Jesus, Interrupted

Revealing the

Hidden Contradictions in the Bible

(and Why We Don't Know About Them)

Bart D. Ehrman

Contents

	Preface	v
ONE	A Historical Assault on Faith	1
TWO	A World of Contradictions	19
THREE	A Mass of Variant Views	61
FOUR	Who Wrote the Bible?	101
FIVE	Liar, Lunatic, or Lord? Finding the Historical Jesus	139
SIX	How We Got the Bible	181
SEVEN	Who Invented Christianity?	225
EIGHT	Is Faith Possible?	269
	Notes	285
	About the Author	
	Other Books by Bart D. Ehrman	
	Credits	
	Cover	
	Copyright	
	About the Publisher	

Preface

I arrived at Princeton Theological Seminary in August 1978, fresh out of college and recently married. I had a well-thumbed Greek New Testament, a passion for knowledge, and not much else. I had not always been passionate about learning. No one who knew me five or six years earlier would ever have predicted that I'd be headed for a career in academia. But I had been bitten by the academic bug somewhere along the way in college. I suppose it was first at the Moody Bible Institute, in Chicago, a fundamentalist Bible college I started attending at the ripe young age of seventeen. There my academic drive was fueled not by intellectual curiosity so much as by a religious desire for certainty.

Studying at Moody was an intense experience for me. I had gone there because I had had a "born-again" experience in high school and decided that to be a "serious" Christian I would need serious training in the Bible. And somehow, during my first semester in college, something happened to me: I became passionate—fierce, even—in my quest for knowledge about the Bible. At Moody not only did I take every Bible and theology course that I could, but on my own I also memorized entire books of the Bible by rote. I studied during every free moment. I read books and mastered lecture notes. Just about every week I pulled an all-nighter, preparing for classes.

Three years of that will change a person's life. It will certainly toughen up one's mind. When I graduated from Moody I headed off to Wheaton College to get a degree in English literature, but I kept up my intense focus on the Bible, taking interpretation courses and teaching the Bible every week to kids in my youth group at church. And I learned Greek so that I could study the New Testament in its original language.

As a committed Bible-believing Christian I was certain that the Bible, down to its very words, had been inspired by God. Maybe that's what drove my intense study. These were God's words, the communications of the Creator of the universe and Lord of all, spoken to us, mere mortals. Surely knowing them intimately was the most important thing in life. At least it was for me. Understanding literature more broadly would help me understand this piece of literature in particular (hence my major in English literature); being able to read it in Greek helped me know the actual words given by the Author of the text.

I had decided already in the course of my freshman year at Moody that I wanted to become a professor of the Bible. Then, at Wheaton, I realized that I was pretty good at Greek. And so my next step was virtually chosen for me: I would do a doctorate in New Testament studies, and work especially on some aspect of the Greek language. My beloved professor of Greek at Wheaton, Gerald Hawthorne, introduced me to the work of Bruce Metzger, the most revered scholar of Greek biblical manuscripts in the country, who happened to teach at Princeton Theological Seminary. And so I applied to Princeton, knowing nothing—absolutely nothing—about it, except that Bruce Metzger taught there and that if I wanted to become an expert in Greek manuscripts, Princeton was where I needed to go.

I guess I did know *one* thing about Princeton Seminary: it was not an evangelical institution. And the more I learned about it in the months leading up to my move to New Jersey, the more nervous I became. I learned from friends that Princeton was a "liberal" seminary where they did not hold to the literal truth and verbal

inspiration of the Bible. My biggest challenge would not be purely academic, doing well enough in my master's-level classes to earn the right to go on to do a Ph.D. It would be holding on to my faith in the Bible as the inspired and inerrant Word of God.

And so I came to Princeton Theological Seminary young and poor but passionate, and armed to take on all those liberals with their watered-down view of the Bible. As a good evangelical Christian I was ready to fend off any attacks on my biblical faith. I could answer any apparent contradiction and resolve any potential discrepancy in the Word of God, whether in the Old or New Testament. I knew I had a lot to learn, but I was not *about* to learn that my sacred text had any mistakes in it.

