JETS 54.3 (September 2011) 449–65

DISUNITY AND DIVERSITY: THE BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF BART EHRMAN

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In Bart Ehrman's most recent book, *Jesus, Interrupted,* the subtitle—*Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (and Why We Don't Know About Them)*—could lead some readers to believe that Ehrman is going to uncover new (apparent) problems in the Bible that have been hidden from scholars and serious students of Scripture.[1] These readers will be surprised to find that none of the information or arguments in this book is actually new, and Ehrman admits as much. He repeatedly emphasizes that for years scholars have known of, written about, and lectured on the material he presents. And, of course, he is right. The last two centuries in biblical studies have been characterized by skepticism concerning the unity of the theology found in the Bible. In recent years, the emphasis on viewing the Bible as a series of books that express divergent and irreconcilable theologies can be seen in the influential works of figures such as Walter Bauer, Rudolf Bultmann, Ernst Käsemann, and James Dunn.[2]

Yet Ehrman differs from the aforementioned men in that he is not writing to his fellow scholars. He writes for a lay audience, and he does so with a charismatic and appealing style. Ehrman is disturbed that most people in the pews are unaware of what has been going on in the academy. In *Jesus, Interrupted*, he attempts to remedy this problem by enlightening the masses with his own brand of biblical scholarship. The problem is that Ehrman represents a segment of biblical scholarship which he often implies is the only legitimate brand of scholarship, and he rarely exposes lay readers to the best arguments of opposing views. Carefully crafted responses to Ehrman's work are needed as he has ventured out of textual criticism, his primary area of expertise.[3] The

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[1] Bart Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (and Why We Don't Know About Them)* (HarperCollins: New York, 2009).

[2] For examples of major works by each figure that stress the diversity of the Bible see Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971); Rudolf Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963); Ernst Käsemann, *Essays on New Testament Themes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970); and James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977).

[3] Many scholars in fact have responded to Ehrman on a number of other points. See Daniel Wallace, "The Gospel According to Bart," *JETS* 49 (2006) 327–49; Dillon Burroughs, *Misquotes in Misquoting Jesus* (Ann Arbor, MI: Nimble Books, 2006); Timothy Paul Jones, *Misquoting Truth: A Guide to the Fallacies in Bart Ehrman's Misquoting Jesus* (Downers Gove: InterVarsity, 2007); Nicholas Perrin, *Lost in Transmission: What We Can Know About the Words of Jesus* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 2008); and Andreas Köstenberger and Michael Kruger, *The Heresy of Orthodoxy:*

present essay will respond to Ehrman's approach and subsequent conclusions in the area of biblical theology as represented in *Jesus, Interrupted.*[4]

I. AUTHORSHIP ISSUES

Pervasive skepticism of the NT characterizes Ehrman's work, and much of this cynicism is bound up in distrust for the biblical authors themselves. He states:

> And so we have an answer to our ultimate question of why these Gospels are so different from one another. They were not written by Jesus' companion or by companions. They were written decades later by people who didn't know Jesus, who lived in a different country or different countries from Jesus. They are different from each other in part because they also didn't know each other, to some extent they had different sources of information (although Matthew and Luke drew on Mark), and they modified their stories on the basis of their own understanding of who Jesus was.[5]

For Ehrman, the contradictions between the Gospels have a very simple explanation: they were not written by eyewitnesses or companions of eyewitnesses, as was later claimed. After all, according to Ehrman, the first disciples were probably not even literate. However, Ehrman must be able to account for why the Gospels were ever attributed to the individuals whose names are now considered part of the titles. Therefore, he explains further,

> Why did the tradition eventually arise that these books were written by apostles and companions of the apostles? In part it was in order to assure readers that they were written by eyewitnesses and companions of eyewitnesses. An eyewitness could be trusted to relate the truth of what actually happened in Jesus' life. But the reality is that eyewitnesses cannot be trusted to give historically accurate accounts.[6]

There are several problems with Ehrman's argument. First, he fails to explain why, if the church wanted to use early church figures to gain widespread acceptance for these documents, they chose Matthew, Mark, and Luke, three less prominent figures in early Christianity. If they were simply assigning names to the documents to give the books greater authority, it seems likely that they would have chosen figures such as Peter who were more significant in the early church.

Second, Ehrman's argument that Peter and John were illiterate based on the use of the word ἀγράμματοί to describe the two disciples in Acts 4:13

How Contemporary Culture's Fascination with Diversity Has Reshaped Our Understanding of Early Christianity (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010).

