

MISQUOTING JESUS

The Story Behind Who
Changed the Bible and Why

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INTRODUCTION

More than almost anything I've ever written about, the subject of this book has been on my mind for the past thirty years, since I was in my late teens and just beginning my study of the New Testament. Because it has been a part of me for so long, I thought I should begin by giving a personal account of why this material has been, and still is, very important to me.

The book is about ancient manuscripts of the New Testament and the differences found in them, about scribes who copied scripture and sometimes changed it. This may not seem to be very promising as a key to one's own autobiography, but there it is. One has little control over such things.

Before explaining how and why the manuscripts of the New Testament have made a real difference to me emotionally and intellectually, to my understanding of myself, the world I live in, my views of God, and the Bible, I should give some personal background.

I was born and raised in a conservative place and time—the nation's heartland, beginning in the mid 1950s. My upbringing was nothing out of the ordinary. We were a fairly typical family of five, churchgoing but not particularly religious. Starting the year I was in fifth grade, we were involved with the Episcopal church in Lawrence,

Kansas, a church with a kind and wise rector, who happened also to be a neighbor and whose son was one of my friends (with whom I got into mischief later on in junior high school—something involving cigars). As with many Episcopal churches, this one was socially respectable and socially responsible. It took the church liturgy seriously, and scripture was part of that liturgy. But the Bible was not overly emphasized: it was there as one of the guides to faith and practice, along with the church's tradition and common sense. We didn't actually talk about the Bible much, or read it much, even in Sunday school classes, which focused more on practical and social issues, and on how to live in the world.

The Bible did have a revered place in our home, especially for my mom, who would occasionally read from the Bible and make sure that we understood its stories and ethical teachings (less so its "doctrines"). Up until my high school years, I suppose I saw the Bible as a mysterious book of some importance for religion; but it certainly was not something to be learned and mastered. It had a feel of antiquity to it and was inextricably bound up somehow with God and church and worship. Still, I saw no reason to read it on my own or study it.

Things changed drastically for me when I was a sophomore in high school. It was then that I had a "born-again" experience, in a setting quite different from that of my home church. I was a typical "fringe" kid—a good student, interested and active in school sports but not great at any of them, interested and active in social life but not in the upper echelon of the school's popular elite. I recall feeling a kind of emptiness inside that nothing seemed to fill—not running around with my friends (we were already into some serious social drinking at parties), dating (beginning to enter the mysterium tremendum of the world of sex), school (I worked hard and did well but was no superstar), work (I was a door-to-door salesman for a company that sold products for the blind), church (I was an acolyte and pretty devout—one had to be on Sunday mornings, given everything that happened on Saturday nights). There was a kind of loneliness associated with being a young teenager; but, of course, I didn't realize that

it was part of being a teenager—I thought there must be something missing.

That's when I started attending meetings of a Campus Life Youth for Christ club; they took place at kids' houses—the first I went to was a yard party at the home of a kid who was pretty popular, and that made me think the group must be okay. The leader of the group was a twenty-something-year-old named Bruce who did this sort of thing for a living—organized Youth for Christ clubs locally, tried to convert high school kids to be "born again" and then get them involved in serious Bible studies, prayer meetings, and the like. Bruce was a completely winsome personality—younger than our parents but older and more experienced than we—with a powerful message, that the void we felt inside (We were teenagers! All of us felt a void!) was from not having Christ in our hearts. If we would only ask Christ in, he would enter and fill us with the joy and happiness that only the "saved" could know.

Bruce could quote the Bible at will, and did so to an amazing degree. Given my reverence for, but ignorance of, the Bible, it all sounded completely convincing. And it was so unlike what I got at church, which involved old established ritual that seemed more geared toward old established adults than toward kids wanting fun and adventure, but who felt empty inside.

To make a short story shorter, I eventually got to know Bruce, came to accept his message of salvation, asked Jesus into my heart, and had a bona fide born-again experience. I had been born for real only fifteen years earlier, but this was a new and exciting experience for me, and it got me started on a lifelong journey of faith that has taken enormous twists and turns, ending up in a dead end that proved to be, in fact, a new path that I have since taken, now well over thirty years later.