Some things don't go as planned. What I actually did learn at Princeton led me to change my mind about the Bible. I did not change my mind willingly—I went down kicking and screaming. I prayed (lots) about it, I wrestled (strenuously) with it, I resisted it with all my might. But at the same time I thought that if I was truly committed to God, I also had to be fully committed to the truth. And it became clear to me over a long period of time that my former views of the Bible as the inerrant revelation from God were flat-out wrong. My choice was either to hold on to views that I had come to realize were in error or to follow where I believed the truth was leading me. In the end, it was no choice. If something was true, it was true; if not, not.

I've known people over the years who have said, "If my beliefs are at odds with the facts, so much the worse for the facts." I've never been one of these people. In the chapters that follow I try to explain why scholarship on the Bible forced me to change my views.

This kind of information is relevant not only to scholars like me, who devote their lives to serious research, but also to everyone who is interested in the Bible—whether they personally consider themselves believers or not. In my opinion this really matters. Whether you are a believer—fundamentalist, evangelical, moderate, liberal—or a nonbeliever, the Bible is the most significant book in the

history of our civilization. Coming to understand what it actually is, and is not, is one of the most important intellectual endeavors that anyone in our society can embark upon.

Some people reading this book may be very uncomfortable with the information it presents. All I ask is that, if you're in that boat, you do what I did—approach this information with an open mind and be willing to change if change you must. If, on the other hand, you find nothing shocking or disturbing in the book, all I ask is that you sit back and enjoy.

I owe a mountain of gratitude to a number of careful and insightful readers who have plowed through my manuscript and vigorously insisted—not in vain, I hope—that I change it in places to make it better: Dale Martin of Yale University and Jeff Siker of Loyola Marymount University; my daughter, Kelly Ehrman Katz; my graduate students Jared Anderson and Benjamin White; an insightful reader for the press; and my very sharp and helpful editor at HarperOne, Roger Freet.

Translations of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) are taken from the New Revised Standard Version; those of the New Testament are either from the NRSV or are my own; quotations of the Apostolic Fathers are my own.

I have dedicated the book to my two-year-old granddaughter, Aiya—who is perfect in every way.

ONE

A Historical Assault on Faith

The Bible is the most widely purchased, extensively read, and deeply revered book in the history of Western Civilization. Arguably it is also the most thoroughly misunderstood, especially by the lay reading public.

Scholars of the Bible have made significant progress in understanding the Bible over the past two hundred years, building on archaeological discoveries, advances in our knowledge of the ancient Hebrew and Greek languages in which the books of Scripture were originally written, and deep and penetrating historical, literary, and textual analyses. This is a massive scholarly endeavor. Thousands of scholars just in North America alone continue to do serious research in the field, and the results of their study are regularly and routinely taught, both to graduate students in universities and to prospective pastors attending seminaries in preparation for the ministry.

Yet such views of the Bible are virtually unknown among the population at large. In no small measure this is because those of us who spend our professional lives studying the Bible have not done a good job communicating this knowledge to the general public and because many pastors who learned this material in seminary have, for a variety of reasons, not shared it with their parishioners once they take up positions in the church. (Churches, of course, are the most obvious place where the Bible is—or, rather, ought to be—taught and

discussed.) As a result, not only are most Americans (increasingly) ignorant of the *contents* of the Bible, but they are also almost completely in the dark about what scholars have been saying about the Bible for the past two centuries. This book is meant to help redress that problem. It could be seen as my attempt to let the cat out of the bag.

The perspectives that I present in the following chapters are not my own idiosyncratic views of the Bible. They are the views that have held sway for many, many years among the majority of serious critical scholars teaching in the universities and seminaries of North America and Europe, even if they have not been effectively communicated to the population at large, let alone among people of faith who revere the Bible and who would be, presumably, the ones most interested. For all those who aspire to being well educated, knowledgeable, and informed about our civilization's most important book, that has to change.

A SEMINARIAN'S INTRODUCTION TO THE BIBLE

Most of the people who are trained in Bible scholarship have been educated in theological institutions. Of course, a wide range of students head off to seminaries every year. Many of them have been involved with Bible studies through their school years, even dating back to their childhood Sunday School classes. But they have typically approached the Bible from a devotional point of view, reading it for what it can tell them about what to believe and how to live their lives. As a rule, such students have not been interested in or exposed to what scholars have discovered about the difficulties of the Bible when it is studied from a more academic, historical perspective.

