

## Bart Ehrman and the Resurrection



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When Jesus was born, the devils came to Satan and said, “The idols today have all bowed their heads.” Satan said, “Something has happened in your world.” Satan then flew all over the world but found nothing. At last he found the infant Jesus, surrounded by the angels. He returned to the devils and said, “A prophet was born yesterday. No female ever conceived or gave birth without my being present, except this one. Therefore, despair of idol worship after this night. Henceforth, seduce men by exploiting their hastiness and superficiality.”<sup>1</sup>

Abu-Hamid al Ghazali (1058-1111 AD)

During the course of his Midwestern debate with Craig A. Evans over the historical reliability of the Gospel resurrection accounts Bart D. Ehrman said the following:

I listed ten discrepancies among the Gospels about the resurrection of Jesus. Several of them were minor. A couple of them were major. And I want to hear how Craig explains them. Especially, how is it that Luke explicitly says that they stayed in Jerusalem and they saw Jesus there, whereas Matthew explicitly

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<sup>1</sup> *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature* (ed. & trans. Tarif Khalidi; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 168-69.

says that they did not stay in Jerusalem but they went to Galilee and saw Jesus there?

Note that of the ten Ehrman considers only “a couple...major.” Then he singles out only one about whether Jesus disciples went to Galilee or stayed in Jerusalem. In answer to this I need to point out two things, one about the Gospels in general, and the other about Luke in particular. As to the Gospels, as John Calvin noted centuries ago, “the Evangelists had no intention of so putting their narrative together as always to keep an exact order of events, but to bring the whole pattern together to produce a kind of mirror or screen image of those features most useful for the understanding of Christ.”<sup>2</sup> Then as to Luke, the difficulty there appears to be here relates more to his collapsing the chronology of events than to his contradicting Matthew. We see the same thing happening in his account of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, which he follows immediately with the driving of the merchants and money changers out of the temple. In Mark, who is probably Luke’s source there, the cleansing of the temple does not follow immediately on the heels of the triumphal entry, but rather occurs on the following day. Luke has collapsed the chronology (compare Luke 19 [esp. v. 45] and Mark 11 [esp. v. 12]). The same thing appears to be going on in Luke’s account of the resurrection appearances where, if we did not have his own version of the rest of the story in Acts, we might be led to believe that Jesus ascended into heaven on the same day as his resurrection.<sup>3</sup> From Acts however we learn that he appeared to his disciples “over a period of forty days” (1:3). Here is how Ehrman reads this: “According to Acts chapter one, they [the disciples] stay in Jerusalem for forty days and that is where they see Jesus. They never do go to Galilee.” But he overspecifies. Yes Luke offers no account there of the disciples going to Galilee, and yes Jesus commands them to stay in Jerusalem, but the precise chronology isn’t nailed down by Luke as to when Jesus gave that command. He only says that it happened at some point during the forty days, while Jesus and his disciples were having a meal together (1:4).

An important rhetorical strategy Ehrman pursued in the debate was to side-tract the discussion off topic at two important points. The first of these took place when he shifted focus off the question of the historicity of the resurrection (what the debate was supposedly about) and onto that of Biblical inerrancy. It was in this context that he brought up his ten discrepancies. This shift gave Ehrman an apparent on-the-spot rhetorical

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<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels* (2 vols.; trans. A. W. Morrison; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 139.

<sup>3</sup> If there is a seem in Luke where there is a time change it is probably at 24:50.

advantage by effectively turning evidence that Evans could (and did) use against him into something he could try to leverage against Evans. Ehrman makes this first shift very deftly in the following statement:

You may be tempted to say, “Well, yes, they [the resurrection narrative] disagree with the details, but all the eyewitnesses agree: there *was* a car accident.” Two comments about that: First, if that is what you want to say, that the details may be at odds, but the big picture is what matters (not the details) then in effect, you need to admit that what you are saying is that the Bible has discrepancies, contradictions, and errors in one book or in another or in all of the books. So what now is your view of Scripture? A book filled with errors? If it has some errors, how do you know that it does not have a lot of errors, and if the details are in error, why not the big picture?

The reason this was a smart move strategically for Ehrman (even though perhaps not a wholly legitimate one, but then when are moves in debates ever wholly legitimate?) is that, as he himself pointed out during the debate, historians are especially happy when they have “several accounts by eyewitnesses that are not biased to corroborate one another. In other words, they basically agree in what they have to say yet without collaboration.” This, as Evans pointed out, is precisely the kind of evidence we are dealing with in the case of the resurrection accounts.

One of the evidences of a lack of collaboration is the absence of attempts by different authors to harmonize themselves with one another. Proof of this is found in the presence in varying accounts of apparent minor discrepancies that are difficult if not impossible to harmonize. This was a conspicuous feature in the sources related to the Wittgenstein poker incident Evans described during the debate and it is a conspicuous feature in the Gospel accounts of the resurrection of Jesus. Some of the discrepancies in the latter actually point to our having independent witnesses of the resurrection, and this in turn weighs heavily in favor of historicity, thus also highlighting the fact that the main problem with the resurrection is not the historical testimony underpinning it, but its character as a miraculous event. If you do not believe that miracles are possible, you are not going to believe in the resurrection, no matter how well it is attested historically.

In the context of the debate, a good response to Ehrman’s venturing off topic the first time would have been to mildly remind him, first of all, that there was scarcely a single discrepancy he could mention that was not already well known to Christian scholars, and that had not been discussed since the early centuries of the Church, by individuals like

Jerome, in the fourth century, Erasmus, Calvin and Luther, in the sixteenth, and many others since, a number of whom were not only adherents to the Church's high view of Scripture, but to some considerable extent the architects and clarifiers of that view as well. And then secondly, it would have been good to point out that the debate was not about the challenge discrepancies pose for the doctrine of inerrancy (a fine subject, perhaps, but one to pursue on another occasion), but about the historical reliability of the resurrection accounts.

As it happened, from that point on in the debate, Ehrman pursued a course of reasoning that seemed to take for granted that if he could prove that the Gospels were not inerrant, he had also undermined the historical reliability of the resurrection accounts. But that hardly follows, since virtually every other source ever deemed reliable by historians never made any claim to inerrancy. Indeed, as Murray J. Harris has aptly pointed out, "the presence of discrepancies in circumstantial details is no proof that the central fact is unhistorical."<sup>4</sup> In view of the evidence the discrepancies provide to the Gospel witnesses' independence, in that their writers made little or no effort to "get their stories straight," we can actually take them as evidence of just the opposite, namely historicity.

But now a sidebar on the discrepancies. In view of its historic high view of Scripture, I have never ceased being impressed at the Church's equally historic resistance of the temptation to make adjustments in the Scriptures as a way of "cleaning up" or "clearing away" potentially embarrassing discrepancies. To be sure there have been scribes who have fallen victim to that temptation and ventured such "corrections," but on the whole the Church has carefully avoided tampering with the text of Holy Scripture. Yes they did attempt to provide explanations of how such discrepancies might be harmonized, but they cherished the text too much to physically "improve" it.<sup>5</sup> In truth it might even be said that Ehrman owes the historic Church a debt of gratitude for preserving the text as carefully as it did. By letting these discrepancies stand it has provided him with the rather lucrative career path of bringing them all up again afresh to a new generation eager to see the noses of the pious tweaked in the kind of books, documentaries, and debates Ehrman

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<sup>4</sup> Murray J. Harris, *Raised Immortal: Resurrection and Immortality in the New Testament* (London: Marshall, Morgan, and Scott, 1983/Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 68, quoted in Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic/ Nottingham, UK: Apollos, 2007), 34.

<sup>5</sup> The examples to the contrary identified by Ehrman in his *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) simply represent the conspicuous exceptions to the rule.

engages in. Others like him have plied that trade in the past, and still others will ply it in the future. The same point I am making was also put most eloquently 35 years ago, while Ehrman was an undergraduate at Moody Bible Institute, and while I was wandering in the darkness pursuing a degree in Fine Arts “without hope and without God in the world” (Eph 2:12). It is found in Malcolm Muggeridge’s extraordinary book, *Jesus the Man Who Lives*:

One of the things that has struck me about the New Testament Gospels altogether is how very easy it would have been to sub-edit them so as to eliminate the contradictions, inconsistencies and occasional apparent absurdities which have so delighted agnostics and whose exegesis has so exercised commentators. I really believe that, given a free hand and some expert help, I could have done the job myself in quite a short time, producing a consistent story with nothing in it for critics to cavil at or sceptics to ridicule. That this was not done when the first definitive texts were prepared—it would have been so easy then—suggests strongly to me that the writers of the Gospels believed they were recording Jesus’s very words and deeds as handed down by eye-witnesses.<sup>6</sup>

Yet it is precisely here that Ehrman would have objected most strenuously, as he did at the debate, vigorously asserting that the Gospels most definitely—it must be nice to be so sure of oneself—did *not* contain eyewitness tradition. He made a number of arguments in that direction, two of which we will discuss here. The first had to do with the supposed distance in time between the life of Jesus and the composition of the Gospels, the second with the supposed manner in which the traditions about Jesus and his teaching were handed on.

### I. IS LATENESS OF COMPOSITION AN ISSUE?

In my experience, New Testament Scholars who try to speak as historians often flounder in what they say due to the fact that they have never had to write history in any other area. They therefore really do not know how historians work, how they deal with texts, how long they consider too long in terms of expecting to still be able to find eye-witness testimony of an event, and so on. Throughout the debate Ehrman kept

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<sup>6</sup> Malcolm Muggeridge, *Jesus: The Man Who Lives* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 40.

asserting that what he was doing was simply what historians do. Thus when Evans accused him of being a reverse Fundamentalist, Ehrman responded with “This is not fundamentalism. This is historical research. This is how historians go about their business.” In that moment I was reminded of the lines in Charles Williams’s *Descent into Hell*, a novel that traces the course of the damnation of a scholar named Wentworth, who Williams describes by saying: “He raged secretly as he wrote his letters and drew up his evidence; he identified scholarship with himself, and asserted himself under the disguise of a defence of scholarship.”<sup>7</sup>

My own response to Ehrman’s claim that he is simply doing what historians do is that I do not accept it. In my experience credible historians, in others fields and in my own, are not as dismissive of evidence as Ehrman shows himself to be. The ax he has to grind with the Bible has been so obviously clouding his historical judgment in his popular works of late that it has resulted in a shadow being cast over his present and future ability to continue describing himself as a dispassionate historian. But however that may be, we return to the issue at hand, the inference from the lateness of the composition of the Gospels that they are unlikely to contain eyewitness testimony.

