

PREFACE

In high school I assumed that I would be a lawyer, so I went to a very fine liberal arts college in southern California, where I majored in history and minored in philosophy, in preparation for law school. But in my senior year in college I had become a committed Christian, which led me to seminary, instead of law school (“from law to grace,” as one minister remarked).

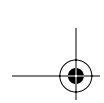
I went to seminary for the purpose of training in Christian ministry. I was fascinated with Jesus of Nazareth and wanted to learn more about him and his teaching. I looked forward to a lifetime in pastoral ministry. But in seminary I discovered the academic side to theology and biblical studies. I loved it. Greek and Hebrew came easily; exegesis was fun; historical and background studies were stimulating. While other students were attempting to avoid these subjects, I engaged them enthusiastically.

In my second year I took an advanced course in Greek in which we read the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke—in one semester! That did it; I was hooked on the life, teaching and world of Jesus. I was fascinated with the Gospels themselves and the questions scholars grappled with: What are the sources of the Gospels? How do they relate to one another? How much of the Gospels is history, and how much is interpretation? I enjoyed it so much I decided to pursue a Ph.D.

I had the good fortune of entering Claremont Graduate University at a time when its biblical studies faculty was at its greatest. CGU, along with the nearby Claremont School of Theology, boasted a powerhouse faculty in New Testament and related fields of study. In this faculty were Hans Dieter Betz, William Brownlee, Burton Mack, James Robinson, James Sanders and John Trever.

Professor Betz chaired the Hellenism and the New Testament Seminar, which was favored with visits from Ronald Hock and Edward O’Neill, both



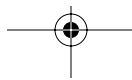


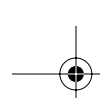
on the faculty of the University of Southern California. During this time the seminar was finishing its work on Plutarch and just launching its work on the Greek magical papyri. Betz impressed me greatly with his high standards and attention to detail. His commentaries on Galatians and the Sermon on the Mount in the Hermeneia commentary series are impressive and well respected.

Professor Robinson chaired the Nag Hammadi Seminar, dedicated to the publication and study of the Coptic Gnostic codices found in Nag Hammadi, Egypt. I found his enthusiasm for fresh research, discovery and publishing infectious. Entering Claremont was like walking into a publishing factory. I was overwhelmed by the activity. During my time with the Nag Hammadi Seminar, I became acquainted with Charles Hedrick (who taught me Coptic) and Marvin Meyer, who now is the research director for the Coptic Magical Texts Project at Claremont Graduate University and an expert on Gnostic texts.

Professor Mack was in those days engrossed in Philo and Jewish wisdom traditions. He was at that time a warm-hearted Christian scholar. I distinctly recall him in 1977 telling me how happy he was that I was serving on the staff of a nearby church. "That is really good," he said. "What we need are more doctors of the church." Times change and so do some people.

Professor Brownlee was wonderful to work with. He was quiet, gentle and unassuming. Yet he was one of the very first scholars to lay eyes on the Dead Sea Scrolls. He was in Jerusalem, doing a year of postdoctoral studies in 1947-1948, when the first cave containing scrolls was discovered. His studies in the book of Ezekiel and the ancient Ugaritic language were set aside. Brownlee brought one of the scrolls back with him to Duke University in the fall of 1948 so he could use it in teaching Hebrew. (That of course is no longer allowed!) He published an early study of the Rule Scroll (1QS) and spent much of his career analyzing Qumran's commentary (or pesher) on the book of Habakkuk. I found him delightful to work with and eventually finished my doctoral dissertation under his supervision. It was from Brownlee that I learned much about the Dead Sea Scrolls, and it was with him that I studied Aramaic and Syriac. His sudden death in 1983 left me an academic orphan and ended plans that we had made for collaborative studies in Isaiah and Daniel.



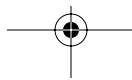


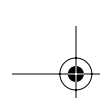
I also had the privilege of making the acquaintance of John Trever, Bill Brownlee's longtime friend. Trever was with Brownlee in Jerusalem in 1947-1948, and it was he who took the very first—and quite excellent—photographs of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Trever was also happy to give me a guided tour of his collection of photographs and artifacts, explaining where they were found and their significance.

Although I was very close to Brownlee, the person who influenced me the most at Claremont was Professor Sanders, who joined the faculty in 1977, the year my doctoral studies commenced. It would be almost impossible to exaggerate the significance of his contribution to my understanding of biblical literature and its full context. Sanders introduced me to the versions of Scripture, such as the Old Greek (or Septuagint) and the Aramaic (or Targum). He led me through the rabbinic literature, taught me to appreciate rabbinic midrash and transformed textual criticism—the study of ancient manuscripts and their diverse readings and variants—into a joy. Under his instruction my appreciation of Scripture grew. Over the years we have collaborated on a number of publishing projects and jointly chaired from 1989-1996 a program unit in the Society of Biblical Literature.

Although I started out at Claremont as a New Testament student, I was so deeply influenced by Brownlee and Sanders that I wrote my dissertation on the book of Isaiah. There are New Testament components in the dissertation, to be sure, but at the conclusion of my doctoral studies I was as much interested in a career in Old Testament as I was in New Testament. One of the ironies of my life is that twenty-five years ago I interviewed for a position in Old Testament at Acadia Divinity College. I was passed over on account of my youth and ended up at Trinity Western University instead—as an assistant professor of New Testament! This appointment guided me back to the New Testament, and after twenty-one years at Trinity I was appointed to Acadia Divinity College as the Payzant Distinguished Professor of New Testament. It seems I was destined for Acadia after all—but in New Testament not Old.