Those of us who had these born-again experiences considered ourselves to be "real" Christians—as opposed to those who simply went to church as a matter of course, who did not really have Christ in their hearts and were therefore simply going through the motions with

none of the reality. One of the ways we differentiated ourselves from these others was in our commitment to Bible study and prayer. Especially Bible study. Bruce himself was a Bible man; he had gone to Moody Bible Institute in Chicago and could quote an answer from the Bible to every question we could think of (and many we would never think of). I soon became envious of this ability to quote scripture and got involved with Bible studies myself, learning some texts, understanding their relevance, and even memorizing the key verses.

Bruce convinced me that I should consider becoming a "serious" Christian and devote myself completely to the Christian faith. This meant studying scripture full time at Moody Bible Institute, which, among other things, would involve a drastic change of lifestyle. At Moody there was an ethical "code" that students had to sign off on: no drinking, no smoking, no dancing, no card playing, no movies. And lots of Bible. As we used to say, "Moody Bible Institute, where Bible is our middle name." I guess I looked on it as a kind of Christian boot camp. In any event, I decided not to go half-measures with my faith; I applied to Moody, got in, and went there in the fall of 1973.

The Moody experience was intense. I decided to major in Bible theology, which meant taking a lot of biblical study and systematic theology courses. Only one perspective was taught in these courses, subscribed to by all the professors (they had to sign a statement) and by all the students (we did as well): the Bible is the inerrant word of God. It contains no mistakes. It is inspired completely and in its very words—"verbal, plenary inspiration." All the courses I took presupposed and taught this perspective; any other was taken to be misguided or even heretical. Some, I suppose, would call this brainwashing. For me, it was an enormous "step up" from the milquetoast view of the Bible I had had as a socializing Episcopalian in my younger youth. This was hard-core Christianity, for the fully committed.

There was an obvious problem, however, with the claim that the Bible was verbally inspired—down to its very words. As we learned at Moody in one of the first courses in the curriculum, we don't actually have the original writings of the New Testament. What we have are copies of these writings, made years later—in most cases, many

years later. Moreover, none of these copies is completely accurate, since the scribes who produced them inadvertently and/or intentionally changed them in places. All scribes did this. So rather than actually having the inspired words of the autographs (i.e., the originals) of the Bible, what we have are the error-ridden copies of the autographs. One of the most pressing of all tasks, therefore, was to ascertain what the originals of the Bible said, given the circumstances that (1) they were inspired and (2) we don't have them.

I must say that many of my friends at Moody did not consider this task to be all that significant or interesting. They were happy to rest on the claim that the autographs had been inspired, and to shrug off, more or less, the problem that the autographs do not survive. For me, though, this was a compelling problem. It was the words of scripture themselves that God had inspired. Surely we have to know what those words were if we want to know how he had communicated to us, since the very words were his words, and having some other words (those inadvertently or intentionally created by scribes) didn't help us much if we wanted to know His words.

This is what got me interested in the manuscripts of the New Testament, already as an eighteen-year-old. At Moody, I learned the basics of the field known as textual criticism—a technical term for the science of restoring the "original" words of a text from manuscripts that have altered them. But I wasn't yet equipped to engage in this study: first I had to learn Greek, the original language of the New Testament, and possibly other ancient languages such as Hebrew (the language of the Christian Old Testament) and Latin, not to mention modern European languages like German and French, in order to see what other scholars had said about such things. It was a long path ahead.

At the end of my three years at Moody (it was a three-year diploma), I had done well in my courses and was more serious than ever about becoming a Christian scholar. My idea at the time was that there were plenty of highly educated scholars among the evangelical Christians, but not many evangelicals among the (secular) highly educated scholars, so I wanted to become an evangelical "voice" in secular circles, by getting degrees that would allow me to teach in secular settings while

retaining my evangelical commitments. First, though, I needed to complete my bachelor's degree, and to do that I decided to go to a top-rank evangelical college. I chose Wheaton College, in a suburb of Chicago.

