

LOST IN TRANSMISSION? MISSION?

WHAT WE CAN KNOW ABOUT
THE WORDS OF JESUS

BY NICHOLAS PERRIN



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO BEIJING

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I first “met” the Bible in the spring of 1981, when I was a high school junior at Phillips Exeter Academy, a New England boarding school. I had been taking Latin for four years, and while I was washing out in nearly every subject, the language of the Romans was one of the few things I could manage. Having been encouraged to take Greek my senior year, I decided to buy and study the assigned Greek grammar ahead of time. Before I knew it, I had taught myself to read the funny squiggles and was eager to try out my translation skills on real texts, not just the ancient Greek equivalent of “See Spot run.”

Soon enough, while browsing through some discontinued books for sale in the school library, I saw my chance. It was a copy of Westcott and Hort’s *The New Testament in the Original Greek*, on sale for something like a dollar. I bought it, took it home, and started reading the gospel of Mark in its original language. That was the first time, as far as I know, that I had read the Bible.

Although I have a dim memory of attending an occasional flannelgraph-style Sunday school as a very small child, I did not

grow up in the church. I was not part of a churchgoing family. The only Christians I knew were people who, quite frankly, never demonstrably applied their faith to the way they went about life. So in opening up the gospel of Mark, I had no guides to fall back on; I had no idea what I was doing. Nor did I have any idea what I would find.

I read through the first chapters slowly and carefully (you can't help reading slowly when you're looking up every other word), and I was beginning to make some sense of what the text was saying about Jesus. *Pretty cool stuff*, I thought to myself. *Is it possible that God could exist after all?* It was still too early in my journey for me to discern what exactly the New Testament writings were really asking of me, although I realized even then that they in fact seemed to be demanding *something* of me—a response of some kind. At the time, I just wasn't sure what it was.

Meanwhile, I continued, as I had spare moments, to plod through the Greek. I also continued to read anything else that might help me refute, corroborate, or otherwise process what was to become my favorite gospel, Mark. (For some reason, I was always looking for almost any excuse to read something other than the books that I was supposed to read for my classes.) I remember how after a frigid bus trip down to Cambridge, my friends and I went inside the Harvard Co-op Bookstore to warm up. I ended up buying Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and Sugerman and Hopkins's *No One Here Gets Out Alive*, a biography about Jim Morrison, the lead singer for the Doors, my favorite group at the time. Hours later back in my warm dormitory room, I dived right into both books. Nietzsche and Morrison both seemed, in their own ways, to take Christianity seriously, even if

their postures were intensely oppositional. *Maybe*, I thought, *I will come to think like them.*

During those days the radio airwaves were rife with Beatles music, largely in tribute to John Lennon, who had been gunned down only a few months before. Although Lennon's most famous song, "Imagine," had been out for years, the song was revived as if it were new and fresh. Its message was an invitation to imagine the peaceful bliss of a world without heaven or religion.

Having grown up and experienced life in a world that didn't concern itself much with "religion," I felt the song resonated with me. No heaven? Imagine that. If we could just get people to forget about heaven, then we would all be better off, redirecting our energies in a much more useful way. If we would cut out all this talk of religion and eternal destinies, Hindus could stop being Hindus, Muslims could stop being Muslims, Christians could stop being Christians, and Jews could stop being Jews. They could all lay aside their destructive religious differences, and finally we could all pull together and get along. It made perfect sense. What a novel idea—what an ingenious song.

Looking back today, I realize that the message of "Imagine" is neither particularly novel nor ingenious. At least in the West, people have been saying pretty much the same thing since the time of the French Enlightenment thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78). While I have been a Beatles fan since first grade and would be the last to doubt John Lennon's genius as a songwriter, the words of this song (the lyrics of which actually now purport to come from his then wife, Yoko Ono) hardly demand creative genius. It takes no William Wordsworth, at any rate, to say exactly what Western culture has been saying for the past quarter of a millennium and in much the

same way. In the end, John Lennon is saying, “I wish everybody looked at life the way I did—I and the rest of the Enlightenment.” Of course, that’s the poet’s prerogative.