[4] In *Jesus, Interrupted* Ehrman's primary, though not only, focus is the Gospels and how they relate to each other and the rest of the NT. Therefore, the following response includes more material related to the Gospels than other NT books.

[5] Ehrman, *Jesus* 112.

[6] Ibid. 103. Moreover, Ehrman paints a picture of early Christian communities being extremely isolated from each other. However, the weaknesses of such a theory have been highlighted by Richrd Bauckham, ed., *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 1–48.

is unconvincing. The word ἀγράμματος is the opposite of γραμματεύς, which is used in the NT to denote a professional scribe. Therefore, ἀγράμματος can simply mean to lack rabbinical training.[7] In the context of Acts 4, the Jewish council is described as γραμματεῖς (Acts 4:5), in contrast to Peter and John who are ἀγράμματοί. It is evident that the contrast is between those who have formal rabbinical training (the Jewish council) and those who do not (Peter and John). In any case, as Carson asserts, "The astonishment of the authorities was in any case occasioned by the competence of Peter and John when they should have been (relatively) ignorant, not by their ignorance when they should have been more competent."[8] Moreover, most Jewish boys did learn to read, and since John's family was not poor (Luke 5:3 and Mark 1:20 indicate his family owned boats and employed others), it is highly probable that he received a better-than-average education.[9] Ben Witherington responds pointedly to Ehrman's overall argument that the first disciples were mere illiterate peasants:

> First of all, fishermen are not peasants. They often made a good living from the Sea of Galilee, as can be seen from the famous and large fisherman's house excavated in Bethsaida. Secondly, fishermen were businessmen and they had to either have a scribe or be able to read and write a bit to deal with tax collectors, toll collectors, and other business persons. Thirdly, if indeed Jesus had a Matthew/ Levi and others who were tax collectors as disciples, they were indeed literate, and again were not peasants. As the story of Zaccheus makes perfectly clear, they could indeed have considerable wealth, sometimes from bilking people out of their money. In other words, it is a caricature to suggest that all Jesus' disciples were illiterate peasants.[10]

A third problem with Ehrman's argument is the implication that a person with a vested interest should be assumed to be an unreliable witness. In fact, Samuel Byrskog has pointed out that Greek and Roman historians believed the ideal eyewitnesses were participants in an event who were able to draw on their experience to interpret its significance, rather than dispassionate observers.[11] Certainly, Ehrman is correct to argue that eyewitnesses do not always

[7] C. K. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles* (2 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994–1998) 2:233–34; Craig Evans, "Jewish Scripture and the Literacy of Jesus," http://www.craigaevans.com/evans.pdf (accessed March 25, 2010).

[8] D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 74.

[9] Ibid. 74; Carson adds, "Rabbi Akiba was apparently unlettered until the age of forty, and then became one of the greatest rabbis of his generation; it would not be surprising if some of the leaders of the church, decades after its founding, had devoted themselves to some serious study."

[10] Ben Witherington III, "Bart Interrupted: Part 4," http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2009/04/bart-interrupted-part-four.html (accessed March 25, 2010).

[11] Samuel Byrskog, *Story as History—History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History* (Tubingen: Mohr, 2000) 64. Along these lines, Carson offers a contemporary analogy in his commentary on John: "the Fourth Gospel can be accepted as what it manifestly purports to be: a reliable witness to the origins, ministry, death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus the Messiah. Such a witness does not have to be dispassionate, merely truthful. One accepts, for instance, that the first witnesses of Auschwitz were both truthful and passionate, even if in some circles they were at first easily dismissed because of their passion. But in retrospect, merely dispassionate witness regarding Auschwitz would be obscene. Similarly, a dispassionate witness to the person, teaching and work of Christ would necessarily be profane. To set theological commitment

record events correctly. But if the Gospels were based on eyewitness testimony, it seems sensible to assume that the eyewitnesses would be passionate about making sure the events surrounding the life of Jesus were reported accurately.

Finally, Ehrman fails to grapple with important contributions in recent scholarship, which significantly challenge the belief that the Gospels were not based on eyewitness testimony. Richard Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospel as Eyewitness Testimony* stands as one of the most significant of these contributions.[12] Bauckham's careful and detailed work should not be easily dismissed or ignored by biblical scholars from any persuasion. His case rests upon five major arguments.

First, Bauckham shows that in ancient Mediterranean times, historians relied as much as possible on eyewitness testimony.[13] The opening four verses of Luke match established historiographic language of the day and demonstrate the care that was taken in the composition of the Gospel. Moreover, in ancient history, just as in all of history, eyewitness testimony is, by its very nature, selective. The Gospels provide four different perspectives because they are from four different authors who experienced events differently.