Other students are serious about doing well academically in seminary but do not seem to know the Bible very well or to hold particularly high views of Scripture as the inspired Word of God. These students are often believers born and raised, who feel called to ministry—most of them to ministry in the church, but a good number of them to other kinds of social ministry. For the country's

mainline denominations—Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran, Episcopalian, and so on—a good number of these students are already what I would call liberal. They do not believe in the inerrancy of the Bible and are more committed to the church as an institution than to Scripture as a blueprint for what to believe and how to live one's life. And many of them, frankly, don't know very much about the Bible and have only a kind of vague sense of its religious value.

It was not always like this in Protestant seminaries. In earlier decades it could be assumed that a student would arrive at seminary with a vast knowledge of the Bible, and the training for ministry could presuppose that students had at their command the basic contents of both Old and New Testaments. That, sadly, is no longer the case. When I was at Princeton Theological Seminary (a Presbyterian school) in the late 1970s, most of my classmates were required to take remedial work in order to pass an exam that we called the "baby Bible" exam, a test of a student's knowledge about the most basic information about the Bible—What is the "Pentateuch"? In what book is the Sermon on the Mount found? Who is Theophilus?—information that most of us from stronger evangelical backgrounds already had under our belts.

My hunch is that the majority of students coming into their first year of seminary training do not know what to expect from courses on the Bible. These classes are only a small part of the curriculum, of course. There are required courses in church history, systematic theology, Christian education, speech, homiletics (preaching), and church administration. It's a lot to squeeze into three years. But everyone is required to take introductory and advanced courses in biblical studies. Most students expect these courses to be taught from a more or less pious perspective, showing them how, as future pastors, to take the Bible and make it applicable to people's lives in their weekly sermons.

Such students are in for a rude awakening. Mainline Protestant seminaries in this country are notorious for challenging students' cherished beliefs about the Bible—even if these cherished beliefs are

simply a warm and fuzzy sense that the Bible is a wonderful guide to faith and practice, to be treated with reverence and piety. These seminaries teach serious, hard-core Bible scholarship. They don't pander to piety. They are taught by scholars who are familiar with what German- and English-speaking scholarship has been saying about the Bible over the past three hundred years. They are keen to make students knowledgeable *about* the Bible, rather than teach what is actually *in* the Bible. Bible classes in seminary are usually taught from a purely academic, historical perspective, unlike anything most first-year students expect and unlike anything they've heard before, at home, at church, or in Sunday School.

The approach taken to the Bible in almost all Protestant (and now Catholic) mainline seminaries is what is called the "historical-critical" method. It is completely different from the "devotional" approach to the Bible one learns in church. The devotional approach to the Bible is concerned about what the Bible has to say—especially what it has to say to me personally or to my society. What does the Bible tell me about God? Christ? The church? My relation to the world? What does it tell me about what to believe? About how to act? About social responsibilities? How can the Bible help make me closer to God? How does it help me to live?

The historical-critical approach has a different set of concerns and therefore poses a different set of questions. At the heart of this approach is the historical question (hence its name) of what the biblical writings meant in their original historical context. Who were the actual authors of the Bible? Is it possible (yes!) that some of the authors of some of the biblical books were not in fact who they claimed, or were claimed, to be—say, that 1 Timothy was not actually written by Paul, or that Genesis was not written by Moses? When did these authors live? What were the circumstances under which they wrote? What issues were they trying to address in their own day? How were they affected by the cultural and historical assumptions of their time? What sources did these authors use? When were these sources produced? Is it possible that the perspectives of these sources

differed from one another? Is it possible that the authors who used these sources had different perspectives, both from their sources and from one another? Is it possible that the books of the Bible, based on a variety of sources, have internal contradictions? That there are irreconcilable differences among them? And is it possible that what the books originally meant in their original context is not what they are taken to mean today? That our interpretations of Scripture involve taking its words out of context and thereby distorting its message?

And what if we don't even have the original words? What if, during the centuries in which the Bible—both the Old Testament, in Hebrew, and the New Testament, in Greek—was copied by hand, the words were changed by well-meaning but careless scribes, or by fully alert scribes who wanted to alter the texts in order to make them say what they wanted them to say?

