

2012

The Reliability of the New Testament.

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Recommended Citation

Burke, Tony (2012) "The Reliability of the New Testament.," *Consensus*: Vol. 34 : Iss. 1 , Article 17.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol34/iss1/17>

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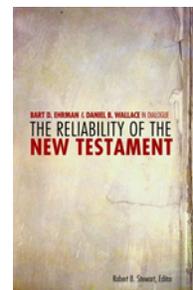
Book Review

The Reliability of the New Testament. Bart D. Ehrman and Daniel B. Wallace in Dialogue

Robert B. Stewart, Editor

Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011

Bart Ehrman's *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* was greeted with heavy criticism from evangelical text-critics when it was published in 2005. One of Ehrman's most vocal detractors was Daniel Wallace, who, in articles, blog posts, and books, has called into question Ehrman's conclusions about the unreliability of today's New Testament, a position frequently summarized by Ehrman in the statement "there are more differences in our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament" (p. 21). Stewart's volume presents a transcript of a "dialogue" (emphatically stated: not a debate) between Ehrman and Wallace from the 2008 Greer-Heard Point-Counterpoint Forum in Faith and Culture held at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.



The aim of the Greer-Heard Forum is to bring together an evangelical Christian and a non-evangelical or non-Christian. The theme for 2008 was "The Textual Reliability of the New Testament." Along with the Ehrman-Wallace dialogue, the Forum featured four additional papers (by Parker, Holmes, Warren, and Martin), published in this volume along with another three invited contributions (by Heide, Evans, and Racquel). Surprisingly, most of the papers delivered at the forum are, for the most part, supportive of Ehrman's position, whereas the invited papers are essentially evangelical apologetic, aimed at defending the New Testament as an inspired text guarded from error by the activity of the Holy Spirit.

David Parker ("What is the Text of the New Testament?") argues that it is undeniable that the text of the New Testament is unreliable and agrees with Ehrman that, in many cases, it is impossible to determine the original reading. He is more celebratory of variants, however, as they are evidence of Christians "engaging in theological and moral debate" (p. 103). Michael W. Holmes ("Text and Transmission in the Second Century") is more optimistic about the reliability of the text, saying that variations evidence "a situation characterized by macro-level stability and micro-level fluidity" (p. 78) and thus our sources represent the early stages of transmission in the first two centuries "well enough to encourage us to seek to recover the earlier texts from which our extant copies appear to have descended" (p. 78). William Warren ("Who Changed the Text and Why? Probable, Possible, and Unlikely Explanations") essentially agrees with both Parker's and Holmes' principal arguments, but calls for caution when assigning variants to orthodox corruption. Warren concludes his paper with a list of proposals for determining the cause of variants—such as, a reading in the church fathers discussed because of theological or apologetic concerns increases the likelihood that the reading was affected by such considerations (p. 121).

The only paper from the Forum that is truly critical of Ehrman is Dale B. Martin's "The Necessity of a Theology of Scripture." Martin argues that Ehrman's view of biblical inerrancy (essentially, if the Bible is inspired, why are there so many differences in the manuscripts?) represents "an immature and untrained *theology* of scripture" (p. 87). The Bible, he says, is not scripture simply in and of itself; it is scripture when read in faith by the leading of the Holy Spirit (p. 87). The remaining papers bolster Martin's position; it makes one wonder if they were invited simply to provide a balance to the discussion not achieved on the night of the Forum. Craig A. Evans ("Textual Criticism and Textual Confidence: How Reliable Is Scripture?") asks, if the most significant variants (e.g., the longer ending of Mark, John's *Pericope Adulterae*) are removed from the New Testament "what have we lost?" He concludes: "very little," because "no discovery yet has called into question significant New Testament teaching" (p. 167). Sylvie R. Raquel ("Authors or Preservers? Scribal Culture and the Theology of Scriptures") echoes Martin, saying that Christian scribes were not careless; rather, variants appear in the texts as the outcome of putting oral tradition into writing, a process carried out "under the guidance of the Holy Spirit" (p. 183) and authorized by the community (p. 176). Finally, K. Martin Heide's statistical analysis ("Assessing the Stability of the Transmitted Texts of the New Testament and the *Shepherd of Hermas*") is, I must admit, difficult to assess, as the quality of its translation (from German into English) and its use of undefined jargon make the paper a painful read. Editor Robert Stewart may have felt the same, as Heide's paper alone suffers from egregious typographical errors.

Nevertheless, the star of this volume is the Ehrman-Wallace dialogue. The transcript begins with Ehrman's summary of *Misquoting Jesus*, a talk he has delivered numerous times since the book's publication. The summary captures well the "hyperskeptical" position of the author, who, when asked about the reliability of the New Testament, says "the reality is there is no way to know" (p. 27). Wallace's response begins with the statement that the two scholars do not disagree on the evidence (such as the number of variant readings in New Testament manuscripts), only its interpretation. He accuses Ehrman of inconsistency—that he "puts a far more skeptical spin on things when speaking in the public square than he does when speaking to professional colleagues" (p. 32). This is fair criticism, though *Misquoting Jesus* is a book for the popular market and (likely) was intentionally meant to be provocative in order to capture readers' interest. Wallace takes issue also with Ehrman's views on the reasons for changes in the text, which often are attributed to orthodox corruption. Wallace rightly states that other reasons are possible, if not more likely, and concludes saying, "It strikes me that Bart is often certain in the very places where he needs to be tentative, and he is tentative where he should have much greater certainty" (p. 46).

Though calling itself a "dialogue," there is little sense that Ehrman and Wallace and the other participants in the Forum have truly listened to each other's positions. Both sides bring to the evidence a set of assumptions that are incompatible—Wallace *et al.* believe the New Testament to be inspired and variants in individual texts are insignificant when the corpus is read as a whole, whereas Ehrman, Parker, and others engage in a more literary-critical pursuit that is interested in the bearing variants have on the reconstruction and interpretation of each text. Nevertheless, the Ehrman-Wallace dialogue has great

pedagogical value for generating discussion on these two positions and the impact *Misquoting Jesus* has had on text-criticism in public consciousness.

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