As I taught New Testament at Trinity, I of course began to shift my research and publishing away from Isaiah and the Old Testament to the New Testament. I focused on Jesus and the Gospels, which had been the focus of



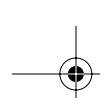


my interest back in seminary. An interesting thing happened. I realized that my work in Isaiah, the Greek and Aramaic versions of the Old Testament, the Dead Sea Scrolls and early rabbinic literature was an enormous asset in the study of Jesus and the Gospels. As I became acquainted with more and more New Testament scholars (at regional and national Society of Biblical Literature meetings), I became aware that many of them lacked training in the Semitic background of the New Testament. I was bumping into New Testament scholars who had studied Greek and knew something of the Greco-Roman world, but had only the feeblest ability with Hebrew and Aramaic (if at all). Most knew little of early rabbinic literature and the Aramaic paraphrases of Scripture.

This deficiency on the part of so many New Testament scholars helps explain the oddness of much of the work of the Jesus Seminar, founded by Robert Funk in 1985. Whereas many of the Seminar's members have been exposed to Greek literature and Greco-Roman culture and conventions, not many of them appear to have competence in the Semitic (Jewish) world of Jesus. Few seem acquainted with the land of Israel itself. Few have done any archaeological work. Few know rabbinic literature and the Aramaic paraphrases of Scripture. As a consequence of these deficiencies, it is not surprising that the Jesus Seminar has come to so many odd and implausible conclusions. For example, the Seminar does not understand what Jesus meant by his reference to "kingdom of God." The Seminar has completely misunderstood the meaning of eschatology and holds to a skewed idea of the meaning of Jesus' favorite self-designation "Son of Man." Moreover, the Seminar finds no meaningful place for Israel's Scripture in Jesus' self-understanding and teaching. The Seminar's errors are egregious and legion. Unfortunately, the Seminar has gained a great deal of media attention and has cultivated a series of books that advance misguided and mistaken views of Jesus and the Gospels—both those in the New Testament and those outside the New Testament. *Fabricating Jesus* will address just these sorts of issues.

I am a Christian. I was a Christian before going to seminary and graduate school, and I still am after completing school and teaching and publishing for more than a quarter century. When some of my friends at seminary learned that I would be entering Claremont to pursue a doctorate, I was





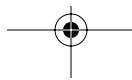
warned that critical study would not be good for my faith. Of course, I had heard of some who after becoming involved in critical research had given up faith. I will speak to that topic in the first chapter.

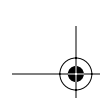
My academic life has not resulted in the loss of faith. Aspects of my faith have changed, to be sure. Not everything is as cut and dried, black and white, as it once was. There are aspects of theology that remain uncertain, historical details that remain unclear. But then again, I have found that that was the way it was for Jesus and his earliest followers. Maybe not having pat answers for everything is what faith is all about.

At first, I must admit, I found aspects of biblical criticism unsettling. But in time I realized that what biblical criticism challenged was not the essence of the Christian message, but the baggage that many think is part of the message. Typically this baggage includes views of authorship and dates of given biblical books (for example, the idea that biblical books must be early and written by apostles even when they make no such claim), as well as assumptions regarding the nature of biblical literature (for example, the belief that the Gospels are history and nothing else) and the nature of Jesus' teaching (for example, the view that everything Jesus said was wholly unique and never before heard). In time I was able to distinguish the baggage from the message. In fact, I can say that biblical criticism rescued the message and helped me see it and appreciate it more fully.

I have found careful, searching study of the historical Jesus rewarding. I love to lecture. I love to preach. I love to tell the stories of the Gospels. I love to see the look in the faces of people in the congregation when they first understand what Jesus meant—what he really meant—when he said or did something. I am always touched when I see how the story of Jesus affects people and brings positive change to their lives. The story of the sinful woman (Luke 7), or the good Samaritan (Luke 10), or the prodigal son (Luke 15), if proclaimed in proper context, results in forgiveness, reconciliation and even self-reproach. It seems that none of the power Jesus exuded has diminished in the passage of time.

I have found that the better we come to understand who Jesus was, what he said and how he was understood by his contemporaries, the more we appreciate him and the movement that he inaugurated. When Jesus' actions





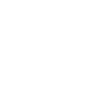
or words are misunderstood, problems begin. I have found that lying behind assertions to the effect “Jesus could not have said this” are mistakes in interpretation, usually due to a failure to view the saying in its proper context and setting.

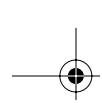
Fabricating Jesus is a book that takes a hard look at some of the sloppy scholarship and misguided theories that have been advanced in recent years. I am appalled at much of this work. Some of it, frankly, is embarrassing.

Fabricating Jesus is written at a popular level and is primarily intended for nonexperts who find much that has been said about Jesus in recent years terribly confusing. Notes are kept to a minimum and are gathered at the back of the book. I have tried to define terms common in biblical studies but unfamiliar to general readers as I introduce them; in addition, I have appended a glossary at the back for quick reference. A list of recommended books is provided for any readers who want to look in more depth at the documents and scholarly literature that stand behind my arguments and conclusions.

I want to thank Jim Hoover of InterVarsity Press, who invited me to write this book and provided me with many great ideas and insights. I also thank my wife, Ginny, who graciously read through the whole manuscript, one chapter at a time, and asked me those important questions, such as, “What does this mean?” Because of her care and attention, the book is much easier to read. And finally, a word of thanks is due Danny Zacharias, who assisted with the preparation of the indexes.