These are among the many, many questions raised by the historical-critical method. No wonder entering seminarians have to prepare for "baby Bible" exams even before they could begin a serious study of the Bible. This kind of study presupposes that you know what you're talking about before you start talking about it.

A very large percentage of seminarians are completely blind-sided by the historical-critical method. They come in with the expectation of learning the pious truths of the Bible so that they can pass them along in their sermons, as their own pastors have done for them. Nothing prepares them for historical criticism. To their surprise they learn, instead of material for sermons, all the results of what historical critics have established on the basis of centuries of research. The Bible is filled with discrepancies, many of them irreconcilable contradictions. Moses did not write the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) and Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John did not write the Gospels. There are other books that did not make it into the Bible that at one time or another were considered canonical—other Gospels, for example, allegedly written by Jesus' followers Peter, Thomas, and Mary. The Exodus probably did not happen as described in the Old Testament. The conquest of the

Promised Land is probably based on legend. The Gospels are at odds on numerous points and contain nonhistorical material. It is hard to know whether Moses ever existed and what, exactly, the historical Jesus taught. The historical narratives of the Old Testament are filled with legendary fabrications and the book of Acts in the New Testament contains historically unreliable information about the life and teachings of Paul. Many of the books of the New Testament are pseudonymous—written not by the apostles but by later writers *claiming* to be apostles. The list goes on.

Some students accept these new views from day one. Others—especially among the more conservative students—resist for a long time, secure in their knowledge that God would not allow any falsehoods into his sacred book. But before long, as students see more and more of the evidence, many of them find that their faith in the inerrancy and absolute historical truthfulness of the Bible begins to waver. There simply is too much evidence, and to reconcile all of the hundreds of differences among the biblical sources requires so much speculation and fancy interpretive footwork that eventually it gets to be too much for them.

PROBLEMS WITH THE BIBLE

For students who come into seminary with a view that the Bible is completely, absolutely, one hundred percent without error, the realization that most critical scholars have a very different view can come as a real shock to their systems. And once these students open the floodgates by admitting there might be mistakes in the Bible, their understanding of Scripture takes a radical turn. The more they read the text carefully and intensely, the more mistakes they find, and they begin to see that in fact the Bible makes *better* sense if you acknowledge its inconsistencies instead of staunchly insisting that there aren't any, even when they are staring you in the face.

To be sure, many beginning students are expert at reconciling differences among the Gospels. For example, the Gospel of Mark

indicates that it was in the last week of his life that Jesus "cleansed the Temple" by overturning the tables of the money changers and saying, "This is to be a house of prayer . . . but you have made it a den of thieves" (Mark 11), whereas according to John this happened at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry (John 2). Some readers have thought that Jesus must have cleansed the Temple twice, once at the beginning of his ministry and once at the end. But that would mean that neither Mark nor John tells the "true" story, since in both accounts he cleanses the temple only once. Moreover, is this reconciliation of the two accounts historically plausible? If Jesus made a disruption in the temple at the beginning of his ministry, why wasn't he arrested by the authorities then? Once one comes to realize that the Bible might have discrepancies it is possible to see that the Gospels of Mark and John might want to teach something different about the cleansing of the Temple, and so they have located the event to two different times of Jesus' ministry. Historically speaking, then, the accounts are not reconcilable.

The same can be said of Peter's denials of Jesus. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus tells Peter that he will deny him three times "before the cock crows twice." In Matthew's Gospel he tells him that it will be "before the cock crows." Well, which is it—before the cock crows once or twice? When I was in college I purchased a book that was intent on reconciling differences of this kind. It was called *The Life of Christ in Stereo*. The author, Johnston Cheney, took the four Gospel accounts and wove them together into one big mega-Gospel, to show what the *real* Gospel was like. For the inconsistency in the account of the denials of Peter, the author had a very clever solution: Peter actually denied Jesus *six* times, three times before the cock crowed and three more times before it crowed twice. This can also explain why Peter denies Jesus to more than three different people (or groups of people) in the various accounts. But here again, in order to resolve the tension between the Gospels the interpreter has to write his *own* Gospel, which is unlike any of the Gospels found in the New Testament. And isn't it a bit absurd to say that, in effect,

only "my" Gospel—the one I create from parts of the four in the New Testament—is the right one, and that the others are only partially right?