But if you get what “Imagine” is driving at, as well as our own cultural location, you’re pretty well positioned for understanding the song’s popularity too. And popular it has been. One would be hard-pressed to think of more than five songs in rock ‘n’ roll history more admired than this song. According to the 2002 *Guinness World Records: British Hit Singles*, “Imagine” was the second most popular song in Britain (second only to Queen’s “Bohemian Rhapsody”). When the far-reaching Musicradio WABC-AM signed off the air in the spring of 1982, Lennon’s song was chosen to be the final song; “Imagine” gave voice to the last words of a cultural institution, the swan song of an era. It has been replayed, resung, and remixed countless times to the delight of equally countless audiences. Presumably these same audiences have found, as I did some years ago, that there is something alluring about the idea of a heavenless, religionless “brotherhood of man.” But even if the substance of this vision, which again traces its origins right back to the salons of eighteenth-century French *philosophes*, were today to strike me as compelling (it doesn’t for reasons I will explain later), Lennon’s idealism now seems trite and ho-hum. The lyrics sound too much like a beauty pageant contestant who gets up on stage and explains her sincere belief in our need for world peace. The theme just doesn’t have teeth.

The book you’re about to read has been written in response to a new song, a song with teeth. It’s not a song that you would hear on any Top 40 station or, in fact, any music station, but it is a song you might hear on National Public Radio or the BBC. Actually,

it's not a song at all. But it is a message, in some ways not too different from Lennon's. The message goes something like this:

Imagine there're no credible words of Jesus.
 It's easy if you try.
 No sustaining evidence below us,
 Above us only sky.

The singer of this "song" is Bart D. Ehrman; the name of his CD, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*. In this *New York Times* best-selling book, Ehrman claims that the changes to the textual tradition of the New Testament are so numerous and so profound that we can no longer speak meaningfully about getting back to the words and actions of the real Jesus. In other words, because the Bible is dependent on ancient manuscripts, and because these manuscripts are so thoroughly corrupt, we in essence no longer have Jesus: he has been lost in transmission.

The important difference between Lennon's ditty and Ehrman's thesis is that while the former claims only to be conveying his personal philosophy, the latter claims to be delving into history. The first asks us to imagine; the second tells us that this is the way it is and was. Whatever Jesus said, whatever the authors of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John wrote, the truth of the matter is that we no longer have access to the original words. They have been lost in the black hole of history, and we can demonstrate this, Ehrman says, by examining history.

As for Lennon's song, you can take it or leave it. But when it comes to history, the stakes are staggeringly higher. If utopian

visions have to do with what we can be, history has to do with what we have been. It is history that defines us. If Christianity is based on the teachings of Jesus, it would be quite embarrassing for Christians if it turned out that what were thought to be Jesus' teachings were not his teachings at all.

And so it appears that the followers of Jesus, at least those followers who understand the written words of Jesus as being his true words, are faced with a decision. They have basically three choices: (1) concede the force of Ehrman's argument, (2) offer a counter to Ehrman's argument, or (3) ignore the whole matter and hope that this unsettling talk about changes to the manuscript tradition goes away. In my mind, the worst of these options is number three. And yet, in surveying the past performance of conservative Christians in the face of challenge, I find that option number three seems to have been a kind of instinctive default mode. When issues like this have come up over the years, conservative Christianity has had an unfortunate track record of putting its head in the sand. This has been documented historically.¹

This state of affairs reminds me of a passage, not from the Bible or a biblical prophet, but from a different kind of prophet, one of my dead, high school mentors whom I read alongside my favorite gospel writer: Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche recounts a parable in which a madman runs into the village square. His message: God is dead. "God is dead. God remains dead," he rants, "and we have killed him." The people gather around this curiosity and laugh. "God is dead? How can God be dead? We all go to church," they seem to be saying. They laugh because they think the madman is nothing more than a harmless lunatic. They go on with their lives, only eventually to

come to the realization, slowly and reluctantly, that the madman, who stands for Nietzsche himself, may be right.

From the Christian point of view, Nietzsche may be interpreted as having thrown down the gauntlet: unless Western Christianity would come to terms with the cultural changes that Nietzsche saw on the horizon, it would surely die a slow death. In part, especially in post-Christian Europe, Nietzsche and his madman have been proved right. Because Christians have had lapses of intellectual courage to deal with ideas or cultural currents that have challenged the way Christianity has traditionally looked at things, their movement has suffered all the more for it. Today's madman is often tomorrow's prophet, and the next day's purveyor of obvious truisms. Had Nietzsche's townspeople had the foresight, had the late nineteenth-century church known better, they would have invited the madman in for a meal, taken the time to understand what he was saying, weighed the matter, then wrestled with it.