Continual reference was made by Ehrman during the debate as to the length of time that supposedly elapsed between the death of Jesus and the writing of the Gospels. Here is one of them:

Jesus probably died sometime around 30 AD. Our first account of Jesus’ death and resurrection is the gospel of Mark written around the year 65 or 70 AD, thirty-five to forty years later by somebody who was not from Israel the way Jesus was, who spoke a different language from Jesus (he spoke Greek rather than Aramaic), who does not claim to be an eyewitness and in fact was not an eyewitness. Matthew and Luke were written ten or fifteen years later. John was written about ten years later than that. These are accounts written somewhere between 40 and 60 or 70 years after the events they narrated.

There is much to be disputed in this passage, and we shall do so in due course. But for now let us focus on the time element. Although these dates for the Gospels are often repeated by scholars, they are at best guesses, and may be quite wrong. None of them can be proven, and Ehrman is irresponsible in putting them forward as hard fact. But before we pursue this let us assume for the moment that the dates Ehrman offers are correct, and then ask whether he is justified even then in his appeal to

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Williams, *Descent into Hell* (London: Faber & Faber, 1949), 38.

them as grounds for dismissing their historicity. Is 35 to 70 years after an event too long to expect to find any credible historical or even eyewitness testimony, or is it quite normal for historians to take such late evidence seriously? Having had the opportunity to do historical research and writing in sixteenth through nineteenth century religious history and in contemporary history as well, I am aware that historians regularly rely on sources that far distant in time from the events they are attempting to describe. We will focus on nineteenth-century religious history as a way of providing examples of this.

Let us take, for example, the account of the conversion of Charles Grandison Finney, premier evangelist of the Second Great Awakening, which took place on Wednesday, October 10, 1821. Finney writes (actually dictates) his account of it probably in late 1867 or early 1868, more than 45 years after the event.<sup>8</sup>

Biographers of Finney rely heavily on this account in their historical reconstructions of his story. They may, for example, question Finney's own interpretation of his early experience; does he for example project his own later, more fully developed theological understandings back on his earlier self? Such questions can be checked against allusions to his conversion in his own earlier sermons, as well as in accounts left by other people who knew him. But no one so far as I am aware doubts the general accuracy of the basic facts of his account.<sup>9</sup> It is, after all, direct eyewitness testimony.

Next came biographies of Finney by those who knew him, such as George Fredrick Wright (1838-1921), who published his life of the evangelist in 1891, basing his work, as the blurb on the back of my copy of the book says, on his "own experience as a student of Finney and on the memories of Finney's family, associates, converts and students."<sup>10</sup> Now we are talking 70 years after Finney's conversion, a period equal to the largest time span Ehrman mentions.

In 1902, Aaron Merritt Hills (1848-1935), who honored the evangelist by naming his own son Charles Finney Hills, and who later wrote in the forward of his own two-volume *Fundamental Christian Theology* (1931)

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<sup>8</sup> Charles G. Finney, *The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney: The Complete Restored Text* (eds. Garth M. Rosell & Richard A. G. Dupuis; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, Academie Books, 1989), xxix.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Keith J. Hardman's treatment of Finney's conversion in his *Charles Grandison Finney: 1792-1875: Revivalist and Reformer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990 [Orig.: Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1987]), 24-43, along with his comment on the possibility of Finney projecting his more fully developed theology back upon his early self (p. 45).

<sup>10</sup> G. Frederick Wright, *Charles G. Finney* (Salem, OH: Schmul, 1996 [orig. 1891]).



**Fig. 1: H. B. Hall & Sons engraving of Finney from the 1<sup>st</sup> edition of the *Memoirs of Rev. Charles G. Finney, Written by Himself* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1876). (Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary Library)**

that “Sixty-four years ago I met the mighty Finney, a king among men, and sat four college years under his ministry,”<sup>11</sup> produced yet another biography of Finney.<sup>12</sup> As this was written 81 years after Finney’s conversion, and several biographical accounts had become available, Hill’s work is largely derivative. Nevertheless he did include some of his own recollections (Hills graduated from Oberlin, where Finney was, in 1871) and he was able to elicit additional testimony from living eyewitnesses who could speak first-hand about other things that had happened earlier in Finney’s career.<sup>13</sup> In this case you have a person who was not born until twenty seven years after Finney’s conversion, who had still known Finney personally and had access to other people who did as well, paralleling the

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<sup>11</sup> A[aron] M[erritt] Hills, *Fundamental Christian Theology: A Systematic Theology* (2 vols.; Pasadena, CA: C. J. Kinne, 1931).

<sup>12</sup> A[aron] M[erritt] Hills, *Life of Charles G. Finney* (Cincinnati, Ohio, Office of "God's Revivalist," 1902).

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Hills, *Finney*, 181-82, 229-43.

way people born at the mid-point of the first century might well have had access to people who knew and followed Jesus.

An interesting sidebar to this Finney example is that while I was putting it together, I was surprised to discover on the shelves of our own Midwestern Seminary library what by all appearances looked like first editions of both Finney's own memoirs, published 134 years ago in 1876, and A. M. Hill's biography of Finney, published 108 years ago in 1902 (fig. 1). That reminded me of the fact that once books are written they tend to get laid away on some shelf or in some library where they wait to make a reappearance when the time comes for later departures from their stories to be set straight. This is true both of books in our era and of earlier ones. So, for example, when I came across these first editions I was reminded that even in ancient times there were libraries, and there were people who troubled themselves to keep track in their minds of what was in them. We may take for example Julius Africanus Sextus (c. 160-ca. 240 AD), an early Christian historian and literary scholar from Palestine, who consulted the family of Jesus about how we should harmonize the genealogies of Matthew and Luke, and built a library for the Emperor Alexander Severus (reigned 222-235) in the Parthenon at Rome. A papyrus fragment contains an amazing remark by Africanus describing where one could find a copy of a particular book:

You will find this whole document on the shelves in the archives of our former home town, the colony of Aelia Capitolina [a later name for Jerusalem] in Palestine, and in Nysa in Caria and, up to the thirteenth verse, in Rome near the baths of Alexander in the beautiful library in the Pantheon, whose collection of books I myself built for Augustus.<sup>14</sup>

This is true even when there is a concerted effort to suppress books. Laying open on the table in front of me as I write is a book that quotes a command given in 1266 at the general chapter of the Franciscan order in Paris, that "all the *legendae* about St. Francis that had been made in the past should be destroyed." By "made in the past" was meant those biographies of St. Francis that had been written before the official version of Francis' life by Bonaventura, minister general of the Franciscan order, came out a few years before (1262 or 63). What was being commanded, in other words, was that all the sources Bonaventura

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<sup>14</sup> A passage from book 18 of Africanus's *Kestoi*, which dealt, among other things, with medicine, military art, natural history, agriculture, translated by E. N. O'Neal, from the latter part of PGM XXIII.1-70, in *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; ed. by Hans Dieter Betz; Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 263-64.

would have consulted in writing his biography, by friends, companions, and adult contemporaries of Francis (who died 1226, when Bonaventura was five) were to be destroyed. The ultimate ineffectiveness of this command is proved by the fact that I quote it from my copy of an edition of Thomas of Celano's writings on the life of Saint Francis, writings which were supposed to have been among those destroyed.<sup>15</sup> Happily by the time the command was given, many of the earlier biographies had come into the hands of people outside the Franciscan order, people who were under no obligation to obey the wishes of the Franciscan hierarchy. Had earlier Gospels been suppressed when later ones were written, we should expect that the same thing would have happened. It didn't.

One of the most intriguing chronological parallels that can be called upon here is Mormonism. Ehrman placed Jesus' death around 30 AD while the publication of the Book of Mormon was in 1830 AD, the parallel year in the nineteenth century to the time of the death and resurrection of Jesus in the first. Joseph Smith, by the way, was murdered by a mob in Carthage, Illinois, in 1844.

Mormonism provides a great negative illustration at least in part precisely *because* eyewitnesses continued to be around to be consulted decades after the fact, with the result that there is scarcely a single fact nor doctrine relating to the founder or the founding of Mormonism that has not proved an embarrassment to the LDS Church. The problem is that Joseph Smith was a religious fraud, and the evidence of both eyewitness and documentary history proves it.<sup>16</sup>

Those who have read the Book of Mormon will remember how it includes in its front pages the so-called "Testimony of the Three Witnesses," namely Oliver Cowdery, Martin Harris, and David Whitmer. All three men were later estranged from Joseph Smith, and of the three, Oliver Cowdery, who died in 1850, had the least to say about his part in the founding of Mormonism. In contrast Martin Harris was interviewed about the origins of the Book of Mormon many times between the 1820s and 1870s when he died, and numerous times even during the 1870s, right

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<sup>15</sup> Thomas of Celano, *St. Francis of Assisi: First and Second Life of St. Francis, with Selections from Treatise on the Miracles of Blessed Francis* (trans. & ed. Placid Herman O.F.M.; Chicago, IL: Franciscan Herald Press, 1962), lii.