The same problem occurs in the accounts of Jesus' resurrection. On the third day after Jesus' death, the women go to the tomb to anoint his body for burial. And whom do they see there? Do they see a man, as Mark says, or two men (Luke), or an angel (Matthew)? This is normally reconciled by saying that the women *actually* saw "two angels." That can explain everything else—why Matthew says they saw *an* angel (he mentions only one of the two angels, but doesn't deny there was a second), why Mark says it was a man (the angels appeared to be men, even though they were angels, and Mark mentions only one of them without denying there was a second), and why Luke says it was two men (since the angels appeared to be men). The problem is that this kind of reconciling again requires one to assert that what really happened is unlike what *any* of the Gospels say—since none of the three accounts states that the women saw "two angels."

As we will see, there are lots of other discrepancies in the New Testament, some of them far more difficult to reconcile (virtually impossible, I would say) than these simple examples. Not only are there discrepancies among different books of the Bible, but there are also inconsistencies *within* some of the books, a problem that historical critics have long ascribed to the fact that Gospel writers used different sources for their accounts, and sometimes these sources, when spliced together, stood at odds with one another. It's amazing how internal problems like these, if you're not alerted to them, are so easily passed by when you read the Gospels, but how when someone points them out they seem so obvious. Students often ask me, "Why didn't I see this before?" For example, in John's Gospel, Jesus performs his first miracle in chapter 2, when he turns the water into wine (a favorite miracle story on college campuses), and we're told that "this was the first sign that Jesus did" (John 2:11). Later in that chapter we're told that Jesus did "many signs" in Jerusalem (John 2:23). And then, in

chapter 4, he heals the son of a centurion, and the author says, "This was the second sign that Jesus did" (John 4:54). Huh? One sign, many signs, and then the second sign?[1]

One of my favorite apparent discrepancies—I read John for years without realizing how strange this one is—comes in Jesus' "Farewell Discourse," the last address that Jesus delivers to his disciples, at his last meal with them, which takes up all of chapters 13 to 17 in the Gospel according to John. In John 13:36, Peter says to Jesus, "Lord, where are you going?" A few verses later Thomas says, "Lord, we do not know where you are going" (John 14:5). And then, a few minutes later, at the same meal, Jesus upbraids his disciples, saying, "Now I am going to the one who sent me, yet none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' " (John 16:5). Either Jesus had a very short attention span or there is something strange going on with the sources for these chapters, creating an odd kind of disconnect.

These kinds of problems turn out to be even more common in the Old Testament, starting at its very beginning. Some people go to great lengths to smooth over all these differences, but when you look at them closely, they are very difficult indeed to reconcile. And why should they be reconciled? Maybe they are simply differences. The creation account in Genesis 1 is very different from the account in Genesis 2. Not only is the wording and writing style different, as is very obvious when you read the text in Hebrew, and not only do the two chapters use different names for God, but the very content of the chapters differs in numerous respects. Just make a list of everything that happens in chapter 1 in the order it occurs, and a separate list for chapter 2, and compare your lists. Are animals created *before* humans, as in chapter 1, or *after*, as in chapter 2? Are plants created before humans or afterward? Is "man" the first living creature to be created or the last? Is woman created at the same time as man or separately? Even within each story there are problems: if "light" was created on the first day of creation in Genesis 1, how is it that the sun, moon, and stars were not created until the fourth day? Where was the light coming from, if not the sun, moon, and stars? And how

could there be an "evening and morning" on each of the first three days if there was no sun?

That's just the beginning. When Noah takes the animals on the ark, does he take seven pairs of all the "clean" animals, as Genesis 7:2 states, or just two pairs, as Genesis 7:9–10 indicates?

In the book of Exodus, God tells Moses, "I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name 'The LORD' [= Yahweh] I did not make myself known to them" (Exodus 6:3). How does this square with what is found earlier, in Genesis, where God *does* make himself known to Abraham as The LORD: "Then he [God] said to him [Abraham], 'I am The LORD [= Yahweh] who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans'" (Genesis 15:7)?

Or consider one of my all-time favorite passages, the description of the ten plagues that Moses brought down on the heads of the Egyptians in order to compel Pharaoh to "let my people go." The fifth plague was a pestilence that killed "all of the livestock of the Egyptians" (Exodus 9:5). How is it, then, that a few days later the seventh plague, of hail, was to destroy all of the Egyptian livestock in the fields (Exodus 9:21–22)? What livestock?