Craig A. Evans





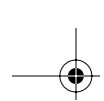
INTRODUCTION

Did Jesus have a child by Mary Magdalene? Was he a Cynic? Or was he a mystic, perhaps even a Gnostic? Did he fake his death and sneak out of the holy land? Did he escape to Egypt? Did he write letters to the Jewish court and explain that it was all a mistake, that he never claimed to be the Son of God? Did he celebrate the Last Supper with friends—twenty-five years after his crucifixion? Has the grave of Jesus been found? Has the grave of his father been found? Are the New Testament Gospels reliable? Are there better sources for the life and teaching of Jesus? Do the Dead Sea Scrolls talk about Jesus? Is the gospel story true? Is there a conspiracy to hide the truth? Indeed, did Jesus ever really exist?

When I first began academic study of Jesus and the Gospels some thirty years ago, I could never have guessed that I or anyone else would find it necessary to write a book addressing such questions. Surely no one in all seriousness would advance such theories. Surely no credible publishers would print them. Yet, all that has happened.

Have you wondered why it is that modern scholars (especially the ones who make it into the popular press) seem so prone to discount the evidence of the Gospels, looking to other sources for information? In several books scholars argue that it is necessary to rely on second- and third-century sources, because our first-century New Testament Gospels are not reliable. Does this make sense? Others claim that there are conspiracies to suppress the evidence. Evidence of what? Why?

We live in a strange time that indulges, even encourages, some of the strangest thinking. It is a time when truth means almost what you want to make of it. And in these zany quests for “truth,” truth becomes elusive. In fact, a book published a few years ago appeared under the title *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used To Be*. Quite so.



What I find particularly troubling is that a lot of the nonsense comes from scholars. We expect tabloid pseudoscholarship from the quacks, but not from scholars who teach at respectable institutions of higher learning.

Modern scholars and writers, in their never-ending quest to find something new and to advance daring theories that run beyond the evidence, have either distorted or neglected the New Testament Gospels, resulting in the fabrication of an array of pseudo-Jesuses. A variety of influences have led to these results, whether (1) misplaced faith and misguided suspicions, (2) cramped starting points and overly strict critical methods, (3) questionable texts from later centuries, (4) appeals to contexts alien to Jesus' actual environment, (5) skeletal sayings devoid of context altogether, (6) failure to take into account Jesus' mighty deeds, (7) dubious use of Josephus and other resources of late antiquity (8) anachronisms and exaggerated claims, or (9) ho-kum history and bogus findings. In short, just about every error imaginable has been made. A few writers have made almost all of them.

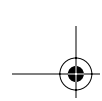
The chapters that follow take up these issues one by one, spending two chapters on questionable texts. The book concludes with an eleventh chapter in which I offer my assessment of important aspects of genuine progress in the study of the historical Jesus, and in which the Gospels inside the New Testament and the Gospels outside the New Testament are treated properly and other relevant primary materials are given their due.

Fabricating Jesus inquires into the thinking and the methods of scholars and popular writers. What presuppositions do they hold? What methods do they use? Why do they move from valid observations to audacious conclusions? Indeed why and how do they fabricate a Jesus different from the one we find in the New Testament? Are these scholars actually using sound historical method? These are some of the questions this book explores.

Fabricating Jesus is designed to speak to a variety of readers. First, this book is written to assist anyone who is confused by the wild theories and conflicting portraits of Jesus, the claims that he really didn't see himself as the Messiah or as God's Son, or that the New Testament Gospels are not trustworthy, or that other sources are better or at least equally valid, and so forth.

Second, the book is written for people who are interested in Jesus and the New Testament Gospels and want to learn more but are baffled by the strange





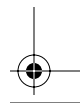
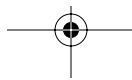
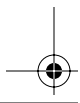
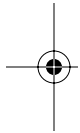
Introduction

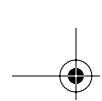
books that have appeared in recent years. I hope you haven't given up.

Third, it is written for skeptics, especially those prone to fall for some old nineteenth-century philosophical hokum that almost no one today holds.

Fourth, *Fabricating Jesus* is written for the guild, for the scholars whose profession is to investigate the Gospels and the life and teaching of Jesus, in hope that it may call us not to a lesser standard of scholarship but indeed to a higher one, one which doesn't presume that skepticism equals scholarship.

Finally, this book is written to defend the original witnesses to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. When put to the test, the original documents hold up quite well. Despite their having been maligned, even ridiculed, and pushed into the background, it is time to give them a fresh hearing.





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MISPLACED FAITH AND MISGUIDED SUSPICIONS

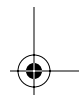
Old and New School Skeptics

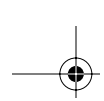
In recent years several books have appeared, written by scholars who at one time or another in their lives regarded themselves as traditional, even conservative, Christians but who later came to define themselves as far to the Christian left or even outright agnostics, especially with regard to the traditional portrait of Jesus and the historical reliability of the Gospels. One or two of them are no longer sure Jesus ever existed at all.

My impression is that the majority of biblical scholars, archaeologists and historians who start out as Christian believers continue on in Christian faith and active involvement in the church. Their views on this issue or that may change as they study; most of us who enter the world of biblical scholarship become less rigid and more open to new perspectives. But why do some scholars depart the faith and become hostile to believers? The popular media, of course, love to exploit and sensationalize these kinds of “coming-out” stories.