Second, while Ehrman quickly dismisses Papias as unreliable and irrelevant in the discussion of authorship, Bauckham traces out the evidence for Papias's reliability and the implications of his writings.[14] Bauckham shows how Papias identifies three generations: eyewitnesses, the elders who sat at their feet, and the disciples of the elders. Papias claims that when he was a young man, which according to Bauckham is in the 80s at the latest, many members of the three generations were still alive, including the eyewitnesses. Many scholars affirm that by this time, at least Mark had been finished and Matthew and Luke were being written. This evidence points to the Gospels not being oral traditions that were passed down and altered during the various stages of transmission but rather oral history communicated by eyewitness testimony.

Third, Bauckham argues that the names present in the Gospels themselves are meant to assure the readers of their accuracy.[15] He demonstrates that throughout the Gospels some figures were distinguished by use of their proper names, while others were left nameless. He then describes the various theories proposed for this phenomenon and the weaknesses of each theory. He concludes that the names were meant to serve as living guarantors of the tradition.

Fourth, in response to those who claim that primitive societies cannot distinguish between myth and history, Bauckham follows Jan Vansina's work

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and historical reliability against each other as necessarily mutually incompatible is unrealistic; worse, it is an invitation to profanity" (*John* 40).

[12] Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

[13] Ibid. 1–11; 116–24.

[14] Ibid. 12–38; 202–39; 412–37.

[15] Ibid. 39–239.

in the field of oral traditions in primitive African cultures.[16] This study concludes that fictional and historical stories are clearly discernable, and much greater care is taken to preserve the historical accounts in primitive societies.

Lastly, Bauckham explores studies in the field of psychology, specifically about the nature and reliability of memory.[17] Marks of eyewitness accounts in the Gospels include vividness, unnecessary detail, vantage point, and perspective. These features are in stark contrast to fictional accounts. Other than his quick dismissal of Papias (and even here he does not address Bauckham's argument for Papias's reliability in these matters), Ehrman never engages or even footnotes any of the arguments concerning the eyewitness testimony of the Gospels made by scholars.[18]

The primary aim of this section has been to undercut Ehrman's claims that eyewitness testimony cannot be trusted and that the Gospels were not actually written by or based on testimony from eyewitnesses. Establishing that the Gospels were based on eyewitness testimony that can be trusted, however, does not necessarily prove that Ehrman's central thesis—that the Bible, specifically the NT, is full of contradictions—is invalid. However, if one considers it probable that the Gospel writers were based on eyewitness testimony, as has been demonstrated, it seems reasonable to give the ancient authors the benefit of the doubt. In contrast, Ehrman approaches these authors with a spirit of skepticism, and his conclusions are, therefore, not surprising. This essay will now address these conclusions directly.

II. CONTRADICTIONS IN THEOLOGIES

Chapter two in *Jesus, Interrupted* is primarily concerned with showing how the historical details in the Gospels contradict each other. From this, one sees that Ehrman's cynicism impacts how he views the various accounts, which will in turn lead to a greater skepticism as he compares the various theologies of the authors. The thrust of Ehrman's biblical theology becomes apparent in chapter three where Ehrman contrasts the theologies of NT authors.

For Ehrman, the legitimate historical approach to biblical theology must allow for each author to speak for himself. He argues that once a reader begins

[16] Ibid. 264–89; cf. Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

[17] Ibid. 290–357.

[18] Ehrman also questions why the works of various authors in the Bible are seen as part of a larger inspired book when its own authors did not view their works in this way. He asserts that Paul thought he was just writing letters; "he did not think he was writing the Bible. . . . Only later did someone put these letters together and consider them inspired" (*Jesus, Interrupted* 64). Ehrman, of course, is right that Paul did not see himself writing letters that were a part of 27 individual writings which later came to be known as the Bible. Yet evidence exists in Paul's own letters that he viewed himself as inspired. For instance, in 1 Cor 2:13 Paul asserts, "This is what we speak, not in words taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things in spiritual words" and later in the same letter says, "If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord" (1 Cor 14:37–38). Another example is 1 Thess 4:15, "For this we declare to you in a word of the Lord." In view of these passages, it is remarkable that Ehrman makes this claim about Paul without providing evidence or attempting to explain how he interprets these texts.

to combine independent authors' theologies, which were never intended to be read alongside each other, the individual author's theology gets drowned out. On the other hand, once each author's theology is allowed to stand for itself, it becomes evident that the differences are, according to Ehrman, "not merely matters of minutiae but are issues of great importance."[19] For Ehrman there is no one NT theology, only irreconcilable theologies. Ehrman builds his case on what he sees as three areas of theological contradiction in NT documents. He briefly covers other (apparent) discrepancies, which he sees as more minor, but this paper will limit itself to these three areas.

