

In three days we will hit the seventh-year anniversary of the blog. I thought it would be fun (for me) to look at the earliest posts. Here is the very first one, from April 3, 2012 (I've edited it a bit to tone down the rhetoric; I was a bit more hot-headed in those days!) It's about one of the most interesting and hotly disputed topics I've dealt with throughout my career.

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Probably more than any of my other books, [Misquoting Jesus](#) provoked a loud and extensive critique from scholars - almost exclusively among evangelical Christians, who appear to have thought that if readers were "led astray" by my claims in the book they might be in danger of losing their faith or (almost worse!) changing what they believed so that they would no longer be evangelical.

I'm not so sure there is really much danger in presenting widely held scholarship to a lay-readership, and so I was a bit surprised at the vitriol I received at the hands of some of my evangelical critics. There were four books written to refute my discussion: (1) Dillon Burroughs, [Misquotes in Misquoting Jesus: Why You Can Still Believe](#); (2) Timothy Paul Jones, [Misquoting Truth: A Guide to the Fallacies of Bart Ehrman's "Misquoting Jesus"](#); (3) Nicholas Perrin, [Lost In Transmission?: What We Can Know About the Words of Jesus](#); and (4) Gregory Koukl, [Misquoting Jesus? Answering Bart Ehrman](#).

In addition, there were scores of blogs and various Internet postings taking on me and my views, some frontal assaults by New Testament scholars who are not credentialed in the field of textual criticism, some of whom produced such long-winded responses that to give a fair representation of their "points" would take another major book!

But there are a few claims that my critics have been made that seem to me to be worth addressing, and if any readers know of any in particular that they would like me to answer, I will be more than happy to do so. Just let me know!

One common claim made by my evangelical detractors is that despite the fact that there are hundreds of thousands of differences among our surviving manuscripts of the New Testament (and that no one of these manuscripts is the "original" or an "accurate copy of the original") NONE of these differences affect "any cardinal doctrine" (as Dan Wallace has been fond of saying). Here is one such statement by Ben Witherington, in his provocatively entitled response "[Misanalyzing Text Criticism](#)."

*It is simply not the case that any significant theological truth is at issue with the textual variants that Ehrman wants to make much of. As I remember Bruce Metzger saying once (who trained both Bart and myself in these matters) over 90% of the NT is rather well established in regard to its original text, and none of the remaining 10% provides us with data that could lead to any shocking revisions of the Christian credo or doctrine. It is at the very least disingenuous to suggest it does, if not deliberately provocative to say otherwise.*

I have lots of things to say about this critique. To begin with, let's be clear (I don't mean this as an attack, but I'm just stating what I think are the facts): when Ben indicates that both he and I were trained in textual criticism by Bruce Metzger, I'm not completely sure what he means. Prof. Metzger taught at Princeton Theological Seminary his entire career. I went to PTS to study with him, worked three years taking all of his classes as a master's student,

wrote a master's thesis under his direction, stayed on to do a PhD under his direction (I was his final doctoral student), and wrote my PhD dissertation under him. Altogether I worked with him for seven years - and after that he hired me to work with him for the New Revised Standard Version translation of the Bible, another two years. I honestly don't know when Ben studied with him, since Ben did not study at PTS. Maybe he took a summer school course once?

In any event, I find Ben's argument that there is no "significant theological truth" at stake in any of the variant readings of the New Testament to be problematic for a number of reasons:

- I never claimed in my book (or elsewhere) that there were theological truths at stake. What I argued is that textual variants affect theologically important passages of the New Testament. Surely a careful reader - Ben prides himself on being a careful reader - realizes that is a different matter altogether.
- The reason "theological truths" are not "at stake" in any of the textual variations I discuss is because theologians, or even theologically interested interpreters like Ben, never, ever, develop their "theological truths" on the basis of any one passage of the Bible. You can take away this passage or that passage, and they will still find ways to find their "truths" in Scripture. Scripture is great that way: it opens itself up to all kinds of theological speculation. If theologians can find the Trinity in Genesis chapter 1 (they can! You can find anything if you look hard enough for it), then certainly the alteration of a verse here or there in the New Testament is going to have relatively slight effect on any doctrine - any cherished doctrine whatsoever.
- That is not to say that textual variations are unimportant for theological discourse. They are important. But not in the way Ben is imagining (or imagining that I'm imagining). The reality is that textual variants affect numerous passages of theological significance: the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the atoning significance of his death, and so on. If Ben wants to deny this then we will have a real brouhaha on our hands!
- Most important, I wonder why "theological significance" is the major criterion being used to determine what matters when it comes to the text of the Bible. In a couple of public debates, Dan Wallace, for example, made the bold and startling claim mentioned above, in response to my views, that "not a single cardinal doctrine" of the Christian faith was affected by the textual variation of the New Testament. After hearing him make this claim a couple of times, I decided to fire back. "Why should that be our gauge for whether textual variation matters or not?" Only someone so deeply rooted in theology that nothing else ultimately matters would even think to use this rhetorical ploy. But think about it in other terms. Suppose, I asked, we all woke up tomorrow only to find that the New Testament books of Mark, Philippians, James, and 2 Peter had disappeared, that they no longer exist, they are no longer in anyone's Bible. Would their absence have any effect on "any cardinal doctrine" of the faith? Not in the least! Doctrine would remain exactly the same for virtually every Christian on the planet. But would you say their sudden disappearance would be significant? YES it would be HUGELY significant. And so my point, changes in the Bible can be inordinately significant without affecting any cherished doctrines of the evangelicals.
- And it is important to stress, textual variants often affect all sorts of things. In

many instances they affect what a verse means. Or a passage. Or even an entire book!. Just think of some of the Big Ones: Did Jesus forgive the woman taken in adultery in the Gospel of John? It depends which manuscripts you read. Did Jesus appear to his disciples after his resurrection, or not, in the Gospel of Mark? It depends which manuscripts you read. Did Jesus go into great agony and sweat great drops as if of blood in Luke's version of his arrest? It depends which manuscripts you read. Does the Gospel of Luke teach that Jesus' death was an atoning sacrifice "for us"? It depends which manuscripts you read. Does the Gospel of John present Jesus as "the unique God"? It depends which manuscripts you read. And on and on.

So, for anyone who is deeply committed to his or her theology, who is worried about how the textual variants of the New Testament might affect it, let me say it once again: none of your cherished doctrines appears to be in real danger because of variations in our surviving manuscripts (at least the variations that we know about). But that is not my claim and never has been my claim.

My claim is that there are important variations in the surviving manuscripts of the New Testament; some of these variations affect how an entire passage — indeed, in some cases how an entire book — is to be interpreted; some of these variations affect how we understand the theology of this or that biblical author; there are numerous passages where scholars continue to debate what the "original" text of the New Testament said; and there are some places where we will never know. All of that does indeed seem to be significant to me.

For nearly seven years now, blog members have received posts like this five or more times a week, week in and week out. If you were a member, you could too — and access all seven years' worth. It costs little, and every penny goes to charity. So think about joining!



[Were Miracle Stories Originally in the Gospels?](#)  
[Did Jesus Pray "Father Forgive Them" from the Cross?](#)