<sup>16</sup> So, for example, see the investigation of the development of the story of the recovery of the golden plates in my "From Captain Kidd's Treasure Ghost to the Angel Moroni: Changing *Dramatis Personae* in Early Mormonism," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 36.4 (Winter 2003): 17-42. See also my discussion of the inability of current historians of religion to deal with the existence of the very real historical category "religious charlatan." In "Jerald Tanner's Quest for Truth—Part III," *Salt Lake City Messenger* (Nov 2008): 13-14 (<http://www.utlm.org/newsletters/no111.htm>).

up in fact until the day he died (July 5, 1875), 45 years after the publication of the Book of Mormon.<sup>17</sup> David Whitmer actually published two booklets the year before he died, *An Address to All Believers in Christ: By a Witness to the Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon*,<sup>18</sup> and *An Address to all Believers in the Book of Mormon*.<sup>19</sup> This was more than 55 years after the publication for the Book of Mormon, and a full 60 years from the time Joseph Smith claimed to have gotten the plates for it from the angel. Like Harris, Whitmer had been interviewed numerous times over the years, the last time by the Chicago Tribune two days before his death, which took place on 25 January 1888.<sup>20</sup>

Joseph Smith's brother William was interviewed as late as 1893, the year of his death, about the origins of the Book of Mormon,<sup>21</sup> 63 years after its publication, and his sister Katherine Smith Salisbury wrote a letter about the coming forth of the Book of Mormon on 10 March 1886, 56 years after its publication.<sup>22</sup> Joseph Smith's wife Emma was also interviewed extensively by her son Joseph Smith III in 1879, just shy of 50 years after the publication of the Book of Mormon.<sup>23</sup>

In the case of the founding event of Mormonism I have presented only a few examples selected on the basis of their proximity to the original event. A great number of other examples might be produced, and I would simply direct any curious reader to Dan Vogel's authoritative five volume collection, *Early Mormon Documents*, where they will find many accounts by people close to Joseph Smith at the time of the publication of the Book of Mormon, including the members of Martin Harris's family and of Joseph's wife Emma's family, both groups of whom generally testified of having experiences with Smith that marked him out in their memories as a charlatan. The fact that there were still eyewitnesses ready to talk about Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon near the end of the nineteenth century helps us realize that "40 and 60 or 70 years," after the crucifixion really is not that long, and as

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<sup>17</sup> See the "Martin Harris Collection," in *Early Mormon Documents* (5 vols.; ed. Dan Vogel; Salt Lake City, UT; Signature Books, 1996-2003), 2:253-393.

<sup>18</sup> (Richmond, MO: David Whitmer, 1887).

<sup>19</sup> (Richmond, MO: David Whitmer, 1887)

<sup>20</sup> See the "David Whitmer Collection," in *Early Mormon Documents* 5:9-227. The Chicago Tribune interview is on pp. 209-210. See also Lyndon W. Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* (Orem, UT: Grandin Book Company, 1993).

<sup>21</sup> See the "William Smith Collection," in *Early Mormon Documents* 1:475-513, with the interview in question appearing on pp. 510-13.

<sup>22</sup> See the "Katherine Smith Collection," in *Early Mormon Documents* 1:517-26. Her 1886 letter appears on pp. 521-22.

<sup>23</sup> See the "Emma Hale Smith Collection," in *Early Mormon Documents* 1:1:527-47. Her interview with Joseph Smith III appears on pp. 534-43.

such we should expect that there would still have been a significant number of eyewitnesses to Jesus around. In addition, in the case of Mormonism, we see more of a concerted effort being made to interview eyewitnesses before they died. Would not the same impulse have been present at the time when the last of the eyewitnesses to the life and ministry of Jesus were coming close to passing from the scene? Certainly in recent years with the passing of the World War II generation we have witnessed a similar thing in the scramble to collect their stories, not least the victims of the Holocaust.<sup>24</sup>

In his statements at the debate, Ehrman made other remarkable moves to avoid the conclusion that the New Testament writers might have come into contact with eyewitnesses to the resurrection, which we will discuss in due course. But first we must pursue him a bit further about his seeming certainty in asserting *when* the Gospels were written. We have already argued that the late dates he gives for the Gospels hardly rule out their being informed by historically reliable, and even eyewitness testimony. But even so, were the Gospels written as late as he suggests?

Certainly a large number of scholars, even Evangelical scholars, assign similar dates to the Gospels, but the question I want to pursue here is why non-evangelical scholars in particular endorse these dates. The reason often stated is that the destruction of the temple at Jerusalem, which occurred in 70 AD, is predicted by Jesus in Mark (13:2). Very often this is stated very candidly, as in the case of James M. Robinson, who writes: "Since it seems to refer to the fall of Jerusalem, it probably was written shortly after 70 C.E., when the Romans destroyed the temple and the city,"<sup>25</sup> and even more firmly by Burton Mack, who insists that "Mark's fiction could not have been conceived before the war. It would not have made sense before the war had run its course and the tragic fate of the city was known."<sup>26</sup> The idea here being that prophecy isn't really possible, therefore the prediction in Mark had to have been made, up as it were, *ex eventu*, that is to say, after the event, and then placed back onto the lips of Jesus. This understanding arises from a world-view difference

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<sup>24</sup> As is seen for example in the opening lines of the "Holocaust Survivors and Resource Center" page on the website for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: "The mission of the Holocaust Survivors and Victims Resource Center is to ensure that the individual experiences of survivors and victims of the Holocaust and Nazi-era persecution are collected, preserved and disseminated for future generations." (<http://www.ushmm.org>).

<sup>25</sup> James M. Robinson, *The Gospel of Jesus: In Search of the Original Good News* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 4.

<sup>26</sup> Burton L. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament? The Making of the Christian Myth* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 152.

between believing and unbelieving scholars, since believing scholars accept not only that prophecy is possible, but that Jesus rose from the dead. Yet we still need to ask whether looking at the evidence from an unbelieving perspective really does require a post-70 date for Mark.

The answer is no, it does not. In coming to their conclusion unbelieving scholars make the very elementary error of overlooking the fact, first of all, that the evidence that Jesus *did* in fact speak of the destruction of the temple is strong, even when considered from the perspective of their own critical methodologies, and that he was not the only one making that prediction, as is clear from Josephus.<sup>27</sup>

Second, even where the concept of real prophecy is not embraced it is usually admitted that there is such a thing as “reading the writing on the wall.” A pious Jew who believed in the holiness of God yet felt that God’s holy temple had been corrupted, might very easily expect God to come and vindicate himself by destroying it, as Ehrman himself admits in the 1999 book, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*, “The prediction that God would enter into judgment with his people, destroying them and their sacred places, is as old as the Hebrew prophets that Jesus heard read as a child in the synagogue in Nazareth.”<sup>28</sup> People are always making predictions, and predictions have at times been known to come true. Happily in this particular case I need look no further for support than Ehrman himself, who, in the book just mentioned, also dates the four Gospels between 65 and 95, thus placing the composition of the Gospel of Mark five years *before* the destruction of the temple.<sup>29</sup> Actually he did this in the debate too.<sup>30</sup> He further explicitly affirms the that Jesus “urged...that the destruction was at hand, and that not only individuals but also social institutions and structures [what Ehrman is referring to includes the temple] would be brought low when the Son of Man arrived on the clouds of heaven with the angels of glory and the power of God.”<sup>31</sup> Please take note here that Ehrman is not merely saying that some early Christians predicted the fall of the temple around 65 and then placed it back onto Jesus’ lips, but that Jesus *himself* predicted it. In granting this Ehrman undermines the central reason why unbelieving scholars have insisted on a post-70 date for Mark as the earliest Gospel,

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<sup>27</sup> Josephus, *Jewish War* 4.6.3 (388), 6.5.3 (300-309).

<sup>28</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (Oxford, UK, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 158.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>30</sup> Ehrman spoke about “Mark written around the year 65 or 70 AD, thirty-five to forty years later,” thus not insisting on a post-70 date.

<sup>31</sup> Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*, 159. Ehrman goes on to stress that the judgment would not have been limited to the temple, but would have been universal, typical of predictions made by people with apocalyptic temperaments.

and later dates for Matthew and Luke in view of their dependence on Mark. He also undermines his own point about late dates in the debate.

## II. THE TELEPHONE GAME?

Another tactic that Ehrman used during the debate to facilitate his attempt to escape the Gospel authors' having had any access to reliable testimony about Jesus was his likening of the transmission of the Jesus tradition to the child's party game of telephone.

Interestingly Ehrman has been bold enough to float this comparison even in his books, thus providing other scholars opportunity to respond to it in print. Craig Blomberg, for example, has described it as "an utterly inappropriate and irrelevant analogy to what would have actually gone on among first-century Christians"<sup>32</sup> I agree with Blomberg but would take his remark one step further to say that it is an utterly inappropriate and irrelevant analogy to what actually goes on whenever people attempt to pass something precious along orally. Darrell L. Bock and Daniel B. Wallace are exactly right when they point out in criticism of Ehrman's appeal to the telephone game what is, or ought to be obvious to everyone, namely that "The whole point of the telephone game, in fact, is to see how garbled the original message can get."<sup>33</sup>

Here Bock and Wallace put their collaborative finger on the salient point: The whole point of the telephone game is to garble the message along the way, to have one kid change it into something funny that *sounds like* what they heard whispered to them.

"Sally's new coat looks nice" goes in at the beginning,  
"Wally's blue goat has lice" comes out at the end.

This brings us to something I have long been convinced of, namely that the interpretations of theological liberalism are as much the product of a lack of imagination as they are of unbelief. Let us assume for a moment that Ehrman really does believe that the telephone game provides an apt parallel for the way things happened with the oral transmission of the Jesus tradition prior to its being written down in the Gospels. Let's take a moment to remind ourselves of how Ehrman talks about the game, this time from his most recent book, *Jesus Interrupted*:

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<sup>32</sup> Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 55.

<sup>33</sup> Darrell L. Bock & Daniel B. Wallace, *Dethroning Jesus: Exposing Popular Culture's Quest to Unseat the Biblical Christ* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 44.