A close reading of the Bible reveals other problems besides the many discrepancies and contradictions. There are places where the text seems to embrace a view that seems unworthy of God or of his people. Are we really to think of God as someone who orders the wholesale massacre of an entire city? In Joshua 6, God orders the soldiers of Israel to attack the city of Jericho and to slaughter every man, woman, and child in the city. I suppose it makes sense that God would not want bad influences on his people—but does he really think that murdering all the toddlers and infants is necessary to that end? What do they have to do with wickedness?

Or what is one to make of Psalm 137, one of the most beautiful Psalms, which starts with the memorable lines "By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept, when we remembered Zion." Here is a powerful reflection by a faithful Israelite who longs to return to Jerusalem, which had been destroyed by

the Babylonians. But his praise of God, and of his holy city, takes a vicious turn at the end, when he plots his revenge on God's enemies: "Happy shall they be who take your [Babylonian] little ones, and dash them against the rock." Knocking the brains out of the Babylonian babies in retaliation for what their father-soldiers did? Is this in the Bible?

The God of vengeance is found not only in the Old Testament, as some Christians have tried to claim. Even the New Testament God is a God of judgment and wrath, as any reader of the book of Revelation knows. The Lake of Fire is stoked up and ready for everyone who is opposed to God. This will involve *eternal* burning—an everlasting punishment, even for those who have sinned against God, intermittently, say, for twenty years. Twenty trillion years of torment in exchange for twenty years of wrong living; and that's only the beginning. Is this really worthy of God?

I should stress that scholars and students who question such passages are not questioning God himself. They are questioning what the Bible has to *say* about God. Some such scholars continue to think that the Bible is in some sense inspired—other scholars, of course, do not. But even if the authors of the Bible were in some sense inspired, they were not completely infallible; in fact, they made mistakes. These mistakes involved discrepancies and contradictions, but they also involved mistaken notions about God, who he really was and what he really wanted. Does he really want his followers to splash the brains of their enemies' infants against the rocks? Does he really plan to torment unbelievers for trillions of years?

These are the questions many seminarians are forced to grapple with as they move away from the devotional commitment to the Bible that they bring with them to seminary and begin to study the Bible in light of scholarship. They are questions raised, in large extent, as a result of being trained in the historical-critical approach to the Bible, the approach that is taught in most mainline Protestant seminaries and that is the more or less "orthodox" view among biblical scholars in America and Europe.

This view insists that each author of the Bible lived in his own time and place—and not in ours. Each author had a set of cultural and religious assumptions that we ourselves may not share. The historical-critical method tries to understand what each of these authors may have meant in his original context. According to this view, each author must be allowed to have his own say. Within the New Testament, the author of Matthew isn't saying the same thing as Luke. Mark is different from John. Paul may not see eye to eye with James. The author of Revelation seems to be different from all the others. And once you throw the Old Testament into the mix, things get completely jumbled. The authors of Job and Ecclesiastes explicitly state that there is no afterlife. The book of Amos insists that the people of God suffer because God is punishing them for their sins; the book of Job insists that the innocent can suffer; and the book of Daniel indicates that the innocent in fact will suffer. All of these books are different, all of them have a message, and all of the messages deserve to be heard.

FROM SEMINARY TO PULPIT

One of the most amazing and perplexing features of mainstream Christianity is that seminarians who learn the historical-critical method in their Bible classes appear to forget all about it when it comes time for them to be pastors. They are taught critical approaches to Scripture, they learn about the discrepancies and contradictions, they discover all sorts of historical errors and mistakes, they come to realize that it is difficult to know whether Moses existed or what Jesus actually said and did, they find that there are other books that were at one time considered canonical but that ultimately did not become part of Scripture (for example, other Gospels and Apocalypses), they come to recognize that a good number of the books of the Bible are pseudonymous (for example, written in the name of an apostle by someone else), that in fact we don't have the original copies of any of the biblical books but only copies made

centuries later, all of which have been altered. They learn all this, and yet when they enter church ministry they appear to put it back on the shelf. For reasons I will explore in the conclusion, pastors are, as a rule, reluctant to teach what they learned about the Bible in seminary.[2]