A big part of the problem starts with conservative Protestant Christianity itself, especially of the Western variety. Due to controversies, such as the modernist-fundamentalist debacle at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, lines were drawn in the sand and detailed statements (or confessions) of faith were drawn up. These statements sometimes came to function as litmus tests regarding who was in and who was out. Learn the statement and agree with it, and all was well. Fail to agree and find yourself on the outside. Indeed, some of these statements seemed to take priority over Scripture itself.

It is not surprising that negative reactions to this sort of rigidity have occurred. Learned study of Scripture that addresses serious questions—such



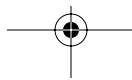


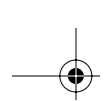
as who wrote the books of the Bible, under what circumstances, with what purposes and, with respect to historical issues, how accurately—invariably works against rigid fundamentalism. My purpose here is not to revisit this larger question, but it is necessary to bring it up because I think it plays a significant role in why some scholars and clergy experience a crisis of faith and make radical shifts.

When it comes to evaluating Jesus, popular Christian apologists often appeal to the triad of options proposed by C. S. Lewis half a century ago: Jesus was either liar, lunatic or Lord. The appeal makes for good alliteration, maybe even good rhetoric, but it is faulty logic. Without further qualification, those who adhere to this line of argument commit the fallacy of excluded middle. That is, they overlook other viable alternatives. At least two other alternatives are possible; both relate to how Scripture is understood, and both come into play in the books that *Fabricating Jesus* criticizes.

A *fourth alternative* is that Jesus is neither liar, lunatic nor Lord (in the traditional, orthodox sense); he is something else. He may be Israel's messiah, the Lord's servant and perhaps the greatest prophet who ever lived. He could even be called God's son, but not in the trinitarian sense, in which Jesus is seen as fully God and fully human. As far as we know, this more or less agrees with Ebionite Christianity, a form of Jewish Christianity that emerged in the second century and eventually disappeared sometime in the fifth century. The Ebionites possessed one or more edited versions of the Gospel of Matthew, which tended to enhance the status of the law and minimize the divine nature of Jesus. They believed Jesus was Israel's messiah and fulfillment of prophecy. They believed that in the sense King David could be called God's "son" (as in Ps 2:7) Jesus also could be called son of God. But Ebionites did not hold to what theologians call "high Christology"—that is, the view that Jesus is divine. The Ebionite understanding of Jesus is pretty close to the view of two of the scholars considered later in this chapter.

A *fifth alternative* is that we really don't know who Jesus was, what he really said and did, what he thought of himself, or what his companions thought of him, because the New Testament Gospels and other sources we have are not reliable. The New Testament Gospels may well present Jesus as Israel's Messiah and as God's Son, but for all we know, that is nothing more





than the theology of Christians who lived in the second half of the first century, Christians who had never met Jesus and had never heard him teach. This form of skepticism sometimes runs even deeper, arguing that not only were the original Gospels unhistorical and unreliable, we are not sure if the manuscripts we possess today accurately reflect the Gospels in their original form. So goes the argument. This is the view of another set of scholars we will consider in this chapter.

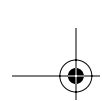
In reading some of the more radical books on Jesus, I find that loss of confidence in the historical reliability of the New Testament Gospels is often occasioned by misplaced faith and misguided suspicions. By *misplaced faith* I mean placing one's faith in the wrong thing, such as believing that the Scriptures must be inerrant according to rather strict idiosyncratic standards and that we must be able to harmonize the four Gospels. If our faith depends on these ideas, especially in rigid terms, then scholarly study may well lead to a collapse of faith.

By *misguided suspicions* I mean the unreasonable assumption that Jesus' contemporaries (that is, the first generation of his movement) were either incapable of remembering or uninterested in recalling accurately what Jesus said and did, and in passing it on. What we have here is a form of hypercriticism that is all too common in scholarly circles and sometimes seems to arise from confusing criticism with skepticism—that is, thinking that the more skeptical the position, the more critical it is. Radical skepticism is no more critical than is credulity.

We can see how this view of things works out by looking briefly at the work of four scholars whose Christian views at one time were fairly conservative and more or less evangelical. The first two I call "old school skeptics" and the second two I call "new school skeptics." The first two opt for something approximating the fourth alternative I have outlined; the second two opt for the fifth alternative.

I have chosen these scholars because they have discussed their personal views and their respective pilgrimages of faith, especially with regard to their understanding of Jesus and the Gospels. I could have discussed a number of other scholars, but have not done so because they have not made their views public.





I also want to make clear that I am not criticizing these scholars for taking the positions that they have taken. Their personal journeys are their business. I cite and discuss a few of their comments because I think they illustrate the issue that is being addressed in this chapter, an issue that I think lies behind many of the problems and controversies that will be considered in the other chapters of this book. I am, nonetheless, critical of some of the conclusions that they have reached.

OLD SCHOOL SKEPTICS—MINIMIZING JESUS

The two old school skeptics I wish to discuss briefly are Robert Funk (1926-2005) and James Robinson (1924-). Their skepticism of the New Testament Gospels is not as radical as some think. Yes, they are quick to point to this Gospel saying and that deed and pronounce them inauthentic, deriving from the early church, not from Jesus. I disagree with their understanding of the formation, age and transmission of the Gospels; I disagree too with the high value and early date they assign to some of the Gospels that are outside the New Testament. But even so, Funk and Robinson believe that a good amount of useful, reliable material emerges from the Gospels, so that a coherent, even edifying portrait of Jesus emerges. Both scholars appear to admire Jesus and regard him as a spiritual benchmark. Their complaints tend to be directed against an ossified church housing a Christianity preoccupied with doctrine but not with social justice. They may paint with a broad brush, but I have no doubt there are churches that would do well to consider this criticism.