This is how Christianity spread, year after year, decade after decade, until eventually someone wrote down the stories. What do you suppose happened to the stories over the years, as they were told and retold, not as disinterested news stories reported by eyewitnesses but as propaganda meant to convert people to faith, told by people who had themselves heard them fifth- or sixth- or nineteenth-hand? Did you or your kids ever play the telephone game at a birthday party? The kids sit in a circle, and one child tells a story to the girl sitting next to her, who tells it to the next girl, who tells it to the next, and so on, until it comes back to the one who first told the story. And it's now a different story. (If it weren't a different story the game would be a bit pointless.) Imagine playing telephone not among a group of kids of the same socioeconomic class from the same neighborhood and same school and of the same age speaking the same language, but imagine playing it for forty or more years, in different countries, in different contexts, in different languages. What happens to the stories? They change.<sup>34</sup>

Now let's pause and think about this. When Ehrman says "If it weren't a different story the game would be a bit pointless," can he really be missing the fact that the story changed because it was intentionally distorted by children trying to be clever along the way? At this point it might be helpful to try to remember the diverse assortment of kids that surrounded us during our own childhoods. There was always that kid who didn't seem to get it the way the other kids did. The other children's jokes went right over his head. It wasn't because he lacked intelligence, but perhaps he did not grasp the humor and imagination of the other children. Are we to imagine then such a kid, ten years old at a birthday party, sitting there in line playing telephone and having someone on the one side of him whisper some silly line into his ear, which he, in all seriousness, carefully repeats word for word into the ear of the child next to him on the other side of him, only to find out that it comes out totally different at the end, so that he cries in wide-eyed astonishment: "Wow, that's not what I heard! It came out totally different!" Was Ehrman that kind of kid? If so it certainly undercuts anyone's excuse for being angry with him for his appealing to the telephone game as a way of explaining

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<sup>34</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (and Why We Don't Know About Them)* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 146-47.

the early transmission of the Jesus tradition. But that doesn't change the fact that it's a bad analogy.

### III. REMEMBERING MEMORY

Let us start with basics. What Ehrman's analogy totally fails to do is to provide any sort of realistic account of how people through the ages have passed along cherished tradition via a disciplined process of oral transmission. It may come as a surprise to some that people have actually been known to memorize things from time to time, and in fact still do. For example, one of the professors at Midwestern, Radu Gheorghita, is an enthusiastic advocate of committing entire books of the Bible to memory. But what about long-term memory, say over 35 years, the length of time Ehrman gives as the time between the death of Jesus and the appearance of the earliest Gospel?

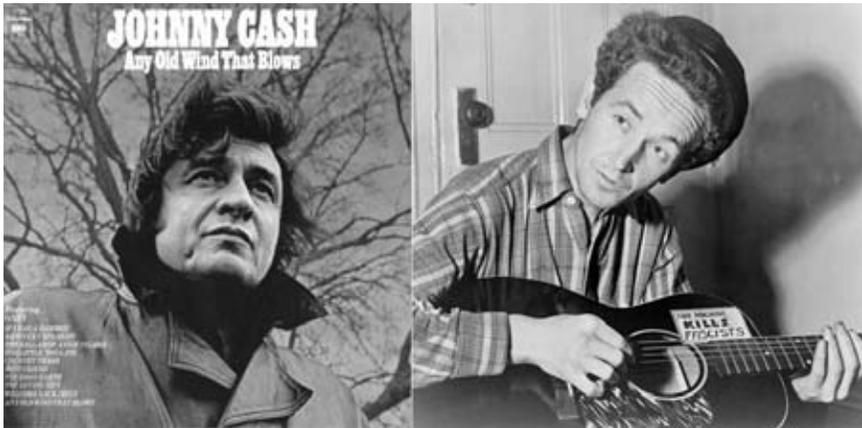


Fig. 2: Johnny Cash and Woody Guthrie

In preparation for answering this question I performed a simple experiment. I attempted to remember two songs I had not performed, nor to the best of my recollection heard, for at least 35 years. I did not insist on taking up the guitar and singing them right through all at once, rather I attempted to recall as much of them to the best of my recollection first. I then wrote them out and afterward checked what I had recovered from my memory against the originals. The songs I selected were Woody Guthrie's *Pastures of Plenty* and Johnny Cash's *Any Old Wind that Blows* (fig. 2). I did rather poorly with the first, recalling exactly one half of the song, two and a half verses, with all the words in the right order, and not able to recall the other two and a half verses at all. In contrast I got all of the Cash song right except for one line: Where I had "But when

it comes to leavin' she'll express the only reason, is she wants to," while Cash had, "Still I know the only reason that she ever has for leavin' is she wants to." Also I forgot that Johnny had repeated the last line of the chorus each time with a buffer of "Yes she will, Yes she will." Still I am convinced that with a little practice both songs could easily be brought back in their entirety.

I include this absurd little personal example to try and bring the whole question of oral transmission into an arena that most modern people will understand. One of the reasons songs are memorable is that their lines have a certain rhythm, which, when combined with the music, remind the singer not to forget something, words rhyme, verses have the same number of lines, most songs have more or less the same number of verse, etc. All of these features facilitate memory. And here the reader may pause to consider as well—provided they have logged in as many years as I have—what *they* can remember from 35 years ago. Let us suppose for example that we speak not of remembering entire songs, but one or more lines from songs, even songs we hated when we were young, but heard a lot on the radio. Or again, how about lines from television advertisements going back many years. The Public Health Cigarette Smoking Act passed in 1970 (i.e., 40 years ago) banning cigarette advertisements from American radio and television.<sup>35</sup> And yet I find I can easily finish out the lines "You can take Salem out of the country, but..." and "Winston tastes good, like a..." and "You've come a long way baby..." with 100 percent accuracy, which is most remarkable in connection with the last ad, since it did not target my gender and ran a full 26 words. There is a body of memorized information that simply comes with living in a given cultural context.

These examples are offered to show that despite the fact that we live in a literate culture that is much less dependent on memorization than cultures at other places and in other times where literacy was less prevalent we all have nevertheless memorized a great deal without even trying. Nor are most of us total strangers to the process of intentional memorization either. As a child I memorized the Apostles Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments, and my children memorized Bible verses in AWANA. Still when confronted with the accomplishment of disciplined memorization in less literate or illiterate settings we are often astonished, as the following examples, I think, will show.

We are all familiar with actors memorizing their parts for a play, usually imagining them with script in hand, reading and rehearsing their

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<sup>35</sup> William G. Rothstein, *Public Health and the Risk Factor: A History of an Uneven Medical Revolution* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2003), 253.

lines. But what about situations where many if not most of the players are illiterate or at best only marginally literate. A good example to think of here is the Passion Play performed by the residence of the Bavarian village of Oberammergau. In 1633 during an outbreak of the plague the citizens of Oberammergau vowed that if their village was spared they would perform a Passion Play unto perpetuity. Since then they have performed it roughly once every ten years (with only a few exceptions). On the chosen year, they perform it many times over a period of months. As I write they are in the midst of their forty-first season. This year they are putting on more than 100 performances between May and October.<sup>36</sup> Today, no doubt, most if not all of the participants in the play are literate, and so will have had no problem practicing their lines from a script. But imagine the task of producing the play back in 1662,<sup>37</sup> the date of the earliest surviving manuscript of the play, when many of the citizens might not have been able to read and therefore had to be taught their share of the play's 5,402 lines some other way.<sup>38</sup> Despite such difficulties a new, much longer, version of the play was written in 1750 that ran 8,457 lines.<sup>39</sup> Seems like a daunting task, does it not, pulling together a village full of illiterate and/or semi-literate amateur citizen actors to perform a play as long as Hamlet done twice over.<sup>40</sup> No doubt the use of the music and the structuring of the play in "six sets of three tableaux in succession," helped, but still! Yet they did pull it off, and with something like 11,000 people seeing it that year.<sup>41</sup> And yet if this sounds impressive consider the remarks of Montrose J. Moses on the relative brevity of the Oberammergau play:

Unlike the large medieval dramas in their prime, the Oberammergau production occupies only one day, during which time, between the hours of eight and five, but one intermission is allowed. The seventeen acts form a play about four times the length of an ordinary four-act modern drama. Formerly the

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<sup>36</sup> See appropriate section at [www.oberammergau-passion.com](http://www.oberammergau-passion.com).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> See Utz Maas, "Literacy in Germany" in *The Making of Literate Societies* (eds. David R. Olson & Nancy Torrance; Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2001), 82-100, esp. 85-86. In his section on Germany in entry "Medieval Drama in Europe," in *The Cambridge Guide to Theater* (rev. ed.; ed. Martin Banham; Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), Peter Meredith refers to Oberammergau in connection with "subliterary folk theater" (p. 706).

<sup>39</sup> See [www.oberammergau-passion.com](http://www.oberammergau-passion.com).

<sup>40</sup> James Shapiro, *Oberammergau: The Troubling Story of the World's Most Famous Passion Play* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2000), 61.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

mysteries and passion plays stretched over a period of several days in performing. The *Actes des Apôtres* contained 61,908 lines, while a mystery of the *New Testament* exceeded 180,000 verses.<sup>42</sup>

Only now are we beginning to approach the potential size of feats of disciplined memory that were not only possible, but frequently attested in illiterate and semi-literate oral cultures.

We should perhaps note before we proceed another assertion Ehrman made in print about oral transmission.

Until recently it has been commonly thought (again, even among scholars) that oral cultures could be counted on to preserve their traditions reliably, that people in such societies were diligent in remembering what they heard and could reproduce it accurately when asked about it. This, however, is another myth that has been exploded by recent studies of literacy. We have now come to see that people in oral cultures typically do not share the modern concern for preserving traditions intact, and do not repeat them exactly the same way every time.<sup>43</sup>

I wonder who Ehrman is referring to when he prefaces his remarkable final statement in the above paragraph with “we have now come to see.” Scholars actually are not finding that oral cultures don’t care about preserving traditions intact. But to give him the benefit of the doubt perhaps Ehrman is only paraphrasing very clumsily what he says immediately after about how oral cultures “do not repeat them [i.e., their traditions] exactly the same way every time.” Whatever the case, what Ehrman says is not true. In the first place different kinds of transmission require different levels of precision in repetition. So let’s look at some of ways cultures have preserved cherished texts orally from this perspective. In order to challenge the basic accuracy of Ehrman’s statement head on, let us begin with cases (from both oral and literate cultures) where scholars believe the intention of memorization is to be able to repeat the material “exactly the same way every time.” An obvious place to start for the former is with Homer. Craig S. Keener notes:

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<sup>42</sup> *The Passion Play of Oberammergau* (trans. & intro. Moses J. Montrose; New York: Duffield, 1910), xvii-xviii.