I vividly recall the first time I came to realize this concretely. I had just started teaching at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and was still a Christian. The pastor of a Presbyterian church in North Carolina asked me to do a four-week series on "the historical Jesus." So I did. In my lectures I talked about why historians have problems using the Gospels as historical sources, in view of their discrepancies and the fact that they were written decades after the life of Jesus by unknown authors who had inherited their accounts about him from the highly malleable oral tradition. I also talked about how scholars have devised methods for reconstructing what probably happened in the life of Jesus, and ended the series by laying out what we can actually know about him. There was nothing at all novel in what I discussed—it was standard scholarly material, the kind of thing that has been taught in seminaries for over fifty years. I learned all this material while I was at Princeton Seminary myself.

Afterward a dear elderly lady came up to me and asked me in frustration, "Why have I never heard this before?" She was not distressed at what I had said; she was distressed that her pastor had never said it. I remember looking across the fellowship hall to the pastor, who was talking to a couple of other parishioners, and wondering the same thing myself: Why had he never told her? He, too, had gone to Princeton Theological Seminary, he too had learned all these things; he taught adult education classes at this church and had been doing so for more than five years. Why had he not told his parishioners what he knew about the Bible and the historical Jesus? Surely they deserved to hear. Was it because he didn't think they were "ready" for it—a patronizing attitude that is disturbingly common? Was he afraid to "make waves"? Was he afraid that historical

information might destroy the faith of his congregation? Was he afraid that church leaders might not take kindly to the dissemination of such knowledge? Did church leaders actually put pressure on him to stick to the devotional meaning of the Bible in his preaching and teaching? Was he concerned about job security? I never found out.

I am not saying that churches should be mini-universities where pastors function as professors from the pulpit. But surely the ministry involves more than preaching the "good news" (however that is understood) every week. It also involves teaching. Most churches have adult education classes. Why aren't adults being educated? My experience in this particular church is not an isolated case.

Every year I teach hundreds of students in my "Introduction to the New Testament" course at Chapel Hill. Normally there are three hundred to three hundred fifty students in the class. I teach the class, of course, not from a confessional or devotional point of view—the view that most of these students, having been raised in the church, are accustomed to hearing—but from a historical-critical point of view. The information and perspectives I present in the class are nothing radical. They are the views found among critical scholars who approach the Bible historically—whether the scholars themselves are believers or unbelievers, Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, agnostic, or whatever else. They are the views I learned in seminary and the views that are taught at divinity schools and universities throughout the country. But they are views that my students have never heard before, even though most of these students have spent a good deal of their lives in Sunday School and church.

My students have a range of reactions to these views. Many of my more conservative students are like me at that age—certain of the Bible's absolute truthfulness and wary of anyone who might call it into question. Some of these students refuse to listen—it is almost as if they cover their ears and hum loudly so they don't have to hear anything that might cause them to doubt their cherished beliefs about the Bible. Others are eager to break away from the confines of

the church and religion entirely, devouring the information I give as if it provides a license to disbelieve.

I personally don't think either reaction—the radical rejection or the all-too-eager embrace of the new perspective on the Bible—is ideal. What I prefer are students who carefully study the material, consider it thoughtfully, question some of its (and their own) assumptions and conclusions, reflect on how it might affect the way they look at the Bible and the Christian religion on which they were raised, and cautiously consider how it might affect them personally. One of my main goals, of course, is to get them to learn the material for the course. It is, after all, historical information about a historical religion and a historically based set of documents. The class is not meant to be a theological exercise to strengthen or weaken one's faith. But since the documents we consider are, for many students, documents of faith, inevitably the historical-critical method we use in class has some implications for faith. And another ultimate objective that I have—as should every university professor—is to get students to *think*.

ACCEPTING THE HISTORICAL-CRITICAL METHOD

Like lots of other seminary students, once I came to see the potential value of historical criticism at Princeton Seminary, I started adopting this new (for me) approach, very cautiously at first, as I didn't want to concede too much to scholarship. But eventually I saw the powerful logic behind the historical-critical method and threw myself heart and soul into the study of the Bible from this perspective.

