Misquoting Jesus is my most widely read book. And I continue to be a bit amazed and dismayed at how widely it is misunderstood. The book was meant to deal with one very specific issue connected with the New Testament, and people who have read it – let alone the people who have not – often assume it’s about some *other* issue, or rather, some other very broad issue, normally something that it is decidedly not about.

One of the problems is that people who are specialists in a field make very fine distinctions that seem absolutely OBVIOUS to them, when the distinctions are very fuzzy indeed to anyone who is an outsider. It’s true of every field of expertise. When a scholar of medieval English literature whom I know very well is at a cocktail party with non-academics, she will frequently talk to people who, to keep the conversation going, ask about anything from the life of Charlemagne to, say, Beowulf, on the assumption that those are what her research is about. Uh, no. When last week I made the mistake of asking a friend of mine who is a condensed matter physicist a question about the Big Bang, she was slightly offended (I suspected) and politely told me that it would be like someone asking *me* about a particular aspect of Shinto in Japan. OK, fair enough.

So, with respect to Misquoting Jesus, let me say this, just to make sure we are on the same page: it is *not* about how the New Testament is full of contradictions, or about the Gospel writers living so many years after Jesus and basing their accounts on oral traditions that were often unreliable hearsay, or about how there are other Gospels that didn’t make it into the New Testament, or about how doctrines Christians believe today cannot be found in the Bible.

These are all highly important issues. And other books I’ve written do deal with them. But each of these books (say, Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium; or Jesus Interrupted; or How Jesus Became God; or Forged) also deal with specific issues, not the same issue. Otherwise I’d just be writing the same book over and over again. Some people seem to think I do, but, well, no. These books are about different things.

OK, then. So what *is* Misquoting Jesus about? It is about...

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It is about how Christian scribes of the second to fourth Christian centuries copied the texts of New Testament, sometimes changing them (by accident or on purpose) so that they ended up saying something other than what they originally said. As a result, there are passages that we read today that are not worded exactly as the authors wrote them.

Those points are COMPLETELY non-controversial among scholars (even though the book stirred up a hornet’s nest among conservative scholars, about which I’ll say something more below). They are simply factually true. What makes them *interesting* is that almost no one outside the realm of scholars seemed to have been aware of them. And for a lot of people that ended up mattering. How can we say that the Bible contains the very words of God if there are places where we don’t know what those words *are*? Let me stress: that question is not an answer. It is a question. And it’s one that people have to figure out for
themselves. But to do so, they need to know the facts.

Facts do matter, even though a frightening number of people seem to disagree. In these days, I think most people are realizing that, well, sometimes maybe it is important for people to get facts right. If we get facts about viruses wrong, we are sunk. But even when facts are not matters of life and death, they matter. In the world of religion, they matter for how we make sense of life, how we come to grips with death, how we conduct ourselves, how we want others to conduct themselves, and what kinds of social and political policies we support, endorse, and implement, affecting both our national lives and our international involvements, everything from reproductive rights, racial and sexual discrimination, climate change, immigration policy, international relations, etc. etc. etc.

OK, that’s far afield from Misquoting Jesus. Or is it? The ultimate importance of my book is that it shows that deciding what to believe based on what the very words of what the Bible says – as fundamentalists do, and as politicians and drivers of social policy do when it happens to be convenient to them – is that we may not in some places actually have the actual words.

I am *not* saying that “we have no idea what the authors of the New Testament wrote.” I’ve never said that. The book doesn’t say that. The book is not attacking the Bible and it is not a wild claim that we have no clues about what Jesus and his followers and the later writers of the New Testament thought and said. We do indeed have clues. In most cases we have pretty good ideas.

So why does it matter, “for the bigger picture,” if scribes changed their manuscripts? Because it is one way out of many to show that the Bible people read and randomly cite by cherry picking verses here and there and there is not a perfect book handed to us by God. In other words, it is one opening among many that was/is meant to take people down the path of critical inquiry into the Bible, to show that you can’t blindly “follow” the Bible.

And once you start taking that path, if you are sincere and honest and truth-seeking – there is no turning back. Only after you start going down it do you start to realize that there are *other* even more significant problems with the Bible. Only when you look into these *other* problems do you start to realize that in fact it has contradictions, all over the map; and historical mistakes; and geographical errors; and legends; and myths. You start to realize that we don’t have eyewitness accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus’ (let alone of Moses’!) life and that the accounts we are at odds with each other. And that our sources for Jesus are decades after the fact and are not always reliable.

I stress: those are NOT views I try do demonstrate, or actually even deal with, in Misquoting Jesus! Seriously. Not at all.

In other words, I meant for the book to be an *entry-way* into asking questions about the New Testament. But instead people – both fans and critics – have often taken it as a description of the *outcome* of taking the path, a kind of statement that we can now throw the Bible away. It is not that. The book deals with one very specific issue of a much bigger picture: how did scribes who copied the texts of the New Testament in the centuries after it was written change it?

That seems like a terribly uninteresting question to pursue. Who *cares* what later scribes did when they were copying the Gospel of Mark? Aren’t we more interested in the Gospel of Mark? Or rather, with whether it gives us solid information on what Jesus said and did?
Yes, most people are more interested in that. I know I myself am! And the fact that the question of how reliable the *copies* of Mark are seems so much less interesting explains why no one ever bothered to write a book like this for layfolk before (though books like that for scholars have been around for over three centuries). And why I was reluctant to write the book in the first place.

But I’ve always thought that even though it’s not THE most important issue in the study of the New Testament, it really is important. And people should see why. So I wrote the book trying to explain why it matters. I really didn’t think anything I said in the book was particularly controversial. Here’s a strange phenomenon: as I said earlier, the book stirred up a hornet’s nest in some circles. There were four books written directly to oppose it (four that I know of; all by fundamentalists or conservative evangelical Christians) and lots more books that deal with it at length in the context of other attempts to “defend the faith.” Yet, so far as I know, among all the critics I’ve had, none of them has ever pointed to a single statement in the book that was actually *wrong*. Why doesn’t that give people pause?

More on that in the next post, where I will summarize what the book actually says – information that may indeed be controversial among people who have never heard such things before, but really are, so far as I know, simply factual information.