<sup>43</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.; New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 54.

Centuries before the Gospels, the best professional reciters could recite all of Homer by heart; in the general era of the Gospels, Dio Chrysostom [d. after 110 AD] even claims a people who no longer were able to speak Greek well but most of whom knew “the *Illiad* by heart.” Many poems remained fluid, but the *Illiad* remained textually constant, because it became canonical for Greek culture.<sup>44</sup>

Another example, more immediately accessible to modern scholars, is the sacred texts of India known as the Vedas. There are four of these: the *Rig Veda*, *Yajur Veda*, *Sāma Veda*, and *Atharva Veda*. As for all of these, Brockington and Brockington tell us, “They were handed down verbatim over the centuries without variation, and the reciter’s or hearer’s understanding of them—or lack of it—was immaterial.”<sup>45</sup> In her magisterial work *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (2009), Wendy Doniger, Marcea Eliade Distinguished Service Professor of the History of Religions at the University of Chicago, sheds further light on this in her discussion of the *Rig Veda* (c.1500 BC), the earliest and most important of the four Vedas, which consists of 1,028 poems or mantras:

The *Rig Veda* was preserved orally even when the Indians had used writing for centuries, for everyday things like laundry lists and love letters and gambling IOUs. But they refused to preserve the *Rig Veda* in writing...The *Mahabharata* (13.24.70) groups people who read and recite the Veda from a written text (rather than memorize it and keep it only in their heads) with corrupters and sellers of the Veda as people heading for hell...The oral text of the *Rig Veda* was therefore memorized in such a way that no physical traces of it could be found...<sup>46</sup>

Remarkably a bit later in her discussion Doniger makes reference in this connection to the telephone game:

Now, one might suppose that a text preserved orally in this way would be subject to steadily encroaching inaccuracy and

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<sup>44</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: MI / Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2006), 141. The passage from Dio Chrysostom is from *Orations* 36.9.

<sup>45</sup> Vālmīki, *Rāma the Steadfast: An Early Form of the Rāmāyaṇa* (trans. & intro. John Brockington and Mary Brockington; London: Penguin Classics, 2006), 23.

<sup>46</sup> Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 105.

unreliability. That the message would become increasingly garbled like the message in a game of telephone, but one would be wrong. For the very same sacredness that made it necessary to preserve the *Rig Veda* orally rather than in writing also demanded that it be preserved with meticulous accuracy.<sup>47</sup>

It is good to keep in mind that Doniger is talking about the verbatim oral transmission of a very large text not merely over decades (cf., Ehrman's "between 40 and 60 or 70 years"), but over centuries.

What Doniger says also provides an interesting backdrop when considering the credibility of claims that "many rabbis had the entire Old Testament and much of the oral law committed to memory."<sup>48</sup> It should never be forgotten that Jesus and his first disciples lived and breathed in the same cultural air that gave birth to Rabbinic Judaism, where, as Berger Gerhardsson has pointed out, "The pupil ... is duty bound to maintain his teacher's exact words. But the Teacher is also responsible for seeing that the exact wording is preserved."<sup>49</sup>

So now let us look at another example from India where we have a very disciplined practice of oral transmission, yet one which does not require verbatim repetition of words each time, but which is nevertheless in dead earnest in its "concern for preserving tradition intact."<sup>50</sup> We are talking about the great Indian epic tradition, most famously represented by the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*. Brockington and Brockington, in contrasting the transmission of the epics to the verbatim oral passing on of the Vedas write:

The case of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* has been completely the opposite. They were heroic tales, narratives conceived as entertainment ... Meaning, as opposed to sound, has been crucial, and additions and modifications have been freely made. All living languages evolve, and the important point here is that later material, naturally, was composed in the diction

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>48</sup> Blomberg, *Historical Reliability*, 55.

<sup>49</sup> Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (ASNU 22; trans. Eric J. Sharpe; Uppsala: Gleerup/Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1961), 133. That Gerhardsson and his associates in the "Scandinavian school," have been criticized for too readily projecting a slightly later Rabbinic Judaism back onto the early Jesus movement, does not change the fact that both arose in a religious culture where memorization played a big part in the preservation and transmission of sacred teaching.

<sup>50</sup> Again, Ehrman, *Historical Introduction*, 54.

and style of the teller's own day, alongside the earlier material that they felt unable to omit.<sup>51</sup>

Such modifications over the centuries did not, however, result in anything like a wholesale departure from, or replacement of, the original. Instead numerous strategies were in place to aid in the effective memorization of the core epic. Robert Goldman has noted:

[I]n a social milieu where the vast majority of the audience of traditional literatures are not literate, traditional texts must make heavy use of devices that maximize memorability. Among these devices are iteration, formulaic composition, simple metrical forms preferably subject to musical or quasi-musical recitation, copiousness, heavy use of epigrams and sententia, hyperbole and tales of wonder.<sup>52</sup>

Hence despite variations scholars have still been able to attempt, for example, to create an edition of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in its early form, without access to early manuscripts. It is thought that the *Rāmāyaṇa* was written between 750 and 500 BC. Yet the earliest *Rāmāyaṇa* manuscript comes from the eleventh century AD.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless reconstruction of an early version of the epic was what Brockington and Brockington were attempting in their popular *Rāma the Steadfast: An Early Form of the Rāmāyaṇa*, as they write in their introduction: "This volume is based on a rigorous linguistic analysis of [the] five core Books, which has identified the passages preserved in the earlier diction."<sup>54</sup>

In India *bhopas*, or singers of epics, are often illiterate individuals belonging to families in which the career of memorizing, reciting, and performing particular epics is hereditary, passed down from father to son over many generations. What dumbfounds the literate westerner, shaped by his or her near complete dependence on written or printed text is the breathtaking size of some of these epics. The *Mahābhārata*, which runs five million words formed into seventy-five thousand verses, is said to be fifteen times the length of the Bible and seven times the length of *Illiad*

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<sup>51</sup> Vālmīki, *Rāma the Steadfast*, xxiv.

<sup>52</sup> Robert Goldman in "Structure, Substance and Function in the Great Sanskrit Epics," (Paper delivered at the Festival of India Conference on Indian Literatures at the University of Chicago, April, 1986), 7-8, quoted in Vālmīki, *The Rāmāyaṇa* (abr. & trans., Arshia Sattar; New Dehli: Penguin Books, 1996), xlv-xlv.

<sup>53</sup> *Rāmāyaṇa* (ed. of Arshia Sattar), il-1.

<sup>54</sup> *Rāmāyaṇa* (ed. of John & Mary Brockington), xxiv.

and the *Odyessy* combined.<sup>55</sup> And yet Doniger insists that, “the bards really did memorize all of it. The literate too knew the texts by heart and wrote commentaries on written versions of them.”<sup>56</sup> Presently the era of the illiterate Indian bard with his or her vast feats of memorization is quickly passing away. Many reasons why this is the case can be imagined, including the rise of a global culture with its new range of opportunities. Yet many suspect the main culprit is the advance of literacy itself. “Just as the blind can develop a heightened sense of hearing, smell and touch to compensate for their loss of vision,” writes William Dalrymple in reference to the Indian context, “so it seems that the illiterate have a capacity to remember in a way that the literate simply do not. It was not lack of interest, but literacy itself, that was killing the oral epic.”<sup>57</sup>

Nevertheless there *are* still some active *reciters* and *even* those who were able to recite the largest epics are still a part of a living memory. Dalrymple, for example, recalls an anthropologist friend telling him about an encounter he had with an itinerate storyteller he had met in South India in the late 1970s who could recite the entire *Mahābhārata*. When asked how he managed it, the bard replied that, “in his mind, each stanza was written on a pebble. The pile of pebbles lay before him always; all he had to do was remember the order in which they were arranged and to ‘read’ from one pebble after another.”<sup>58</sup>



Fig. 3: Detail from a *Phad* illustrating the Rajisthani *Epic of Pabuji* (Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam)<sup>59</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Doneger, *The Hindus*, 263. Sometimes the *Mahābhārata* is said to run 100,000 verses, e.g., William Dalrymple, *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India* (New York: Knopf, 2010), 88.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220.

<sup>57</sup> Dalrymple, *Nine Lives*, 92.

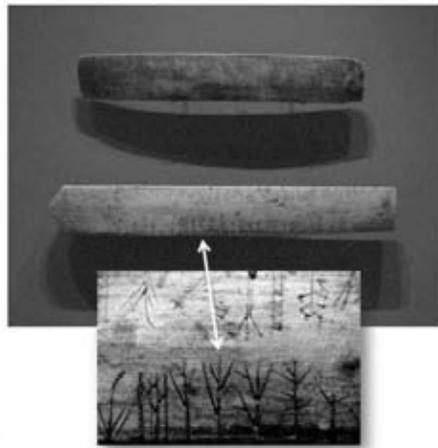
<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>59</sup> Photograph part of the “Wiki Loves Art Netherlands” project (photographer not identified).

This is not to say, however, that the illiterate story tellers necessarily avoided using memory aids. The traditional Rajsthani poem, *The Epic of Pabuji*, for example, was performed in front of a *phad*, a seventeen-foot cloth containing a narrative painting that “serves as both an illustration of the highlights of the story and a portable temple of Pabuji the god” (fig. 3).<sup>60</sup>

This narrative painting is a grand-scale parallel of the “story stick,” referred to in connection with story tellers in Africa, where “carvings and symbols on the stick provide a rough outline, or sequence of episodes, which the tribal shaman or storyteller then retells orally using both the older versions and his own improvisations.”<sup>61</sup>

Such memory aids stand in fact on a trajectory that culminates in the creation of written language; and to the extent that they serve to relieve a person of the task of having to remember everything they actually weaken memory. Such a thought occurred to me very vividly as I reflected on the two Potawatomi Prescription Sticks now housed in Kansas City’s American Indian Collection (fig. 4), accompanied by the following description:



**Fig. 4: Potawatomi Prescription Sticks, Wisconsin or Kansas (c. 1850), Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City, MO (Photo: R. Huggins)**

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>61</sup> L. Michael White, *Scripting Jesus: The Gospels in Rewrite* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 98. In the context where he describes this memory aid and its use, White misstates the situation with oral storytellers by asserting that “The bard did not memorize the whole poem.”