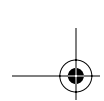
Robert Funk. In *Honest to Jesus* Funk says of his youthful education:

If the creationists had their way I . . . would have been stuck with a literalist reading of Genesis 1 and 2, which I had already acquired from attending Sunday school. . . .

[My pastor] sent me to a Bible college located in the hills of eastern Tennessee. I promptly became a teenage evangelist, using my rhetorical skills to make my audiences laugh and cry.

But I was uneasy. Learning at the college was mostly by memorization and rehearsal. Truth was already encoded in the simplistic creed of the school. A doctrinal straitjacket did not suit me.¹





Funk goes on to describe his later education, which led to a Ph.D. in New Testament and an academic career. He says that he increasingly found teaching in theological institutions frustrating, so he was glad when he relocated to the University of Montana. But even there he grew discouraged, feeling as much out of place in the university as in the church. He relocated to California, founded the Westar Institute and Polebridge Press, and launched the Jesus Seminar.

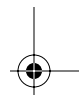
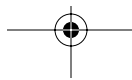
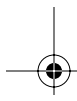
What strikes me is how Funk began his Christian experience with a “literalist reading of Genesis 1 and 2,” went on to attend a “Bible college,” becoming “a teenage evangelist” and learning “by memorization and rehearsal.” I don’t want to read into this too much, but it sure sounds as if a rigid, fundamentalist understanding of Scripture laid the foundation of his formative years. Funk goes on to say that learning was an agonizing experience. I have heard that before—how breaking away from a fundamentalist understanding of Scripture can be emotionally devastating.

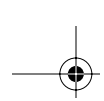
James Robinson. James Robinson was one of my professors in graduate school. I found him fascinating and was much impressed by his productivity. From time to time he remarked on his upbringing and early years in theological education. Not long ago he published an insightful “Theological Autobiography.” In it he spends little time describing his pilgrimage, racing on to narrate at length the frustrations and vicissitudes he experienced in gathering and eventually publishing the Gnostic codices from Nag Hammadi. But here and there in his autobiography Robinson says a few things that pertain to his pilgrimage:

Before going on to graduate studies, I taught for a year at my college (Davidson) . . . a quite literal Old Testament. My students were mostly returning veterans, who must have experienced me as hopelessly naive. Whether or not they actually believed anything I said, by the end of year I no longer did. I had tried to make sense of my childhood theology to myself, and had failed.

In effect, my theological trajectory over half a century has moved step by step from right to left.

I am often asked by Christians who are not academics the leading





question as to how a lifetime of critical biblical scholarship has affected my faith as a Christian. The implied answer is that such “higher criticism” obviously destroyed it.²

Robinson says that at Davidson College he taught “a quite literal Old Testament.” He imagines that his students viewed him as “hopelessly naive.” Here again, we likely have a rigid, fundamentalist understanding of Scripture. Having taught the Old Testament, while probably reading scholarly literature along the way and trying to respond to students’ questions, Robinson says he “no longer” believed what he had taught. But *what* did he no longer believe? He goes on to say, “I had tried to make sense of my childhood theology to myself, and had failed.” What was this “childhood theology”? As best I can extract from his autobiography, Robinson is talking about Calvinist theology and a conservative view of Scripture.

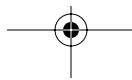
Unable to make sense of his conservative theology, Robinson began moving “step by step from right to left.” Near the end of his autobiography he acknowledges that “higher criticism” destroyed his faith as a Christian. Robinson also asserts that traditional Christianity’s failure to deal with injustice would have destroyed his conservative Christian faith in any case, quite apart from higher criticism.

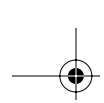
By saying that higher criticism destroyed his Christian faith, I take it that Robinson means the Christian faith of his childhood. Robinson seems to hold to an appreciative view of Jesus. He is skeptical to be sure, but what he says about Jesus, so far as it goes, would be appreciated by most Christians.³ But in my estimation, what he says is comparable to a watered-down version of Ebionite Christology.

NEW SCHOOL SKEPTICS—MISUNDERSTANDING JESUS

The two scholars I mention as “new school skeptics” are far more extreme and more radical than the likes of Funk and Robinson. Indeed, they make Funk and Robinson look like Billy Graham. I have in mind Robert Price and Bart Ehrman.

Robert Price. Robert Price has recently written books in which he argues that the Jesus Seminar is far too optimistic in thinking that as much as 18 percent of the sayings and deeds attributed to Jesus in the Gospels actually



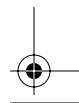
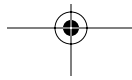
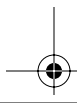


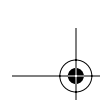
go back to Jesus. Price thinks the evidence is so weak for the historical Jesus that we cannot know anything certain or meaningful about him. He is even willing to entertain the possibility that there never was a historical Jesus.⁴ Is the evidence of Jesus really that thin? Virtually no scholar trained in history will agree with Price's negative conclusions.

Price is a graduate of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, a conservative evangelical school. Previously he was involved with a fundamentalist Baptist church and was a leader of a chapter of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. Not long after seminary, where he was exposed to biblical criticism, Price began rethinking his faith. He returned to school, earning a Ph.D. in systematic theology from Drew University. In the years that followed he began moving to the left, leaving one pastorate for another. He returned to school, this time earning a degree in New Testament. Influenced by nineteenth-century New Testament critics, Price moved further to the left, eventually adopting an agnostic position. His own views of the New Testament Gospels became increasingly radical.

