And you will certainly know the places where you do. It may be that, down the line, Randy and I will have an actual back and forth on the blog about some of these issues. But for now, here it is.

Randy has graciously agreed to address your comments and questions. TWO requirements. First, in your comment, if you are wanting a response, PLEASE indicate if you are asking him or me. Either of us will be free to respond, but if your comment/question is in particular for one of us to address, let us know. Second, as always on this blog, even where you disagree with one of us, please be respectful. As I always urge, let’s pretend we’re not on the internet here.....
Bart Ehrman is professor of religious studies at University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. He also teaches eight of The Great Courses’ widely acclaimed Bible and Christianity classes and has a part in 78 others. The subtitles of Ehrman’s books, including his five New York Times bestsellers, capture his premises: e.g., *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*, *How Jesus Became God: the Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee*, and *Forged: Writing in the Name of God—Why the Bible’s Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are*.

False teachers influence the church from both inside and outside, but outsiders gain special credibility when they are former insiders (cf. 2 Tim. 4:3–4). In this era of escalating deconversions, #exvangelicals, and the “Dones” (with church), Ehrman is a major instrument in countless readers’ downward spiritual trajectory.

**Same Message, New Focus**

Whenever I read an Ehrman book, déjà vu kicks in. His core message is always: “Christians are dead wrong; I know because I used to be one before I became enlightened.” Each of Ehrman’s books deals with something else Christians are wrong about; and his newest, *Heaven and Hell: A History of the Afterlife*, is another volume in his expanding canon of deconversion doctrine.

Ehrman speaks with the authoritative tone of a historian-philosopher, a wise sage, unfolding humanity’s preoccupation with death and the fear of death. Beginning with the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, he then examines Homer, Virgil, Plato, and other ancients. Along the way he interjects his belief that there’s no need to fear death, since it’s simply ceasing to exist (the very thing many people fear).
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Arriving at the Bible, simply one more myth to Ehrman, he presents what he calls the “older Hebrew view” that death is the final end, followed by nonexistence. He then addresses the “later Hebrew position” on resurrection and Judgment Day from the intertestamental era.

While he says little to refute pre-Christian views, once Ehrman gets to the historic Christian view of the afterlife, he conducts an all-out verbal siege. But he doesn’t rant and rave; he calmly presents his assertions, such as that Jesus and Paul disagreed on much, including the way of salvation, but shared a disbelief in an eternal hell. He says both of them, and the author of Revelation (whom he’s certain wasn’t the apostle John), taught annihilationism. He simply ignores or reinterprets passages to the contrary (e.g. Isa. 66:24; Dan. 12:2; Matt. 25:41, 46; Mark 9:43, 48; 2 Thess. 1:9; Jude 7, 13; Rev. 14:9–11; 20:10, 14–15).

Interestingly, though Ehrman doesn’t believe there is a heaven, he leaves room for its possibility:

I certainly don’t think the notion of a happy afterlife is as irrational as the fires of hell; at least it does not contradict the notion of a benevolent creative force behind the universe. So I’m completely open to the idea and deep down even hopeful about it. But I have to say that at the end of the day I really don’t believe it either. (294)

However, Ehrman is certain he isn’t wrong about hell:

Are we really to think that God is some kind of transcendent sadist intent on torturing people (or at least willing to allow them to be tortured) for all eternity, a divine being infinitely more vengeful than anyone who has ever existed? (293–94)

At the end of the book Ehrman quotes from ex-evangelical Rob Bell:

In [universalism], the love of God knows no bounds and cannot be overcome. . . . In the words of one modern Christian author, once himself a committed evangelical with a passion for the biblical witness, in the end “Love Wins.”

Ehrman seems to offer universalism as a backup position to his naturalistic worldview. He’s saying, “I don’t believe in an afterlife, but if there is one then everyone will be in heaven.”

He goes on to essentially applaud the rise of universalism in Christian churches: “Harkening back to Origen, and Paul before him, these committed believers maintain that in the end no one will be able to resist the love of God. . . . [E]veryone will be saved.”

**Opinion Isn’t Proof**

I admire Ehrman’s skill as a persuasive communicator. Were he a lawyer he could take
either side in any case and would likely persuade the jury. (Hence the vulnerability of uninformed Christians who read his books.) Yet Ehrman frequently states what he believes as if opinion constitutes proof. For instance, he emphatically says, “There was a time in human history when no one on the planet believed that there would be a judgment day at the end of time” (8). Really? No one? Does he have private access to an ancient poll taken of every living person?