It is hard for me to pinpoint the exact moment that I stopped being a fundamentalist who believed in the absolute inerrancy and verbal inspiration of the Bible. As I point out in *Misquoting Jesus*, the key issue for me early on was the historical fact that we don't have the original writings of any of the books of the Bible, but only copies made later—in most instances, many centuries later. For me,

it started making less and less sense to think that God had inspired the very words of the text if we didn't actually have these words, if the texts had in fact been changed, in many thousands of places, most of the changes insignificant but many of them of real importance. If God wanted us to have his words, why didn't he preserve his words?

At about the time I started to doubt that God had inspired the words of the Bible, I began to be influenced by Bible courses taught from a historical-critical perspective. I started seeing discrepancies in the text. I saw that some of the books of the Bible were at odds with one another. I became convinced by the arguments that some of the books were not written by the authors for whom they were named. And I began to see that many of the traditional Christian doctrines that I had long held to be beyond question, such as the doctrines of the divinity of Christ and of the Trinity, were not present in the earliest traditions of the New Testament but had developed over time and had moved away from the original teachings of Jesus and his apostles.

These realizations had a profound impact on my faith, as I think they did on that of many of my fellow seminarians at the time and continue to have on many seminarians today. Unlike most of my seminarian friends, though, I did not revert to a devotional approach to the Bible the day after I graduated with my master's of divinity degree. Instead I devoted myself even more wholeheartedly to learning more about the Bible from a historical perspective, and about the Christian faith that I had thought was taught by the Bible. I had started seminary as a born-again fundamentalist; by the time I graduated I was moving toward a liberal form of evangelical Christianity, one that still saw the Bible as conveying important teachings of God to his people, but also as a book filled with human perspectives and mistakes.

As time went on my views continued to evolve. I did not go from being an evangelical to an agnostic overnight. Quite the contrary: for some fifteen years after I had given up on my views of the verbal

inspiration of the Bible, I continued to be a faithful Christian—a churchgoing, God-believing, sin-confessing Christian. I did become increasingly liberal in my views. My research led me to question important aspects of my faith. Eventually, not long after I left the seminary, I came to the place where I still believed completely in God, but understood the Bible in a more metaphorical, less literal, sense: the Bible seemed to me to contain inspired literature, in that it could inspire true and useful thinking about God, but it was still the product of human hands and contained all the kinds of mistakes that any human undertaking will bring.

There came a time when I left the faith. This was not because of what I learned through historical criticism, but because I could no longer reconcile my faith in God with the state of the world that I saw all around me. This is the issue I deal with in my book *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer*. There is so much senseless pain and misery in the world that I came to find it impossible to believe that there is a good and loving God who is in control, despite my knowing all the standard rejoinders that people give.

That is the subject of another book, but it is of some relevance to the present book because over the fifteen years between the time I gave up my evangelical commitments and the time I became agnostic, I was intimately involved with the historical criticism of the Bible, especially the New Testament. Here I want to stress a point that I will be reiterating, with vigor, in my final chapter. I decidedly do *not* think that historical criticism necessarily leads to a loss of faith.

All of my closest friends (and next-to-closest friends) in the guild of New Testament studies agree with most of my historical views of the New Testament, the historical Jesus, the development of the Christian faith, and other similar issues. We may disagree on this point or that (in fact we do—we are, after all, scholars), but we all agree on the historical methods and the basic conclusions they lead to. All of these friends, however, have remained committed Christians. Some

teach in universities, some in seminaries and divinity schools. Some are ordained ministers. Most are active in their churches. Historical-critical approaches to the Bible came to many of them as a shock in seminary, but their faith withstood the shock. In my case, historical criticism led me to question my faith. Not just its superficial aspects but its very heart. Yet it was the problem of suffering, not a historical approach to the Bible, that led me to agnosticism.

This book is not, then, about my loss of faith. It is, however, about how certain kinds of faith—particularly the faith in the Bible as the historically inerrant and inspired Word of God—cannot be sustained in light of what we as historians know about the Bible. The views I set out in this book are standard fare among scholars. I don't know a single Bible scholar who will learn a single thing from this book, although they will disagree with conclusions here and there. In theory, pastors should not learn much from it either, as this material is widely taught in seminaries and divinity schools. But most people in the street, and in the pew, have heard none of this before. That is a real shame, and it is time that something is done to correct the problem.