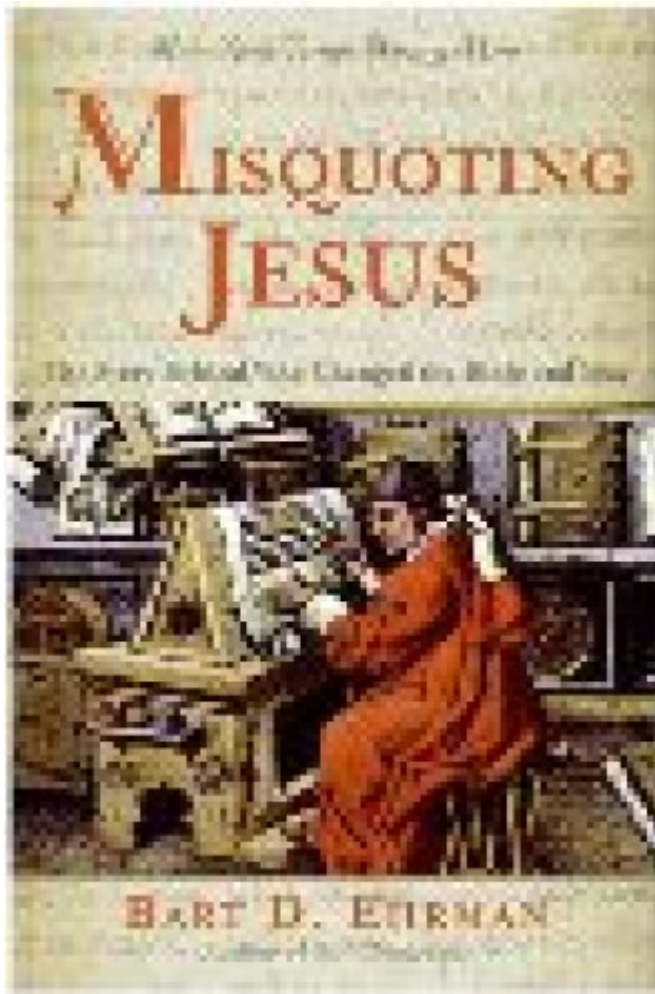


Beware of the scribes

By [Peter R. Rodgers](#) in the [July 11, 2006](#) issue

In Review



Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why

Bart D. Ehrman
HarperSanFrancisco

Bart Ehrman's *Misquoting Jesus* has caused something of a sensation. This is no small achievement for an introduction to New Testament textual criticism, a field known for writing that is dry and inaccessible to non-specialists. Ehrman's book has been so successful in reaching a broad audience that the author has appeared on National Public Radio's *Fresh Air* and Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show*.

Ehrman is able to make textual criticism come alive because the study of the text has shaped his life. In the introductory chapter he tells his story. After his conversion as a teenager, he studied at Moody Bible Institute, Wheaton College and Princeton Theological Seminary. As he studied the New Testament text, he changed from a fundamentalist to an evangelical and then to a liberal-critical Christian. Today Ehrman is a professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and calls himself an agnostic. These changes were provoked by his study of the differences in the New Testament manuscripts. He wondered: With so many variant readings in copies of copies of the original, how can we possibly know what the New Testament writers originally wrote? He moved from believing that the Bible is the inerrant word of God to seeing it as "a very human book." Hence his subtitle: *The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*.

Ehrman begins with a delightful and informative introduction to New Testament textual criticism. He tells in nontechnical language how the New Testament came to be written and copied and how errors inevitably crept into the text. He then relates the story of the modern editions of the Greek New Testament, enlivening his narrative with fascinating anecdotes—like one about how Constantine Tischendorf rescued the Codex Sinaiticus from the fires of St. Catherine's Monastery.

After laying out some of the principles that textual critics use to determine which of various readings is the original text, Ehrman gets to the heart of his argument: that orthodox scribes of the second and third centuries "occasionally changed their texts to make them say what they were known to mean." (This is also the thesis of Ehrman's landmark 1993 work *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*.) They did this, Ehrman claims, to bolster their case for orthodoxy in the face of challenges from heretical groups such as the Adoptionists, the Separationists and the Docetics.

When I read Ehrman's *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* ten years ago, I felt my own confidence in New Testament documents and in the early Christian scribes and leaders challenged. If these early orthodox Christians changed the New Testament

text to suit their needs in controversy, how can we trust them or the scriptures that they claimed for their authority? In the late second century, Irenaeus claimed that the heretic Marcion had “dismembered the epistles of Paul.” But if Ehrman’s assertion is correct, Irenaeus and the other early orthodox teachers—and the scribes connected with their churches—were equally guilty of corrupting scripture.

As I studied the text of Irenaeus in response to Ehrman’s charge, my sentiments were the same as his—“I was intent on pursuing my quest for the truth wherever it might take me,” he writes—but my quest took me to a different place. I discovered that time and again, in cases in which Ehrman alleged that there was orthodox corruption of the text, Irenaeus had chosen the reading that was less useful from the orthodox standpoint and more likely to strengthen the heretics’ case. In multiple instances I concluded that Irenaeus was resisting the temptation to make changes, exercising a scrupulous fidelity to the text as he had received it. Such faithfulness in copying the text can also be found in the work of other early orthodox Christian writers, including Tertullian and Origen.

Reading *Misquoting Jesus* has led me to a second discovery. A number of textual variations that Ehrman alleges to be orthodox corruptions may be explained in other ways. Sometimes the changes were unintentional, caused by a scribe reading or hearing one word and writing a similar word. Alterations in Hebrews 2:9, on which Ehrman has a long discussion, may well be explained in this way, as he admits. But there is another explanation for some variant readings that Ehrman overlooks entirely: the New Testament writers’ rich theological reflection on the Old Testament. Study of this theological dimension of the New Testament yields unexpected and exciting fruit.

For example, we read in Mark 15:34 that Jesus says, quoting Psalm 22:1, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” These words are very useful for the separationist argument that Christ came upon Jesus at his baptism and left him at his crucifixion. So, Ehrman argues, early orthodox scribes changed this verse to read (as it does in a few manuscripts) “why have you *mocked* me?” However, several scholars have suggested that *mocked* is not a later alteration, but what Mark originally wrote. I believe that Mark took *mocked* from Psalm 69:9; in his narrative of Jesus’ death, Mark weaves together Psalms 22 and 69, as he does other Old Testament passages elsewhere in his Gospel. The reading in most New Testament manuscripts can easily be explained by the influence of the more familiar Psalm 22:1 or Matthew 27:46.

So the explanation of this variation is to be found not in the efforts of some imagined unscrupulous second-century orthodox scribe but in the writing of Mark himself, and in his rich and creative theological reflection on the story of Jesus. When we read these two psalms over and over, the one about godforsakenness and the other about shame and reproach, we can hear the stories they tell and sense the theological and literary power of Mark's fusing them together to interpret the meaning of Jesus' death.

Misquoting Jesus has led me back to a fresh study of the New Testament and early Christian writers, a study that has revealed early orthodox Christians' scrupulous fidelity in copying the New Testament text. It also has brought into clearer focus the New Testament writers' disciplined freedom in using the Old Testament. Whereas Ehrman's journey in textual criticism has led him to increasing skepticism, my own has brought me to increased confidence in the New Testament documents and in the central figure to whom they bear witness.