A healer...consulted these prescriptions sticks as memory aids in preparing herbal medicines. The edges of both sides of each flat panel are delicately incised with linear pictographs that represent distinct plant species. While not a formal written language, the images were clearly understood by the maker or others taught to interpret them. Groups of plants that would have been combined in complex formulas are separated by either incised dots or rectangular, X-filled bars.

Once the recipe is on the stick, there is a danger that you will let off keeping it in your head. But then what happens when you lose the stick? That literacy can represent a crutch that weakens the memory is something understood even in ancient times. Plato's *Phaedrus*, for example, relates a conversation between the Egyptian god Thamus (or Ammon), who was said to rule Egypt at the time from Thebes, and Theuth, the inventor of arithmetic, calculation, geometry, astronomy, and especially, letters or writing. Theuth came to Thamus one day to display his inventions in hopes of getting permission for them to be used by the Egyptians. Thamus liked some of them and disliked others, but when they came to writing Thamus said to Theuth: "this discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves."<sup>62</sup>

Similarly, Julius Caesar, commenting on the Druids' practice of memorizing rather than writing down their lore, wrote:

[I]n the schools of the Druids they learn by heart a great number of verses, and therefore some persons remain twenty years under training. And they do not think it proper to commit these utterances to writing, although in almost all other matters, and in their public and private accounts, they make use of Greek letters. I believe that they have adopted the practice for two reasons—that they do not wish the rule to become common property, nor those who learn the rule to rely on writing and so neglect the cultivation of the memory; and, in fact, it does usually happen that the assistance of writing tends to relax the diligence of the student and the action of the memory.<sup>63</sup>

Windy Doniger relates this confirmatory story from India:

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<sup>62</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus* 274c-275a (ET: Benjamin Jowett).

<sup>63</sup> Julius Caesar, *Gallic War* 6.14 (ET: H. J. Edwards).

In the 1950s, Kamal Kothari sent one of his best singers, from the Langa caste, to adult education classes. He learned to read, but from then on he needed to consult his notes before he sang. As Kothari remarked, "It seems that the illiterate have a capacity to remember in a way that the literate simply do not."<sup>64</sup>

Ehrman's appeal to the telephone game reveals two anachronistic features relating to his way of conceptualizing the situation in the early Christian world. First he wants, on the one hand, to say that most of Jesus' early followers across the Roman Empire were illiterate,<sup>65</sup> but on the other that they were all endowed with the weak memories characteristic of highly literate societies.

Secondly, he wants to assume that the more a particular teaching is held to be sacred, the more quickly those who regard it as such will rush to distort it, so much so in fact, in the case of Christianity, that within a mere 35 to 40 years, we are to believe that the original sense of its teaching, and the correct recollection of the central events relating to its founding had already been substantially forgotten. What I have been trying to show here is that just the opposite is the case, (1) that a mere 35 to 40 years is too short a time to entirely lose connection with the memory of even unremarkable things, never mind something as drop-dead, earthquake, world-view-changing as the life, teaching, death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, and (2) that when humans want to orally preserve something sacred to them, they can do it with great efficiency and over a very long period of time.

#### IV. INTO THE TEETH OF THE EVIDENCE

Having addressed, then, the issue of the distance in time between the death of Jesus and the composition of the Gospels, and the supposed parallel to the manner of transmission in the telephone game, we may now turn our attention directly to the more central question of eyewitness testimony in the New Testament. Ehrman talked as if all of the testimony about Jesus' resurrection found in the New Testament stands at several steps removed from anyone who actually remembered it. Is it? Let us begin by recalling first of all that during the debate Ehrman introduced the analogy of the telephone game immediately after making this comment about how the Apostle Paul was supposed to have first heard stories about the resurrection:

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<sup>64</sup> Doniger, *The Hindus*, 220, nt.

<sup>65</sup> Although he does grant that Jesus himself could read (Ehrman, *Jesus Interrupted*, 105).

He had heard stories, and who was telling the stories? He didn't hear these stories from eyewitnesses. He was living in a different country from the eyewitnesses, speaking a different language from the eyewitnesses. Jesus' followers spoke Aramaic and lived in Palestine. Paul spoke Greek and lived outside of Palestine. People started telling stories about Jesus that were in circulation year after year after year. And they converted other people who told the stories, who told the stories to their neighbors, to their spouses, to their business associates. People are telling the stories about Jesus' death and resurrection, and later people like Paul hear those stories. What happens when stories circulate by word of mouth? Not for just a day or two, but for years?

When he says "year after year after year," he simply contradicts what he had said earlier about Paul's being converted "maybe a couple of years after the death of Jesus" (which, if true, would undermine his entire claim about the story of the resurrection being something we have evidence for only many decades after the fact), while in the above paragraph he seems to imply instead that Paul only heard the message at a remote location, in another language, years after the event. Given the setting in which statements like this occurred, *viz.*, in the heat of debate, such mistakes are probably inevitable, and as such needn't really be regarded as blameworthy. This does not mean that such lapses do not adversely affect the credibility of the arguments of debaters who makes them. However, a more serious problem is found in the methodology underpinning Ehrman's entire approach during the debate. Let me sum it up as it appears to me. I understand that Ehrman would not appreciate this portrayal of his approach, but as an observer of the debate with some knowledge of the subject under discussion, it seems to me that this is exactly what he was doing. Anyway, here is a summary of his methodology as I see it:

1. I will treat primary sources (e.g., Paul's own words about Paul's own experience) as valid, except where they don't agree with me or serve my argument, in which case I will find some pretext to dismiss them.
2. I will treat secondary sources (e.g., the Book of Acts talking about Paul and the other disciples of Jesus) as invalid, except where they agree with me or serve my argument, in which case I shall find some pretext to accept them.

3. In cases where I have simply dismissed the evidence that *is* there, I will feel free to assert its exact opposite without owning any obligation to support myself with evidence.

Let me illustrate how Ehrman actually exploited this methodology in framing his statements during the debate. Our first example is found in the preceding comment that Ehrman made about Paul. His argument there hinges on the claim that Paul spoke a different language than Jesus and his followers and that he lived in a different country from them.

However, Acts 22 contradicts this. There Paul describes himself (speaking in Aramaic) as “a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city [i.e., Jerusalem],” and he says that, “Under Gamaliel [a famous Jewish teacher in Jerusalem] I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God” (Acts 22:1-2, cf. 21:40, 22:2, 26:14). Indeed Paul is first introduced in Acts as a Jew in Jerusalem who goes by the name Saul (Acts 7:58). It is only later on that we discover he is from Tarsus (Acts 9:1, 21:39, 22:3). In addition there is an incidental reference as well to Paul having a nephew living in Jerusalem at the time of his arrest there (Acts 23:16).

“Ah yes,” says Ehrman, “but that is a secondary source. Therefore, according to the principle 2, I can ignore it entirely if it suits my purposes, and according to principle 3, assert my own alternative scenario without evidence. Since a secondary source affirms that Paul spoke Aramaic and lived in Jerusalem, that gives me a free hand to assert the exact opposite, namely that Paul did not live and study in Jerusalem, that he did not have family there, and that he did not speak Aramaic.”

In response we need only say, “Yes Professor Ehrman, you are free to say anything you like—’tis a free country—but as you say it without evidence, we are equally free to ignore you.” In point of fact, Ehrman does not know where Paul lived during the time in which the crucial events relating to Jesus’ death and resurrection occurred, nor does he know from whom Paul first heard at least a basic outline of the Gospel, nor whether or not he spoke Aramaic. The book of Acts tells us that as an unbeliever he heard the Christian preaching at the very farthest remove only one step away from the eyewitnesses, namely from Stephen (7:58 and 8:1).<sup>66</sup> Acts does not claim however that that was the first time Paul heard the Christian preaching. If Ehrman chooses to reject the

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<sup>66</sup> Although one could try to make the case that Paul was only present at the site of Stephen’s stoning, after they had dragged Stephen out of the city (Acts 7:58) but had not been present at the place where his speech was given (7:58 and 8:1). But if that were the case, on what basis was Paul “giving approval of his death?”

evidence of Acts, that only means he has less evidence to work with than the rest of us, not more.

Ehrman is sure that Paul did not hear the gospel from an eyewitness prior to conversion. Such an idea might be derived from Paul's claim in Galatians 1:12 that he "did not receive it from any man. Nor was I taught it, rather I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ." However, the fact, attested in his letters (Gal 1:13, 23, 1 Cor 15:9), that prior to his conversion Paul had persecuted the Church, implies that he must have known something of the content of the Church's preaching. Prior to his conversion he was not formally acquainted with the members of Jesus' inner circle (Gal 1:18), although it may be, we have no way of knowing for sure, that he had encountered previously one or more of them in some sort of personal yet hostile way. Still we do know that according to Paul's own testimony he did eventually come to know at least some of the key eyewitnesses, e.g., Peter (Gal. 1:18, 2:11), and John (probably Zebedee), and even more remarkably, Jesus' own brother in the flesh, James (Gal 1:19). These three intimates of Jesus extended the right hand of fellowship to Paul (Gal 2:9), in effect placing their seal of approval on both his own account of his apostolic ministry and message. Clearly this fact must have some bearing on our understanding of their acceptance as well as of Paul's claim to have seen the Lord (1 Cor 9:1) and gotten his gospel from him (Gal 1:1). So in the end the question whether Paul knew the eyewitnesses before he was converted becomes moot in light of the fact that by the time he wrote his earliest epistle (which is, in my view, Galatians) he already knew the eyewitnesses Peter, James, and John.

Can Ehrman without the witness of Acts firmly assert that Paul only saw Jesus in a vision, as he asserted in the debate? Can he really be sure that Paul didn't see the Lord tangibly before him, as it was in the case of doubting Thomas and the other disciples (John 20:26-28, Luke 24:39)?

