

Answering Objections to Christianity



Shining Mountains Bible Study Fall 2020

“The Bible cannot be trusted literally. There are numerous historical inaccuracies, textual contradictions, and scribal errors. We can never know what the Bible originally said”

Introduction

Bart Ehrman is a professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina. As a scholar he specializes in the historical Jesus, early Christianity, and the textual criticism of the New Testament. He was raised in Evangelical Christianity and now is a self-identified agnostic. He attributes his fall from faith on his academic study which revealed the unreliability of the biblical text.

In a debate with NT scholar Craig Evans he tells those who believe all the details of the four Gospels happened together in harmony, *“You’re free to do that. ... But realize what you’ve done. You’ve written your own Gospel rather than trusting any of the Gospels of the New Testament. The problem is the Gospels of the New Testament do not agree either on the sayings of Jesus or on the deeds of Jesus.”* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1-JOdk4xYfo>

What questions about the Bible’s reliability does this raise for you?

Textual Differences

The Synoptic Problem revolves around what to do with differences in how the three synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) record the same event in Jesus’ life. The differences only increase once you add in John’s Gospel. One of the most notorious examples is found below.

Scan the four accounts below. **Note** all the ways in which the accounts are different.

Evaluate: “Because there are differences in the accounts, the four accounts are contradictory.”

Matthew 28:1–10 *After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. 2 There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. 3 His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. 4 The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. 5 The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. 6 He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. 7 Then go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He*

has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you." 8 So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. 9 Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. 10 Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Mark 16:1–8 When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. 2 Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb 3 and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" 4 But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. 5 As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. 6 "Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. 7 But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'" 8 Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

Luke 24:1–10 On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. 2 They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, 3 but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. 4 While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. 5 In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? 6 He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 7 'The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.' " 8 Then they remembered his words. 9 When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. 10 It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles.

John 20:1–18 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. 2 So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!" 3 So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. 4 Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, 7 as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. 8 Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. 9 (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) 10 Then the disciples went back to where they were staying. 11 Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb 12 and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. 13 They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." 14 At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. 15 He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away,

tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.” 16 Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means “Teacher”). 17 Jesus said, “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’ ” 18 Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: “I have seen the Lord!” And she told them that he had said these things to her.

Textual Transmission

The dominant view about the Bible in critical theological scholarship (to which Ehrman subscribes) goes like this:

1. A Jewish man named Jesus of Nazareth lived in the Roman province of Palestine in the first century, taught his followers, and was eventually killed by the Romans.
2. After his death, Jesus’ ethical teaching was orally passed down among his followers.
3. Various groups of people joined into communities around the Mediterranean world. These communities adapted this oral tradition of Jesus’ teaching for their own contexts.
4. During this oral transmission, various ideas about Jesus were added in to this tradition to further support each community’s claims, purposes, and goals.
5. Therefore, many different opposing views about Jesus were circulating in the Roman world. Some viewed Jesus as human, some as divine. Each community created written texts – long after Jesus actually lived – to support their views.
6. Eventually, after the legalization of Christianity by Constantine, the Nicene Creed version of Christianity won out and suppressed these other views of Jesus. The church excluded these other views and adopted the “four canonical Gospels” to support its claims.
7. Because of this process of adding various parts to the oral tradition among competing communities, we can never know for sure today what the “historical Jesus” said or did.

For the moment, let’s assume this is true. What problems occur when you consider the following?

1. At the Hatcher Graduate Library at the University of Michigan, papyrus 46 (a New Testament manuscript containing many of Paul’s letters) is dated to around 200 AD. At the John Rylands Library in Manchester, England, papyrus 52 (a New Testament manuscript containing parts of the Gospel of John – considered to be some of the latest New Testament writings) is dated to around 125 AD.
2. The four canonical Gospels feature the crucifixion of Jesus, which was known as a scandalous and barbaric form of execution in the Roman world to both Jews and Gentiles.
3. The pillars of the early Christian Church, according to the book of Acts, are Peter and Paul. According to the Gospels, Peter denied Jesus during his trial. According to Acts, Paul was a former persecutor of Christians.
4. The first eyewitnesses of the resurrection in all four Gospels were women, whose testimony in first century society would not be allowed as evidence in court?

Textual Reliability

An easy solution to this objection goes like this:

1. "How do you know the Bible is true?"
2. "Because it is God's Word"
3. "How do you know it is God's Word?"
4. "Because it says so."

How is this typical Sunday school or catechism answer circular logic?

How is the following a better solution to this objection?

1. "How do you know the Bible is true?"
2. "Because Jesus says so."
3. "Why should I trust Jesus?"
4. "Because he rose from the dead, and I'm going with the guy who claimed to be true God and backed it up with a resurrection."

Conclusion

Practice how you would answer this objection to Christianity.