1. *Mark and Luke on the crucifixion.* Ehrman begins his list of theological differences by attempting to show how differently Mark and Luke portray Jesus' experiences during his crucifixion. According to Ehrman, in Mark, Jesus dies in despair and unsure of what is happening to him, while in Luke, Jesus is in complete control. Most scholars will agree that Mark and Luke offer different perspectives on Jesus' life and, as Ehrman has pointed out, his death.[20] The central questions appear to be whether it is illegitimate for two authors to highlight two different aspects of Jesus' death and whether these different aspects/themes are incompatible.

First, the Gospel writers never claim to give exhaustive accounts of all the things that happened on the cross. The Gospels indicate that Jesus was on the cross for three or more hours, which we can assume were filled with various details. Each Gospel writer was free to select from the various details from that day. For example, Ehrman stresses Jesus' cry in Mark: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34 ESV) in contrast to Luke 23:46, where Jesus, while on the cross, says, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." However, Mark also indicates that Jesus let out a second cry (Mark 15:37). Assuming that Luke used Mark as one of his sources, it is likely that Luke was providing further detail, giving his readers what Jesus said. In addition, it is reasonable to assume that Jesus experienced a series of diverse emotions as he died on the cross.

Second, while it is true that Mark does not emphasize Jesus' control of the situation to the extent that Luke does, Ehrman plays up the difference for more than it is worth. He claims that Jesus in Mark dies in so much agony and despair that he is unsure of the reason for his death. However, earlier in Mark, Jesus had told his disciples exactly why he must die: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). This is one of three related accounts in Mark where Jesus predicts his death (Mark 8:31–38; 9:30–35; 10:32–45). Even while facing the agony of what he would soon suffer, Mark quotes Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane saying, "Get up, let us be going; behold, the one who betrays me is at hand!" (Mark 14:42). This does not portray a man who has lost control

[19] Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted* 63.

[20] This includes conservative scholars. For two examples of careful scholarship which recognize the diversity of perspectives in the NT without denying their unity see Andreas J. Köstenberger, "Diversity and Unity in the New Testament," in *Biblical Theology: Retrospect & Prospect* (ed. Stott Hafemann; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002) 144–65; and Darrell Bock, *Jesus According to Scripture: Restoring the Portrait from the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007).

of the situation. Moreover, in the trial before the high priest, Jesus himself provides the testimony that led to the crucifixion (Mark 14:62). Therefore, while Luke does highlight Jesus' confidence in the face of suffering, this is not absent in Mark. Moreover, the deep anguish of Jesus, which Ehrman points out is prevalent in Mark, is so in Luke as well. For instance, in Luke 22:42, Jesus asks the Father if he would remove the cup. Furthermore, in Luke 22:44, Luke describes Jesus as "being in agony," his sweat as "drops of blood," and "falling to the ground." No one denies that Mark and Luke offer different perspectives as they write. Yet this does not mean, as has been shown, that the perspectives are in conflict.

2. *John and the Synoptics.* Ehrman begins this section by rapidly listing some of the differences between the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John. Considerable research, none of which has been mentioned by Ehrman, has demonstrated how these differences are not incompatible.[21] Yet, his primary concern is to identify where there are larger theological contradictions between the first three NT Gospels and the last.

a. *The virgin birth.* Ehrman argues that, in Matthew and Luke, Jesus is said to have been born of a virgin while in John, and only in John, Jesus is presented as divine. It is, of course, true that Matthew and Luke are the only two Gospels that affirm Jesus' virgin birth. Yet, it should be added that the other two Gospels nowhere deny the virgin birth. They have simply chosen not to include this detail in their account. As has already been mentioned, and as Ehrman well knows, any historical account is by its very nature selective, and the Gospels should not be looked on skeptically because they do not include every single detail. The very point of having four Gospels is to have four different perspectives.

b. *The divinity of Jesus.* Moreover, while accepting that John presents Jesus as divine, Ehrman denies any divine portrait of Jesus in the Synoptics. Though Jesus' divine nature is the most transparent in John's Gospel, Ehrman presses the diversity to disunity. Before looking at specific evidence from the Gospels themselves, it should be noted that in other parts of the NT, which were written before the four Gospels, Jesus is presented as divine. For example, 1 Cor 8:4–6, Phil 2:5–11, and Col 1:15–20 attest that, at least by AD 50 or 60, Christian leaders regarded Jesus Christ as the pre-existent and divine Son of God. Bauckham writes concerning the church's view of Jesus: "The highest possible Christology, the inclusion of Jesus in the unique divine identity, was central to the faith of the early church even before any of the New Testament writings were written."[22] He continues, "Although there was development in understanding this inclusion of Jesus in the identity of God,

[21] Richard Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007) 138–238; Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel: Issues and Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002); Carson, *John* 40–67.