At Moody I was warned that I might have trouble finding real Christians at Wheaton—which shows how fundamentalist Moody was: Wheaton is only for evangelical Christians and is the alma mater of Billy Graham, for example. And at first I did find it to be a bit liberal for my tastes. Students talked about literature, history, and philosophy rather than the verbal inspiration of scripture. They did this from a Christian perspective, but even so: didn't they realize what really mattered?

I decided to major in English literature at Wheaton, since reading had long been one of my passions and since I knew that to make inroads into the circles of scholarship, I would need to become well versed in an area of scholarship other than the Bible. I decided also to commit myself to learning Greek. It was during my first semester at Wheaton, then, that I met Dr. Gerald Hawthorne, my Greek teacher and a person who became quite influential in my life as a scholar, teacher, and, eventually, friend. Hawthorne, like most of my professors at Wheaton, was a committed evangelical Christian. But he was not afraid of asking questions of his faith. At the time, I took this as a sign of weakness (in fact, I thought I had nearly all the answers to the questions he asked); eventually I saw it as a real commitment to truth and as being willing to open oneself up to the possibility that one's views need to be revised in light of further knowledge and life experience.

Learning Greek was a thrilling experience for me. As it turned out, I was pretty good at the basics of the language and was always eager for more. On a deeper level, however, the experience of learning Greek became a bit troubling for me and my view of scripture. I came to see early on that the full meaning and nuance of the Greek text of the New Testament could be grasped only when it is read and studied in the original language (the same thing applies to the Old Testament, as I later learned when I acquired Hebrew). All the more reason, I thought, for learning the language thoroughly. At the same time, this

started making me question my understanding of scripture as the verbally inspired word of God. If the full meaning of the words of scripture can be grasped only by studying them in Greek (and Hebrew), doesn't this mean that most Christians, who don't read ancient languages, will never have complete access to what God wants them to know? And doesn't this make the doctrine of inspiration a doctrine only for the scholarly elite, who have the intellectual skills and leisure to learn the languages and study the texts by reading them in the original? What good does it do to say that the words are inspired by God if most people have absolutely no access to these words, but only to more or less clumsy renderings of these words into a language, such as English, that has nothing to do with the original words?'

My questions were complicated even more as I began to think increasingly about the manuscripts that conveyed the words. The more I studied Greek, the more I became interested in the manuscripts that preserve the New Testament for us, and in the science of textual criticism, which can supposedly help us reconstruct what the original words of the New Testament were. I kept reverting to my basic question: how does it help us to say that the Bible is the inerrant word of God if in fact we don't have the words that God inerrantly inspired, but only the words copied by the scribes—sometimes correctly but sometimes (many times!) incorrectly? What good is it to say that the autographs (i.e., the originals) were inspired? We don't have the originals! We have only error-ridden copies, and the vast majority of these are centuries removed from the originals and different from them, evidently, in thousands of ways.

These doubts both plagued me and drove me to dig deeper and deeper, to understand what the Bible really was. I completed my degree at Wheaton in two years and decided, under the guidance of Professor Hawthorne, to commit myself to the textual criticism of the New Testament by going to study with the world's leading expert in the field, a scholar named Bruce M. Metzger who taught at Princeton Theological Seminary.

Once again I was warned by my evangelical friends against going to Princeton Seminary, since, as they told me, I would have trouble

finding any "real" Christians there. It was, after all, a Presbyterian seminary, not exactly a breeding ground for born-again Christians. But my study of English literature, philosophy, and history—not to mention Greek—had widened my horizons significantly, and my passion was now for knowledge, knowledge of all kinds, sacred and secular. If learning the "truth" meant no longer being able to identify with the born-again Christians I knew in high school, so be it. I was intent on pursuing my quest for truth wherever it might take me, trusting that any truth I learned was no less true for being unexpected or difficult to fit into the pigeonholes provided by my evangelical background.

Upon arriving at Princeton Theological Seminary, I immediately signed up for first-year Hebrew and Greek exegesis (interpretation) classes, and loaded my schedule as much as I could with such courses. I found these classes to be a challenge, both academically and personally. The academic challenge was completely welcome, but the personal challenges that I faced were emotionally rather trying. As I've indicated, already at Wheaton I had begun to question some of the foundational aspects of my commitment to the Bible as the inerrant word of God. That commitment came under serious assault in my detailed studies at Princeton. I resisted any temptation to change my views, and found a number of friends who, like me, came from conservative evangelical schools and were trying to "keep the faith" (a funny way of putting it—looking back—since we were, after all, in a Christian divinity program). But my studies started catching up with me.