In my view Price's work in the Gospels is overpowered by a philosophical mindset that is at odds with historical research—of any kind. For him parallels in other ancient texts mean that Jesus could not have said what is attributed to him or the event described did not happen. Moreover, because there is evidence that the sayings and stories of Jesus were edited and contextualized, nothing can be trusted. Price uncritically embraces the dubious methods and results of the Jesus Seminar, adopts much of the (discredited) Christ-Myth theory from the nineteenth century (in which it was argued that Jesus never lived), and so forth. Price's procedure strikes me as an atavistic grab bag or a throwback that seems out of touch with genuine progress in critical studies in the last 150 years. What we see in Price is what we have seen before: a flight from fundamentalism.

Bart Ehrman. Bart Ehrman became a believer as a teenager and after his conversion was nurtured in a conservative setting. He enrolled at Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, went on from there to Wheaton College and Wheaton College Graduate School, where he earned degrees in New Testament, and later completed M.Div. and Ph.D. degrees at Princeton Theological Seminary under the direction of Bruce Metzger, the venerable dean of





New Testament textual criticism.

I want to spend more time with Ehrman, for his books have sold widely and have had far more influence than the publications of the other scholars considered in this chapter. It was the study of textual variants—the usual myriad scribal errors and glosses that are found in handwritten books from

OLDEST SYNOPTIC GOSPELS PAPYRI

The earliest copies of manuscripts of the Greek New Testament (the language the New Testament was written in originally) are found on fragments of papyrus (pl. *papyri*, often abbreviated *p*), a type of paper made from reeds that grow along the Nile River in Egypt. Much, but not all, of the Greek New Testament survives in the papyri. All of the Greek New Testament survives in the later codices (sg. *codex*), which are ancient books usually made of vellum, or leather, pages. The oldest Greek papyri containing the text of the Synoptic Gospels are listed below along with the Gospel passage(s) or fragments they contain.

Papyrus 67 (P.Barcelona 1) A.D. 125-150
Matthew 3:9, 15; 5:20-22, 25-28

Papyrus 103 (P.Oxy. 4403) A.D. 175-200
Matthew 13:55-57; 14:3-5

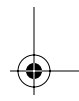
Papyrus 104 (P.Oxy. 4404) A.D. 175-200
Matthew 21:34-37, 43, 45 (?)

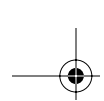
Papyrus 77 (P.Oxy. 2683 + 4405) A.D. 175-200
Matthew 23:30-39

Papyrus 64 (P.Magdalen 17) A.D. 125-150
Matthew 26:7-8, 10, 14-15, 22-23, 31-33

Papyrus 4 (P.Paris 1120) A.D. 125-150
Luke 1:58-59; 1:62-2:1; 2:6-7; 3:8-4:2; 4:29-32, 34-35; 5:3-8

Papyrus 75 (John Bodmer) c. A.D. 175
Luke 3:18-22; 3:33-4:2; 4:34-5:10; 5:37-6:4; 6:10-7:32; 7:35-39, 41-43; 7:46-9:2; 9:4-17:15; 17:19-18:18; 22:4-24:53





antiquity and the Middle Ages—that caused Ehrman to question his faith. In short, he found what he took to be errors in Scripture. Errors in Scripture, thinks Ehrman, mean that the words of Scripture can no longer be viewed as God’s words.

Rather rigid ideas about the verbal inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture underlie Ehrman’s problem, as he says in the autobiographical section of his introduction:

For me, though, this [the loss of the original manuscripts of the New Testament] 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 want to know *His* words.

The Bible began to appear to me as a very human book. . . . 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. . . .

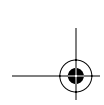
Those of us at Moody, believed that the Bible was absolutely inerrant in its very words.⁵

Because for Ehrman the Bible became a human book and therefore no longer could be viewed as God’s words, he lost confidence in it. Having lost confidence in the Bible, including the Gospels that tell the story of Jesus, Ehrman lost his faith. He now regards himself as an agnostic.

I must admit that I am puzzled by all this. If not at Moody Bible Institute, then surely at Wheaton College, Ehrman must have become acquainted with a great number of textual variants in the biblical manuscripts. No student can earn a degree in Bible and not know this. Yet Bible students are not defecting in droves.

I am also puzzled by Ehrman’s line of reasoning. For the sake of argument, let’s suppose that the scribal errors in the Bible manuscripts really do disprove verbal inspiration and inerrancy, so that the Bible really should be viewed as a *human book* and not as *God’s words*. Would we lose everything as





OLDEST GREEK CODICES

Coincident with the emergence of Christianity was the development of the codex, the forerunner of the modern book, with bound pages printed on both sides. Several early codices of the Greek Bible have survived.

Codex Sinaiticus (abbreviated **S**): produced by three scribes in the fourth century

Codex Vaticanus (abbreviated **B**): produced by two scribes in the fourth century

Codex Alexandrinus (abbreviated **A**): fifth-century codex; first to fall into the hands of Western scholars, leading to quest for more manuscripts, presented to England's Charles I in 1627

Codex Beza (abbreviated **D**): late-fourth-century codex, containing numerous unique readings

Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus (abbreviated **C**): called the "rewriting of Ephraem" because a twelfth-century monk scraped, then copied over this sixth-century Greek codex with the discourses of Ephraem Syrus

Codex Washingtonianus (abbreviated **W**): late-fourth/early-fifth-century codex, containing an interesting gloss at Mark 16:14-15

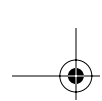


a result? No. Moderate and liberal Christians have held essentially this view for a century or more. The real issue centers on what God accomplished in Jesus of Nazareth.