Ehrman's assertion also does not represent the evidence of Acts adequately, since in the accounts given there of Paul's conversion it was not merely a vision, namely not something experienced only by Paul say in the privacy of his prayer closet. It was an event which left him blind, and which those with him experienced as well at different levels (Acts 9:3-8, 22:6-9, 26:12-14). And so once again we seem to detect principles 2 and 3 at work once again.

Our second example of Ehrman's dubious methodology is his treatment of Mark, as the author of the first Gospel, which parallels closely the way he treated Paul. Here is what Ehrman said:

Our first account of Jesus' death and resurrection is the Gospel of Mark written around the year 65 or 70 AD, thirty-five to forty

years later by somebody who was not from Israel the way Jesus was, who spoke a different language from Jesus (he spoke Greek rather than Aramaic), who does not claim to be an eyewitness and in fact was not an eyewitness.

Again we have Ehrman flatly asserting the opposite of the testimony of Acts, which connects Mark with the eyewitnesses and with Jerusalem at several different points. In Acts 12:12, after Peter escapes from prison, he goes directly to the house of Mary the mother of John Mark. It appears to have been a considerable household, insofar as it retained servants and was chosen as a place of corporate prayer. Mark also went along with Paul on his first missionary journey (12:25), accompanied by Barnabas, a Jew from Cyprus and another intimate of the apostolic circle at Jerusalem (Acts 4:36, 11:22). Then he accompanied Barnabas on a second missionary journey (15:39). In this case, however, several of the links are also attested in Paul, where we read that Mark is the cousin of Barnabas (Col 4:10). We also find him mentioned in Philemon 1:24, and 2 Timothy 4:11. Next, although its meaning is not entirely clear, there is 1 Peter 1:3, which states “She who is in Babylon [Rome? Jerusalem?], chosen together with you, sends you her greetings, and so does my son Mark.” The dominant view in the early Church was that Mark was a disciple of Peter and derived his Gospel from him. The earliest statement to this effect comes from a work composed in the opening decades of the second century by Papias, the bishop of Hierapolis. Papias writes:

And the elder used to say this: ‘Mark having become Peter’s interpreter, wrote down accurately everything he remembered, though not in order of the things either said or done by Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor followed him, but afterwards, as I said, followed Peter, who adapted his teachings as needed but had no intention of giving an ordered account of the Lord’s sayings.’<sup>67</sup>

When Ehrman asserts that Mark “in fact was not an eyewitness” we are left to wonder if he does so in reliance on Papias, a rather remote witness whose historical value Ehrman himself dismisses in his most recent popular book.<sup>68</sup>

As to the language of Mark, it is true that he wrote in Greek, but it isn’t very polished Greek. He also pauses occasionally to use and define Aramaic words (Mark 3:17, 5:41, 7:11, 7:34, 10:46, 14:36, 15:22, 15:34). The simple fact is, again, Ehrman does not know whether Mark could

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<sup>67</sup> Frag. 3, from Eusebius, *Church History* 3.39.15 (ET: Michael Holmes).

<sup>68</sup> Ehrman, *Jesus Interrupted*, 108.

speaking Aramaic or not. The fact that I write this in English does not reveal with certainty what my competency level is in other languages. In any case the whole point of who knew which language as a criterion for separating people from the possibility of having had contact with Jesus and his disciples, might well be moot, because, while it is probable that Jesus and his disciples spoke mainly Aramaic, they may have known some Greek as well. Ehrman does not know, he cannot know, one way or the other.

So then, as the evidence stands, Mark is from Jerusalem and very possibly an intimate of the apostles. And yet we can easily imagine Ehrman dismissively ticking away each piece of evidence: 1 Peter isn't authentic, Paul doesn't connect Mark with Jerusalem, how do we know whether *that* Mark was *the* Mark that wrote Mark, and so on. Ehrman can doubt whatever evidence he likes, but historians usually weigh evidence. Evidence is the *given*. You can't simply adopt a posture of unpersuadability in relation to whichever bits of it you don't happen to like, and still expect to be regarded as a dispassionate, credible historian. But here again the point is that in the case of Mark as with Paul, Ehrman dismisses the evidence that is there and asserts its exact opposite.

But let us take a more positive approach to the whole question of indications of eyewitness testimony, or at least only-one-step-removed testimony in the New Testament. Is the situation really as bleak as Ehrman paints it? Yet again the answer is no. From the evidence already presented it is also clear, for example, that everyone who heard the gospel from Barnabas heard it from an only-one-step-removed witness. If Mark, whose connections have already been described, is the author of the gospel of Mark then we have the testimony of an early associate of the apostles and especially Peter, whose interpreter the early church pretty much uniformly believed him to be.

As for Paul, we have already shown that he personally knew some of the key associates of Jesus. Further, Paul's incidental statements in his letters also imply that the churches he was connected with had knowledge and contact with eyewitnesses as well. We may think for example of the Church of Antioch, who had direct contact with Peter (Gal 2:11), and at least once-removed contact with James (Gal 2:12). At Corinth there was a group who held out that they were especially devoted to Peter (1 Cor. 1:12). Later in the same epistle, Paul remarks, "Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas" (1 Cor 9:4). Such a comment reflects not only Paul's personal knowledge of the marital status and travel habits of Peter and the other Apostles, of James the brother of the Lord, and of some of the other brothers of the Lord. The

fact that he makes this unelaborated reference may imply that the Corinthians had received visits from these individuals.

The author of the book of Hebrews does not claim to be an eyewitness but represents himself and his readers as standing *only one step* away from them, this when he speaks of “salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him” (Heb 2:3). He and his audience also had a connection with Timothy (13:23).

The author of the Gospel of Luke is another interesting case in point at a number of levels. A man named Luke shows up in Paul’s letters (Col 4:14, 2 Tim 4:14, Phlm 1:24). Then in the book of Acts, traditionally understood as having been written by Luke, we encounter what are called the “we-sections,” i.e., places in which the description of the movements of Paul and his traveling companions are framed in the first person plural (Acts 16:10-17, 20:3-21:18, and 27:1-28:16). One very obvious way of explaining this, is to say that the author of the book of Acts accompanied Paul at those times. Another explanation is that the author of Acts has incorporated a travel account by an associate of Paul’s in those places. In either case it amounts to contact with eyewitnesses, since in that stretch of Acts, where Paul goes up to Jerusalem, it is a “we” section. Especially significant in this regard is Acts 21:17-18: “When we arrived at Jerusalem, the brothers received us warmly. The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present.” In other words, whoever “we” was, whoever wrote that part of the narrative, met James and the other elders in Jerusalem. This dove-tails as well with what Paul was planning in relation to the delivery of the collection in 1 Corinthians 16:3-4: “when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable for me to go also, they will accompany me.” As to the author of the Gospel of Luke, he claims to rely on materials handed down from eyewitnesses (1:2). Twice in connection with the story of Jesus’ birth and childhood Luke refers to Mary in a way that sounds very much like he is attributing her as the source: “But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart” (Luke 2:19) and “Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart” (Luke 2:51). Finally there is the author of the Gospel of John, who also wrote 1 John, where he represents himself not only as an eyewitness, but as an ear and hand witness as well:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of

life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us (1 Jn 1:1-3).

It has been for a long time standard procedure among liberal biblical scholars to rule out the value of the Gospel of John as having any credible contribution to our understanding of the historical Jesus. Hence Schweitzer, “[t]hat even to the present day there are to be found defenders of the historicity of the Fourth Gospel proves nothing against the facts that are clearly evident to every critical investigator,”<sup>69</sup> and Bultmann, “[t]he Gospel of John cannot be taken into account at all as a source for the teaching of Jesus,”<sup>70</sup> and James M. Robinson, “the Gospel of John is the latest of the four, from the last decade of the first century, and reflects more of the church’s gospel about Jesus than it does the gospel of Jesus himself. It is the most important Gospel for the history of theology, but the least important for the quest of the historical Jesus.”<sup>71</sup> The reason no doubt is the high theology expressed by John, the portrayal of Jesus as the cosmic Word, who was with God and who was God (John 1:1). Those who think this however seem to have forgotten other fairly early expressions of high Christology, such as the hymn of Philippians 2:6-11.

As for myself, I have no particular stake in insisting that the Gospel of John is by an eyewitness, but I have never been able to persuade myself that, apart primarily from the epilogue (John 21:24-25) the entire work is the product of a single mind, that of a person who takes various evasive steps throughout his work to avoid naming himself directly. His favorite name for himself is “the disciple Jesus loved” (John 13:23, 19:26, 20:2, 21:7, 21:20). He represents himself as being present at the end of the story, after the resurrection when Peter is reinstated (John 21:7). He heard Mary Magdalene’s testimony and went to the empty tomb (20:2-3), he stood at the foot of the cross as Jesus was dying, and was entrusted by Jesus to take Jesus’ mother into his home (19:25-27). It was probably he as well who accompanied Jesus to his trial on the night he was betrayed, this because he was “known to the high priest” (18:15). He was reclining next to Jesus on the night he was betrayed (13:23), which also places him within Jesus’ most intimate circle. He may also have been the unnamed disciple of John the Baptist, who, along with Peter’s brother Andrew, had followed Jesus when they both heard John

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<sup>69</sup> Albert Schweitzer, *The Psychiatric Study of Jesus* (trans. Charles R. Joy; Boston: Beacon Press, 1950), 45.

<sup>70</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* (trans. by Louise Pettibone Smith & Erminie Huntress Lantero; New York: Charles Scribner’s 1958), 12.

<sup>71</sup> Robinson, *Gospel of Jesus*, 4.

the Baptist say, “look the lamb of God.”(John 1:35-40). For all those who more recently got it wrong, I still think Schleiermacher got it right when he said that the Gospel of John “is an account by an eyewitness, and the whole Gospel is written by one man.”<sup>72</sup>

Ehrman takes another view. Taking his cue from the use of “we” in John 21:24, he says that the book “doesn’t claim that the author of the Fourth Gospel *himself* was an eyewitness; it claims that the book was based on the report of a different person.”<sup>73</sup> That’s as may be. But if Ehrman is correct, the worst case scenario in that case is that the Fourth Gospel was written by someone in intimate collaboration with a person who had been a member of Jesus’ most intimate circle, and that from the beginning.