A turning point came in my second semester, in a course I was taking with a much revered and pious professor named Cullen Story. The course was on the exegesis of the Gospel of Mark, at the time (and still) my favorite Gospel. For this course we needed to be able to read the Gospel of Mark completely in Greek (I memorized the entire Greek vocabulary of the Gospel the week before the semester began); we were to keep an exegetical notebook on our reflections on the interpretation of key passages; we discussed problems in the interpretation of the text; and we had to write a final term paper on an

interpretive crux of our own choosing. I chose a passage in Mark 2, where Jesus is confronted by the Pharisees because his disciples had been walking through a grain field, eating the grain on the Sabbath. Jesus wants to show the Pharisees that "Sabbath was made for humans, not humans for the Sabbath" and so reminds them of what the great King David had done when he and his men were hungry, how they went into the Temple "when Abiathar was the high priest" and ate the show bread, which was only for the priests to eat. One of the well-known problems of the passage is that when one looks at the Old Testament passage that Jesus is citing (1 Sam. 21:1-6), it turns out that David did this not when Abiathar was the high priest, but, in fact, when Abiathar's father Ahimelech was. In other words, this is one of those passages that have been pointed to in order to show that the Bible is not inerrant at all but contains mistakes.

In my paper for Professor Story, I developed a long and complicated argument to the effect that even though Mark indicates this happened "when Abiathar was the high priest," it doesn't really mean that Abiathar was the high priest, but that the event took place in the part of the scriptural text that has Abiathar as one of the main characters. My argument was based on the meaning of the Greek words involved and was a bit convoluted. I was pretty sure Professor Story would appreciate the argument, since I knew him as a good Christian scholar who obviously (like me) would never think there could be anything like a genuine error in the Bible. But at the end of my paper he made a simple one-line comment that for some reason went straight through me. He wrote: "Maybe Mark just made a mistake." I started thinking about it, considering all the work I had put into the paper, realizing that I had had to do some pretty fancy exegetical footwork to get around the problem, and that my solution was in fact a bit of a stretch. I finally concluded, "Hmm ... maybe Mark did make a mistake."

Once I made that admission, the floodgates opened. For if there could be one little, picayune mistake in Mark 2, maybe there could be mistakes in other places as well. Maybe, when Jesus says later in Mark 4 that the mustard seed is "the smallest of all seeds on the earth,"

maybe I don't need to come up with a fancy explanation for how the mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds when I know full well it isn't. And maybe these "mistakes" apply to bigger issues. Maybe when Mark says that Jesus was crucified the day after the Passover meal was eaten (Mark 14:12; 15:25) and John says he died the day before it was eaten (John 19:14)—maybe that is a genuine difference. Or when Luke indicates in his account of Jesus's birth that Joseph and Mary returned to Nazareth just over a month after they had come to Bethlehem (and performed the rites of purification; Luke 2:39), whereas Matthew indicates they instead fled to Egypt (Matt. 2:19-22)—maybe that is a difference. Or when Paul says that after he converted on the way to Damascus he did not go to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before him (Gal. 1:16-17), whereas the book of Acts says that that was the first thing he did after leaving Damascus (Acts 9:26)—maybe that is a difference.

This kind of realization coincided with the problems I was encountering the more closely I studied the surviving Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. It is one thing to say that the originals were inspired, but the reality is that we don't have the originals—so saying they were inspired doesn't help me much, unless I can reconstruct the originals. Moreover, the vast majority of Christians for the entire history of the church have not had access to the originals, making their inspiration something of a moot point. Not only do we not have the originals, we don't have the first copies of the originals. We don't even have copies of the copies of the originals, or copies of the copies of the copies of the originals. What we have are copies made later—much later. In most instances, they are copies made many centuries later. And these copies all differ from one another, in many thousands of places. As we will see later in this book, these copies differ from one another in so many places that we don't even know how many differences there are. Possibly it is easiest to put it in comparative terms: there are more differences among our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament.