Let me put it this way: What did Peter and the other original followers of Jesus proclaim following the experience of the resurrection? Peter's preaching is summed up in the Pentecost sermon:

Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. But God raised him up. . . . This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. (Acts 2:22-24, 32)





Peter and the rest of the apostles proclaimed the resurrection of Jesus. For them this was the good news, this was conclusive evidence that God was at work in the ministry and person of Jesus of Nazareth. Peter didn't stand up and proclaim, "Men of Israel, I have good news; the Bible is verbally inspired and therefore inerrant and, moreover, the Gospels can be harmonized." Had that been Peter's message, then Ehrman would have a valid point.

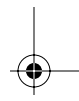
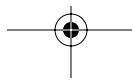
The message that runs throughout the New Testament writings and the earliest Christian communities was that God had raised Jesus, to which Peter and many others (including one or two noncommitted persons, such as Jesus' brothers James and perhaps Jude, and at least one opponent, Paul) bore witness. It was the reality of the resurrection and its impact on those who heard and responded to it in faith that propelled the new movement forward, not "mistake-free" Scripture.

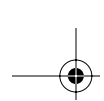
The witness of (Old Testament) Scripture was very important to the early Christian movement, of course. Throughout his sermon Peter appeals to Scripture. Almost every New Testament writer does. But the proofs adduced from Scripture are clearly subordinate to the message itself, which is the miracle of Easter. Nonexperts perhaps need to be told that in the first ten to fifteen years of the existence of the church, not one book of the New Testament was in existence. Nevertheless, the church grew fast and furious, without benefit of a New Testament or the Gospels (inerrant or otherwise).

And finally, I am puzzled by the examples of "errors" that Ehrman puts forward as evidence that Scripture is not trustworthy. Because *Fabricating Jesus* focuses on Jesus and the Gospels and not the rest of the New Testament, I will limit my discussion to the Gospel passages that Ehrman discusses.

Ehrman makes much of passages that he and most textual critics rightly deem as later, inauthentic scribal glosses. He calls attention to Luke 22:41-45, Luke's version of Jesus' prayer in the garden on the night of his betrayal and arrest. The original text consisted of verses 41-42 and 45. Verses 43-44, which describe Jesus' perspiration as great drops of blood, are almost certainly an insertion. Not only are these verses absent from the oldest manuscripts, the portrait of an emotional Jesus is out of step with Luke's tendency to downplay Jesus' emotions.

The story of the woman caught in the act of adultery (Jn 7:53-8:11) ap-





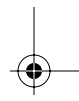
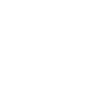
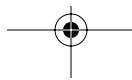
pears only in later manuscripts of the Gospel of John, and sometimes in different locations. The last twelve verses of the Gospel of Mark (Mk 16:9-20) are not the original ending; they were added at least two centuries after Mark first began to circulate. These passages—one from Mark, one from Luke and one from John—represent the only major textual problems in the Gospels. No important teaching hangs on any one of them (unless you belong to a snake-handling cult; see Mk 16:18).

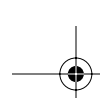
Ehrman thinks he has uncovered an example that demonstrates an important theological difference between the Gospels. In some manuscripts Matthew 24:36 reads: “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but the Father only.” But earlier manuscripts read: “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.” What is conspicuous is the presence of the phrase, “nor the Son.” Ehrman rightly suggests that the verse originally included “nor the Son,” but later scribes probably deliberately omitted it, to avoid the impression that Jesus’ knowledge was limited. Fair enough. But Ehrman draws an unwarranted conclusion when he argues that a significant New Testament teaching—in this case Christology—hangs on the scribal addition. This is simply not true. The limitation of Jesus’ knowledge is plainly stated in the parallel passage in Mark 13:32: “But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” Therefore, with or without “nor the Son” in Matthew 24:36, nothing is changed theologically. Ehrman’s reasoning here is faulty and misleading.

For Ehrman personally, however, the smoking gun that drove him toward the abandonment of his confidence in Scripture is Jesus’ comment in Mark 2:25-26:

And he said to them, “Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?”

Jesus has alluded to the story of David’s receiving consecrated bread (or





“bread of the Presence”) from Ahimelech the priest (1 Sam 21:1-10). David was fleeing from Saul, and when Saul learned that Ahimelech had assisted David and his men, he murdered Ahimelech and most of his family. Abiathar escaped and eventually succeeded his father as priest (1 Sam 22:1-10).

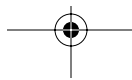
Because Ahimelech—not his son Abiathar—was the priest when David and his men ate the consecrated bread, we have a mistake, technically speaking, either made by Jesus himself or by Mark (or perhaps by someone who passed on the story). Ehrman says he finally admitted to himself that this passage contains 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.” Ehrman then cites a few more candidates, such as Jesus’ comment that the mustard seed is the smallest of seeds or the apparent discrepancy between the Synoptic Gospels and John about which day Jesus died.