Now how about that elusive source that is generally believed to have been used as a source (along with Mark) by the gospels of Matthew and Luke? The so-called Q document. It is often argued (I’m not sure persuasively) that Q had no account of the death and resurrection of Jesus. I am gratified to read James D. G. Dunn affirm something that has seemed obvious to me for a long time, namely that “[t]he most obvious explanation...is that the Q material was given its lasting shape...*prior to Jesus’s death* in Jerusalem.”<sup>74</sup> This does not help us directly with the question of the historicity of the resurrection, but it does speak to the inclusion of eyewitness testimony in the Gospels.

## V. WOULD EHRMAN’S CASE PERSUADE EHRMAN?

At the beginning of the present article we pointed out that during the debate Ehrman wrested the discussion off course twice. The first time he abandoned the question of the historicity of the resurrection to attack the Bible’s inerrancy, the second time he shifted his ground from inerrancy to the problem of suffering in the world. He said basically that he did not lose his faith in Christianity because of the variants he had discovered in the Bible but because of the problem of suffering, again this may be a fine subject for a debate but it was not the one slated for that evening.

But as he was making this second shift I was arrested in my thinking: “Now hold on a minute! Did Ehrman just say what I thought he said? Did he just admit that all the discrepancies he had been listing all

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<sup>72</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Life of Jesus* (ed. and intro. By Jack C. Verheyden; trans. by S. MacLean Gilmore; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975 [1832]), 433.

<sup>73</sup> Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*, 42.

<sup>74</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *A New Perspective on Jesus: What the Quest for the Historical Jesus Missed* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic 2005), 40-41. Dunn’s italics.

evening didn't even persuade *him* that the resurrection wasn't historical? I don't know what Ehrman might say to this question if it were to put it to him now, but let us examine carefully what he actually said at the debate:

It is frequently misstated (including in one of Craig's books—we had a little back and forth over the phone one time about this) that I became an unbeliever because I realized that there were variations in the manuscripts of the New Testament. That is absolutely false. I knew there were variations in the manuscripts of the New Testament when I was a hardcore fundamentalist. That did not shake me at all. I remained a believer for many years. For a while I held Craig's position—that there are discrepancies but we cannot understand really why. But then I started seeing that in fact there are lots of discrepancies and not just in the minor details, in major things, that in fact, John's view of Jesus is really different from Matthew's view of Jesus. And Paul's understanding of Christ is very different from Luke's understanding of Christ, and so forth and so on. I ended up becoming a Liberal Christian and I was a Liberal Christian for many years. What ended up making me a non-believer is unrelated to my biblical Scholarship. My understanding of the Bible is not what led me to become a non-Christian. What led me to become an agnostic was in fact the problem with suffering in the world.

Here Ehrman describes his journey away from faith in four steps: (1) "hardcore Fundamentalist," (2) holder of Craig Evan's current position, (3) liberal Christian who recognized that the various New Testament writers had really different views of Jesus" and (4) Agnostic due to the problem of evil expressed in human suffering. If Ehrman had said (which might be his actual view) that he had become a liberal when he came to believe that the resurrection wasn't real, that it was merely something symbolic, something peripheral to the Christian faith, nothing like someone actually vacating a tomb, that would have been one thing. But that is not what he said. Rather, he said that he became a liberal because he came to understand that the different New Testament writers saw Jesus in very different ways. O.K.? Fair enough. So, then, did the New Testament writers view the resurrection in very different ways? Did some believe in it while others did not? Did some view it in a way that was radically different from the way other New Testament authors understood it? As we seek to answer that question let us deal with it expansively by granting (for the sake of argument) the liberal position

that there were more authors in the New Testament than the traditional titles suggest, since Ehrman, as a liberal Christian and even now, assumes that. Let us also consider that the New Testament authors used sources. What then did the New Testament writers think about the resurrection? Let's begin with the Gospels: Mark, Luke, Matthew, John. Did these authors believe in the resurrection?

It is often noted that Mark ends without anyone actually encountering the resurrected Jesus. The likely cause of this is that the original ending was lost, being replaced by another ending that now appears in most Bibles as Mark 16:9-20. Some however argue to the contrary that Mark intentionally ended his Gospel at 16:8.

In either case it is clear that Mark believed in the resurrection since the "young man" who meets the women at the tomb, declares in Mark 16:6: "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here." So there it is, empty tomb, risen Jesus. Then there are also the three passion predictions at Mark 8:31, 9:31, 10:33, all of which say basically the same thing as the first, which predicts that "the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again." Luke (9:22, 9:44, 18:31) and Matthew (16:21, 17:22, 20:18-19) both take these three passion predictions over into their Gospels.

If we suppose that the end of Mark (i.e., 16:9-20) was written by someone else, then he (or she) too was a believer in the resurrection, since they begin their added section with the words "When Jesus rose...."

Both Luke and Matthew also have well known accounts of the resurrection; each with their own unique presentation and material. At the debate Ehrman asserted that there was a discrepancy about whether the resurrected Jesus met the disciples in Galilee or Jerusalem. We discussed that at the beginning of this essay. In either case it was the *resurrected* Jesus meeting them. Luke's account includes several interesting features of the resurrected body of the Lord, some of which are attested elsewhere in the New Testament as well, especially in John. Jesus appears without being immediately recognized (Luke 24:16, cf. John 20:15-17, 21:12), he could even disappear (Luke 24:31) or appear (Luke 26:36), even when the doors were locked (see John 20:19, 26). Yet he was tangible. He could be touched (John 20:19-20, 26-7) and seen by groups of people (Luke 26:39, John 21:19-20, Matt 28:18, 1 Cor 15:6), and he could eat (Luke 26:43, John 21:15 [?], Acts 1:4)

In addition to the places where Matthew has parallel material to Mark, Luke, and John, he also includes a few details relating to the resurrection not in their Gospels. All four Gospels make reference to the

fact that the tomb was empty (Mark 16:5-6, Luke 24:3, John 20:6). But Matthew alone reports the circulation of the story about the disciples stealing the body (Matt 28:11-15). John alone reports how Jesus said, when he was cleansing the temple, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days” (2:19), and explains it by saying that “the temple he had spoken of was his body” (2:20).

In the book of Acts, attributed to Luke, the resurrection is repeatedly affirmed, as in Peter’s Pentecost sermon: “God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact” (Acts 2:32).

As for Paul, we needn’t discuss all his letters since he makes himself clear enough in 1 Corinthians 15:17-19: “if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.” However there are certain passages that scholars from time to time point to as possibly representing pre-Pauline hymns and creed fragments quoted by Paul, as for example the statement in one of his earliest letters, 1 Thessalonians 4:14: “We believe that Jesus died and rose.”<sup>75</sup> Then again there is the famous Christological hymn at Philippians 2:8-9 “He humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place.” Although this latter passage does not speak explicitly of resurrection, but rather of exaltation, the two ideas are compatible, and appear together, as for example in the book of Hebrews (10:12, 12:2 with 13:20). Various scholars, including Ehrman, have from time to time doubted the authenticity of some of the epistles of Paul. Ehrman offers the following list of disputed epistles in one of his books: 2 Thessalonians, Ephesians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus.”<sup>76</sup>

Very well, then, do these alleged first-century Christian pseudepigraphists affirm the resurrection or not? Some do, some don’t. Second Thessalonians speaks of Christ’s future coming (2:1), but it does not explicitly mention the resurrection. Ephesians (1:20, 2:6) and Colossians (2:12, 3:1) clearly affirm the resurrection. Of the pastoral epistles (the two Timothies and Titus) only 2 Timothy clearly affirms the resurrection (2:8,11,18). 1 Timothy mentions Jesus (1) giving himself as a ransom (2:5, cf. Tit 2:14), (2) being exalted (3:16), and appearing when he returns (6:14, cf. 2 Tim 4:7, Tit 2:13). Some scholars treat the three pastoral epistles as coming from a single author, in which case the

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<sup>75</sup> See, e.g., Richard N. Longenecker, “The Nature of Paul’s Earliest Eschatology,” *NTS* 31 (1985), 90, F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (WBC 45; Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 97.

<sup>76</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene: The Followers of Jesus in History and Legend* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 155-56.

explicit affirmation of the resurrection in 2 Timothy would, as it were, count for all three.

Hebrews 13:20 affirms that author's belief in the resurrection, as does 1 Peter at 1:3, 21 and 3:18, 21. The three Johannine epistles do not mention the resurrection, but we know what the view of that author is from the Gospel he left. Second Peter, James, and Jude make no reference to the resurrection. *None of the books* that fail to mention the resurrection explicitly repudiate it, nor do they provide alternative accounts of how Jesus' story ended.

Finally, Revelation provides a somewhat difficult case because of its symbolic presentation. Nevertheless, we do have Jesus being referred to as "the firstborn from the dead" (1:5), and the one who was "slain" and yet lives (5:6, 9, 12, 6:9, 13:18), who says "I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever" (1:18).

So where does this leave us? In his 1999 book, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*, Ehrman spoke of the importance of multiple, or independent, attestation as an important criterion for determining the historicity of an event. "A strong case," Ehrman wrote, "will be supported by several witnesses who independently agree on a point at issue."<sup>77</sup> What our survey has revealed is that there is perhaps no event as widely and as independently attested by evidence distributed throughout the New Testament as the resurrection of Jesus. You want independent attestation? You got it! Is Ehrman really willing to operate according to his own stated principles in relation to the criterion of multiple attestation? His appeal to the great perspectival differences between the various New Testament authors' view of Jesus, as well as his multiplication of alleged pseudepigraphical authors (people writing in other people names), only results in a greater range of diversity and independence among them. By pushing these writers apart and multiplying their testimonies Ehrman merely increases their value as witnesses to the historicity of the resurrection. Given this line of historical reasoning Ehrman should by now have more real confidence in the historicity of the resurrection than he ever did in the old days, when as a "hardcore fundamentalist," he would have assumed a greater unity of perspective and paradigm on the part of the New Testament witnesses. If that isn't the case, we can only pause, scratch our heads, and wonder why.

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<sup>77</sup> Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*, 90.