Most of these differences are completely immaterial and insignificant. A good portion of them simply show us that scribes in antiquity

could spell no better than most people can today (and they didn't even have dictionaries, let alone spell check). Even so, what is one to make of all these differences? If one wants to insist that God inspired the very words of scripture, what would be the point if we don't have the very words of scripture? In some places, as we will see, we simply cannot be sure that we have reconstructed the original text accurately. It's a bit hard to know what the words of the Bible mean if we don't even know what the words are!

This became a problem for my view of inspiration, for I came to realize that it would have been no more difficult for God to preserve the words of scripture than it would have been for him to inspire them in the first place. If he wanted his people to have his words, surely he would have given them to them (and possibly even given them the words in a language they could understand, rather than Greek and Hebrew). The fact that we don't have the words surely must show, I reasoned, that he did not preserve them for us. And if he didn't perform that miracle, there seemed to be no reason to think that he performed the earlier miracle of inspiring those words.

In short, my study of the Greek New Testament, and my investigations into the manuscripts that contain it, led to a radical rethinking of my understanding of what the Bible is. This was a seismic change for me. Before this—starting with my born-again experience in high school, through my fundamentalist days at Moody, and on through my evangelical days at Wheaton—my faith had been based completely on a certain view of the Bible as the fully inspired, inerrant word of God. Now I no longer saw the Bible that way. The Bible began to appear to me as a very human book. Just as human scribes had copied, and changed, the texts of scripture, so too had human authors originally written the texts of scripture. This was a human book from beginning to end. It was written by different human authors at different times and in different places to address different needs. Many of these authors no doubt felt they were inspired by God to say what they did, but they had their own perspectives, their own beliefs, their own views, their own needs, their own desires, their own understandings, their own theologies; and these perspectives, beliefs, views, needs,

desires, understandings, and theologies informed everything they said. In all these ways they differed from one another. Among other things, this meant that Mark did not say the same thing that Luke said because he didn't mean the same thing as Luke. John is different from Matthew—not the same. Paul is different from Acts. And James is different from Paul. Each author is a human author and needs to be read for what he (assuming they were all men) has to say, not assuming that what he says is the same, or conformable to, or consistent with what every other author has to say. The Bible, at the end of the day, is a very human book.

This was a new perspective for me, and obviously not the view I had when I was an evangelical Christian—nor is it the view of most evangelicals today. Let me give an example of the difference my changed perspective could have for understanding the Bible. When I was at Moody Bible Institute, one of the most popular books on campus was Hal Lindsey's apocalyptic blueprint for our future, *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Lindsey's book was popular not only at Moody; it was, in fact, the best-selling work of nonfiction (apart from the Bible; and using the term nonfiction somewhat loosely) in the English language in the 1970s. Lindsey, like those of us at Moody, believed that the Bible was absolutely inerrant in its very words, to the extent that you could read the New Testament and know not only how God wanted you to live and what he wanted you to believe, but also what God himself was planning to do in the future and how he was going to do it. The world was heading for an apocalyptic crisis of catastrophic proportions, and the inerrant words of scripture could be read to show what, how, and when it would all happen.

I was particularly struck by the "when." Lindsey pointed to Jesus's parable of the fig tree as an indication of when we could expect the future Armageddon. Jesus's disciples want to know when the "end" will come, and Jesus replies:

From the fig tree learn this parable. When its branch becomes tender and it puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also you, when you see all these things you know that he [the Son of Man] is

near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place. (Matt. 24:32-34)

What does this parable mean? Lindsey, thinking that it is an inerrant word from God himself, unpacks its message by pointing out that in the Bible the "fig tree" is often used as an image of the nation of Israel. What would it mean for it to put forth its leaves? It would mean that the nation, after lying dormant for a season (the winter), would come back to life. And when did Israel come back to life? In 1948, when Israel once again became a sovereign nation. Jesus indicates that the end will come within the very generation that this was to occur. And how long is a generation in the Bible? Forty years. Hence the divinely inspired teaching, straight from the lips of Jesus: the end of the world will come sometime before 1988, forty years after the re-emergence of Israel.