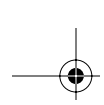
And so everything began to unravel for Ehrman. But observe the line of reasoning; it is so typical of brittle fundamentalism. I have heard fundamentalists say, “Show me one mistake in the Bible and I will throw out the whole thing.” I suspect Ehrman heard that more than once in his Moody Bible Institute days. His reasoning today, even as a professing agnostic, still has a fundamentalist ring to it.

I repeat: The truth of the Christian message hinges not on the inerrancy of Scripture or on our ability to harmonize the four Gospels but on the resurrection of Jesus. And the historical reliability of the Gospels does not hinge on the inerrancy of Scripture or on proof that no mistake of any kind can be detected in them. Ehrman’s struggle with faith—and I feel for him—grows out of mistaken expectations of the nature and function of Scripture, mistaken expectations that he was taught as a young, impressionable fundamentalist Christian.⁶

THE FIRST CHRISTIAN WITNESSES

Emphasizing the central role of the resurrection brings me back to the importance of the first Christian witnesses. It also brings me back to Robert Funk. In his zeal to direct attention to the authentic Jesus as opposed to the Christ of ecclesiastical dogma and creed, Funk goes so far as to assert: “We

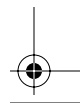
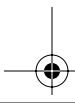


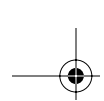


THE OLDEST GREEK MANUSCRIPTS OF JOHN'S GOSPEL

The oldest surviving fragments of the Greek new Testament are found written on papyrus. The following are the oldest papyri that preserve portions of the Gospel of John.

- p⁵** Papyrus 5 (housed in the British Library in London), also designated P.Oxy. 208 + 1781, dates to the early third century. It contains John 1:23-31, 33-40; 16:14-30; 20:11-17, 19-20, 22-25.
- p²²** Papyrus 22 (housed in the Glasgow University Library), also designated P.Oxy. 1228, dates to the middle of the third century. It contains John 15:25-16:2, 21-32.
- p²⁸** Papyrus 28 (housed in the Palestine Institute Museum of the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California), also designated P.Oxy. 1596, dates to the late third century. It contains John 6:8-12, 17-22.
- p³⁹** Papyrus 39 (housed in Ambrose Swasey Library, Rochester Divinity School), also designated P.Oxy. 1780, dates to the early third century. It is a small fragment, containing John 8:14-22.
- p⁴⁵** Papyrus 45 (housed in the Chester Beatty Collection, in Dublin), also designated P. Chester Beatty I, dates to the late second century. This is one of the major papyri. It contains large portions of the four Gospels and Acts. Of John it contains 4:51, 54; 5:21, 24; 10:7-25; 10:30-11:10, 18-36, 42-57. P46 (P. Chester Beatty II) contains significant portions of several of Paul's letters
- p⁵²** Papyrus 52 (housed in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester), also designated Gr. P. 457, dates to the very beginning of the second century and may be the oldest surviving fragment of the Greek New Testament (though recently some have claimed that fragments of Matthew date to the first century itself). Papyrus 52 is a small fragment, containing John 18:31-33 (on the recto side), 37-38 (on the verso side).
- p⁶⁶** Papyrus 66 (housed in the Bibliotheca Bodmeriana), also designated P. Bodmer II, dates to the second or third century. The Bodmer Papyri are very important. Papyrus 66 contains John 1:1-6:11; 6:35-14:26, 29-30; 15:2-26; 16:2-4, 6-7; 16:10-20:20, 22-23; 20:25-21:9, 12, 17.
- p⁷⁵** Papyrus 75 (housed in the Bibliotheca Bodmeriana), also designated P. Bodmer XIV and XV, dates to the late second century. Besides portions of Luke, it contains John 1:1-11:45, 48-57; 12:3-13:1, 8-9; 14:8-29; 15:7-8.
- p⁸⁰** Papyrus 80 (housed in the Fundación San Lucas Evangelista, Barce-





lona), also designated P. Barcelona 83, dates to the middle of the third century. All that survives is a single verse: John 3:34.

p⁹⁰ Papyrus 90 (housed in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford), also designated P.Oxy. 3523, dates to the middle or late second century. It contains John 18:36–19:7.

p⁹⁵ Papyrus 95 (housed in the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florence), also designated PL II/31, dates to the third century. It contains John 5:26–29, 36–38.

0162 Uncial 0162 (housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), also designated P.Oxy. 847, is not a papyrus, but a single leaf of leather, or vellum. It dates to the late third or early fourth century and as such is an early example of the later uncial. It contains John 2:11–22.

Uncial refers to codices of the Bible written in the third to tenth centuries on parchment or vellum in large rounded capital letters. They are the next earliest copies of manuscripts after the papyri.

P.Oxy. = Oxyrhynchus Papyri, a trove of thousands of papyrus fragments found in Egypt at Oxyrhynchus, containing a variety of texts in six or more languages.

can no longer rest our faith on the faith of Peter or the faith of Paul.”⁷ On one level, he is right; I think I understand what he means. Christians must embrace what Jesus taught and what Jesus himself believed. Quite true. But on another level I think that Funk is seriously mistaken. Peter and Paul were foundational witnesses to the event that brought the church into existence: the resurrection of Jesus. Ignoring this witness runs the risk of abandoning authentic Christianity, Jesus and all.

The documents that the early Christian community gathered bore witness to this great event and struggled to interpret it and apply it in a variety of real-life situations. The books that make up the New Testament constitute a vital record of the early church’s experience and witness. These witnesses and the records they left behind need to be taken seriously and studied carefully.⁸ Failure to do so will almost certainly result in distorted portraits of Jesus and misguided understanding of what true Christian faith is all about.