For centuries Christians have trusted their Bibles as the inspired Word of God. But now along comes an all-too-reasonable-sounding "madman" (although certainly not the first, as shall become clear) with a story to tell. In the introduction of his book, Ehrman shares how he, having grown up in a church setting, had a conversion experience as a teenager. After attending Moody Bible Institute then moving on to Wheaton (my present stomping ground where I now teach New Testament), Ehrman began to harbor doubts about the reliability of Scripture. He reports that while undertaking doctoral work at Princeton, he took a class on his favorite gospel, the gospel of Mark. He wrote a paper in which he sought to address the problem as to why Abiathar is named as the

high priest in Mark 2:26, while the account of 1 Samuel 21 clearly states that the high priest at the time was Ahimelech. After turning in this paper, which included an elaborate explanation as to why Mark had it right after all, Ehrman finally received it back from his professor, along with this comment tucked away in the margin: “Maybe Mark just made a mistake.”

For Ehrman that changed everything. There was a time when he, like evangelicals today, believed in something called plenary, verbal inspiration, the idea that God inspired every last word of Scripture. But if plenary, verbal inspiration is true, he reasoned, then that also means that every last word must be factually accurate. Ehrman’s struggle with an apparent inaccuracy in Mark (the gospel writer’s muffing the name of the high priest) meant the end of believing in Scripture as God-breathed. The protective barrier of the doctrine of verbal inspiration could no longer keep out the raging waters of textual contradictions. And unlike the little boy keeping his finger in the dike, Ehrman believed that he found a hole too big for his finger. Better to walk away and let the floodwaters take their course. Today, Ehrman declares himself to be a firmly convinced agnostic, and perhaps he would say that this is because the floodwaters have taken their course. There is, I am sure, more to his story than that—there always is. But the story itself is in its own way compelling.

Presumably, Ehrman’s newfound view that the gospel writers fiddled with the facts gave him permission to think of the scribes as also messing around—in pretty fundamental ways—with the biblical tradition as they went about their task. To be sure, this is a provocative thesis and nothing to dismiss lightly. If Ehrman is the “madman” within the narthex of the conservative church,

Christians might with a nervous chuckle show him to the doorway of their minds, but the truth of the matter is that he is not going away—at least not that easily.

Besides, Christians should remember what's at stake. If following Jesus means anything, it means living a life of integrity and therefore also a life that steadily refuses to participate in the obstruction of truth. But people can be tempted to suppress the truth when they feel something precious will be lost if the truth comes out. That is why, in the trafficking of ideas, we must be wary of the faux pearl of great price, the sense of stability that accompanies the delusive conviction that we have thoroughly and decisively made sense of the world. When people succumb to that temptation of ignoring challenges to their faith, they are in the end demonstrating that they are more committed to the feeling of having a lock on truth than they are to truth itself. When Christians succumb to the same temptation, there is the added temptation of justifying their intellectual disengagement by appealing to faith or the Holy Spirit or something like that. Not only does this rationale shut down a discussion that is probably worth having; it also usually has more to do with intellectual laziness or megalomania than anything remotely biblical or divine. No one should be readier than the Christian to explore the truth (as Nietzsche himself rightly pointed out elsewhere in his writings); no one should be quicker to say, "We need to have a discussion about this."

As it turns out, the discussion that *Misquoting Jesus* prompts is part of a much larger and long-standing conversation. Like Lennon in his song "Imagine," Bart Ehrman is an author who is saying nothing entirely new; like Lennon again, he is taking his place in a

chorus that has been performing since the Enlightenment. Ehrman writes as one who is particularly concerned with the discipline of textual criticism, the reconstruction of the biblical autographs—that is, the original manuscripts penned or dictated by the biblical writers themselves. As a leading authority on this subject, he deserves to be heard. But when we ask about what we can know and not know about the words of Jesus, it should come as no surprise that there's more to it than text-critical considerations. There are other issues dealing with the documentation of Jesus' life and words that are equally, if not more, important. We might call this Jesus scholarship.