This message proved completely compelling to us. It may seem odd now—given the circumstance that 1988 has come and gone, with no Armageddon—but, on the other hand, there are millions of Christians who still believe that the Bible can be read literally as completely inspired in its predictions of what is soon to happen to bring history as we know it to a close. Witness the current craze for the Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins series *Left Behind*, another apocalyptic vision of our future based on a literalistic reading of the Bible, a series that has sold more than sixty million copies in our own day.

It is a radical shift from reading the Bible as an inerrant blueprint for our faith, life, and future to seeing it as a very human book, with very human points of view, many of which differ from one another and none of which provides the inerrant guide to how we should live. This is the shift in my own thinking that I ended up making, and to which I am now fully committed. Many Christians, of course, have never held this literalistic view of the Bible in the first place, and for them such a view might seem completely one-sided and unnuanced (not to mention bizarre and unrelated to matters of faith). There are, however, plenty of people around who still see the Bible this way. Occasionally I see a bumper sticker that reads: "God said it, I believe it,

and that settles it." My response is always, What if God didn't say it? What if the book you take as giving you God's words instead contains human words? What if the Bible doesn't give a foolproof answer to the questions of the modern age—abortion, women's rights, gay rights, religious supremacy, Western-style democracy, and the like? What if we have to figure out how to live and what to believe on our own, without setting up the Bible as a false idol—or an oracle that gives us a direct line of communication with the Almighty? There are clear reasons for thinking that, in fact, the Bible is not this kind of inerrant guide to our lives: among other things, as I've been pointing out, in many places we (as scholars, or just regular readers) don't even know what the original words of the Bible actually were.

My personal theology changed radically with this realization, taking me down roads quite different from the ones I had traversed in my late teens and early twenties. I continue to appreciate the Bible and the many and varied messages that it contains—much as I have come to appreciate the other writings of early Christians from about the same time and soon thereafter, the writings of lesser-known figures such as Ignatius of Antioch, Clement of Rome, and Barnabas of Alexandria, and much as I have come to appreciate the writings of persons of other faiths at roughly the time, the writings of Josephus, and Lucian of Samosata, and Plutarch. All of these authors are trying to understand the world and their place in it, and all of them have valuable things to teach us. It is important to know what the words of these authors were, so that we can see what they had to say and judge, then, for ourselves what to think and how to live in light of those words.

This brings me back to my interest in the manuscripts of the New Testament and the study of those manuscripts in the field known as textual criticism. It is my conviction that textual criticism is a compelling and intriguing field of study of real importance not just to scholars but to everyone with an interest in the Bible (whether a literalist, a recovering literalist, a never-in-your-life-would-I-ever-be-a-literalist, or even just anyone with a remote interest in the Bible as a

historical and cultural phenomenon). What is striking, however, is that most readers—even those interested in Christianity, in the Bible, in biblical studies, both those who believe the Bible is inerrant and those who do not—know almost nothing about textual criticism. And it's not difficult to see why. Despite the fact that this has been a topic of sustained scholarship now for more than three hundred years, there is scarcely a single book written about it for a lay audience—that is, for those who know nothing about it, who don't have the Greek and other languages necessary for the in-depth study of it, who do not realize there is even a "problem" with the text, but who would be intrigued to learn both what the problems are and how scholars have set about dealing with them.²

That is the kind of book this is—to my knowledge, the first of its kind. It is written for people who know nothing about textual criticism but who might like to learn something about how scribes were changing scripture and about how we can recognize where they did so. It is written based on my thirty years of thinking about the subject, and from the perspective that I now have, having gone through such radical transformations of my own views of the Bible. It is written for anyone who might be interested in seeing how we got our New Testament, seeing how in some instances we don't even know what the words of the original writers were, seeing in what interesting ways these words occasionally got changed, and seeing how we might, through the application of some rather rigorous methods of analysis, reconstruct what those original words actually were. In many ways, then, this is a very personal book for me, the end result of a long journey. Maybe, for others, it can be part of a journey of their own.