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Ehrman, after denying the Old Testament ever speaks of resurrection, explains in a footnote:

Some readers may wonder why I am not contrasting this view of Job with the famous passage of Job 19:25–26: “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God” (ESV).

Ehrman negates Job by citing a Jewish scholar who says, “The text has been garbled and we cannot tell exactly what Job intended to say.” This scholar adds, “Job is almost certainly not talking about seeing God in the afterlife.”

I consulted 12 major translations by different teams of Hebrew scholars, some of whom don’t hold to biblical inerrancy. Their translations contain only minor differences. All of them suggest Job is indeed speaking of seeing God in the afterlife.

This is just one example of Ehrman’s practice of either: (1) inaccurately conveying what the Bible says; (2) accurately conveying what the Bible says, then declaring it’s wrong; (3) arguing the text really doesn’t say what Christians believe it says (why does that matter if what it really says is also wrong?); and (4) citing Scripture in support of his contentions, even though he regularly dismisses Scripture’s validity.

When researching my book Heaven, I read more than 150 books on the subject, including many I disagreed with. And, in reading Ehrman’s book, I saw no evidence that he had read a single evangelical book on heaven, though he did manage to cite one on hell (containing arguments for annihilationism and universalism). While his footnotes reflect extensive research in ancient Greek texts, he seems largely unaware of what the Bible or evangelical Christians claim about heaven—the new earth. He refers to Revelation 21:1, and recognizes the teaching of bodily resurrection, yet doesn’t develop what the Bible teaches about the eternal dwelling place of God’s people.

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With a few exceptions when he admits he’s not certain, I’m struck by Ehrman’s usual unswerving confidence that he is 100 percent right. He is, just like evangelicals, relying on an ultimate authority—but instead of the Bible, it’s his own intellect.

Apostle of Deconversion

As he does in most of his books, Ehrman seeks to build credibility by sharing his testimony of conversion to unbelief. He professed faith at age 15 at Youth for Christ, then attended Moody Bible Institute and Wheaton College. He was a card-carrying evangelical. His exodus from evangelicalism began when he went to Princeton Seminary, where he lost his faith in the Bible and Jesus:

[At Princeton] my scholarship led me to realize that the Bible was a very human book, with human mistakes and biases and culturally conditioned views in it. And realizing that made me begin to wonder if the beliefs in God and Christ I had held and urged on others were themselves partially biased, culturally conditioned, or even mistaken.

These doubts disturbed me not only because I wanted very much to know the Truth but also because I was afraid of the possible eternal consequences of getting it wrong. . . . What if I ended up no longer believing and then realized too late that my unfaithful change of heart had all been a huge blunder?

Ehrman appears to believe his studies at Princeton were guided by objective truth and his rejection of the Christian worldview was a courageous submission to this truth.

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He claims, “In this book I will not be urging you either to believe or disbelieve in the existence of heaven and hell.” No reader could imagine Ehrman is urging belief in heaven or hell. But it seems intellectually dishonest to say he isn’t encouraging disbelief in them. Arguably that is a central purpose of the book.

In fact, to understand Heaven and Hell and Ehrman’s other writings, we must grasp that his deconversion redirected, rather than removed, his evangelistic zeal. Many people have quietly lost their faith, but Ehrman didn’t go gently into the night. Instead, he has become an eloquent apostle of deconversion, and his disciples are many.

While critics of the faith come and go, I regard Ehrman as one of the most significant modern opponents to the Christian faith. He’s a secular prophet to certain evangelical and ex-evangelical readers.

**Call to Hold Fast**

I feel sorry for Bart Ehrman, but I’m even more saddened at the harm done to those who embrace his teachings. We who believe the Bible must recognize this is about our adversary, Satan, who comes to destroy and devours people through persuasive arguments, and who when he lies, “speaks his native language” (John 8:44, NIV).

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In a time when “everyone has a story,” people listen to stories without discernment. The personal testimony historically has been used by faith-affirmers to reach the lost. Now it has become a tool of faith-deniers to reach the found.

There are still wonderful conversion stories, and we should tell them. But we should also teach our children to cultivate their intellects and equip them to refute falsehood. And we should demonstrate the transcendent vibrancy of a generous, Christ-centered, and people-loving life, enlightened by the authentic God-man Jesus, full of grace and truth.

Finally, as we call on God to do the miraculous work of conversion in people’s lives, we “must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that [we] can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it” (Titus 1:9).
Did Jesus Favor Armed Rebellion Against Rome?