The results of more than two centuries of Jesus scholarship have been mixed. Some have been saying that we can know a good deal about what Jesus said and did; others are far less sanguine. Such disagreement can be disconcerting. Why does one set of scholars say one thing and another set something very different? Is there any hope of sorting through these issues ourselves? What can we actually say about the words of Jesus? Do we have them in our Bibles or not? If we do have them in our Bibles, why don't we have other gospels (the ancient *Gospel of Thomas*, for example) in our Bibles as well? Moreover, what about the broad range of English translations? Can they all be so different and yet be so accurate? These are all good questions. They deserve answers.

I have written this book for two categories of people. First of all, I have written this book for the nonreligious person who has at least some passing interest in Jesus. There are more than a few in this category. Year in and year out, Jesus remains a hot news item. He never fails to make the cover of some major newsmagazine and never fails to pique the interest of American life and culture. Jesus

is not just a matter of church discussion; a lot has been said and will continue to be said about Jesus in the public arena.

Unfortunately, those who write and speak authoritatively on Jesus are not always up front with their own methodological assumptions. Nor are they always forthcoming with the fact that these assumptions are in turn driven by prior faith decisions. I don't mind this so much. Who am I, one who has made faith decisions of my own, to begrudge other scholars their faith decisions? What I do mind, however, is when these same scholars pretend that they are approaching their material from some objective and scientific vantage point. In our day and age, the presentation of objective and "pure history," implied in a certain scientific style of writing, is now readier than ever to be seen for what it is. Rules for doing Jesus scholarship don't just materialize out of thin air: someone—someone who wants to win the game—makes the rules.

The uninformed non-Christian walking into the parlor for the first time deserves at least a passing glimpse into what the rules are and who made them. Before the non-Christian makes up his or her mind about Jesus, to the extent that contemporary scholarship on the words of Jesus weighs into the reasoning process, he or she should have a grip on the big picture. After all, if you are where I was some twenty-five years ago, if you are contemplating giving your life to following one whose only surviving words are now subject to serious question, it makes sense to find out what the questioning is all about.

I have also written this book for the church. A number of unsettling things are being said about Jesus, things that, one would suppose, every thinking Christian is obliged to work through. If the claims of Ehrman and others are really true, this will mean a major

rethink for millions of devout believers. But if they are not true, how do we know they are not true? What is the basis for the claim that Jesus' words have been lost in transmission? What is the basis for the claim that they have been preserved?

These questions must be raised and must, in some manner, be resolved. It will not do simply to say that Ehrman is a dreamer, because, the fact of the matter is, he's not the only one. He hopes, I'm sure, that someday many will join him in his views. Many already have and presumably too many will.

I believe that there is a better route to take. It is a path that involves, in the first seven chapters, sorting out our presuppositions about Jesus: what was true of Jesus, what do people *wish* were true of Jesus, and how do these two considerations together radically affect the historical reconstruction of the words of Jesus? In order to understand the results of Jesus scholarship, you have to understand the worldviews and assumptions that have driven that scholarship. In other words, you have to understand how the rules became the rules. I maintain here that for the better part of the past three centuries, Jesus scholarship has generally overlooked Jesus' identity as a Jew and has therefore undervalued the historical value of his words. By doing justice to history, by restoring Jesus to Judaism, we see that his recorded words in fact acquire a high degree of reliability. If we change the rules as they need to be changed, this will also change the score considerably.

In the remaining four chapters and conclusion, I turn to some of the particulars of Ehrman's argument and seek to discuss in an intellectually responsible way what we can and can't know about the words of Jesus. There are many steps from Jesus to eyewitnesses, from eyewitnesses to autograph gospels, from autograph

gospels to copies of the same, from copies to a critical text, and finally to English translation. Here we begin by applying historical imagination to the past (as every historian must do) then finally conclude by applying theological imagination to the present and future. If, as I am hoping to make clear throughout this book, Jesus scholarship inevitably involves issues of belief (theology), I cannot help but talk about theology, though I save this for the conclusion.

The reliability of Jesus' words is no trivial matter, for in the Gospels, including the gospel of Mark, we have Jesus making some extremely strong claims. The Gospels themselves report on Jesus' vision for the whole world: that one day creation would be one under his lordship. If this report is basically right, then the world has to reckon with this Jesus. But if this report is basically wrong, if Christendom has egregiously misquoted Jesus, then the world can go on its way while modern-day Christians may find that their next best option is falling back on the dreamy world proposed by Lennon. If you can imagine the church capitulating to the Enlightenment narrative in which God has not spoken, then you can imagine what's at stake in the claim that Jesus has been lost in transmission. It's not hard to do.