[22] Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 24; cf. Andreas J. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters: The Word, the Christ, the Son of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), chap. 1.

the decisive step of so including him was made at the beginning."[23] This calls into question any claim that Jesus' deity was only a late insertion into Christian theology due to the influence of pagan Hellenistic philosophy.[24]

In fact, in an earlier work on another issue, Ehrman recognizes that in Philippians and other early Christian writings, Jesus is presented as equal with God:

> For Paul—and presumably for the Philippians to whom he wrote—Christ was *"in the form"* of God and was, in some sense, equal with God, even though he became human. Similar teachings can be found in other writings of the New Testament. One of Jesus' common designations throughout these writings is "Son of God." This is scarcely an epithet that came to be applied to Jesus on the basis of a close vote at the Council of Nicaea hundreds of years later! Our earliest Gospel, that of Mark, begins by announcing its subject matter: *"The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the son of God"* (Mark 1:1).[25]

He also appears to indicate that Jesus' divinity is not limited to only one Gospel: "the Gospels of the New Testament portray him as human as much as they portray him as divine."[26] It appears that Ehrman has changed his position, which he certainly has the right to do, but it seems strange that he would argue against the position he held just a few years ago with the impudence he exhibits. He fails to include references to any opposition and presents his apparently new position as the only truly reasonable one.

N. T. Wright is one such scholar whom Ehrman could have referenced in opposition. Wright serves as a helpful guide in understanding Christological development in its historical context.[27] Rather than pointing to particular verses in the Gospels where Jesus claims to be God, Wright goes back further, starting with how first-century Jews understood God and the way he acts within the world. Wright surveys passages in Isaiah, as well as referencing 1 Samuel 5–7, Exodus 40, Leviticus 9, and 1 Kings 8, along with post-biblical writings, which leads him to conclude: "There is thus ample evidence that most second-Temple Jews who gave any thought to the matter were hoping for YHWH to return, to dwell once again in the Temple in Jerusalem as he had done in the time of the old monarchy."[28] Moreover, he argues that YHWH's return would come through an agent who would be exalted and honored in a way never seen before.[29]

[23] Ibid. 24.

[24] For careful treatments of Christology in the NT, see Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); I. H. Marshall, *The Origins of New Testament Christology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1976).

[25] Bart Ehrman, *Truth and Fiction in the Da Vinci Code: A Historian Reveals What We Really Know about Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Constantine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) 16.

[26] Ibid. 15.

[27] N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997). For a helpful summary of his argument concerning the deity of Jesus in *Jesus and the Victory of God,* see N. T. Wright, appendix to *There is a God,* by Antony Flew (New York: Harper Collins , 2007) 188–95; and Marcus Borg and N. T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (New York: Harper, 1999) 157–68.

[28] Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* 623.

[29] Ibid. 625.

Next, Wright argues that first-century Jews, as well as the OT itself, spoke about God and his activity in several specific ways: Temple, Torah, Wisdom, Logos, and Spirit. Therefore, he continues, "Now when we come to the Gospels with those given ways of speaking in our heads, we discover Jesus behaving-–not just talking, but behaving—as if somehow those five ways are coming true in a new manner in what he is doing."[30]

Hence, Jesus embodies God by acting in ways that only YHWH can behave. In the Synoptic Gospels, his teaching points to his role as the Word. For instance, he speaks as the one with authority of his own, going beyond many OT laws and negating others. In the parable of the wise man, Jesus says that it is the one who does his words who is wise. Jesus presents himself as the temple and the one with authority to forgive sins. And Jesus casts himself as the one who lives by the Spirit. Wright concludes:

> So what we see is not so much Jesus going around saying, 'I am the Second Person of the Trinity. Either believe it or not.' That really isn't the way to read the Gospels. Rather, reading them as first-century historians, we can see that Jesus is behaving in ways that together say: this whole great story about God who comes to be with his people is actually happening. Only it isn't through the Word and wisdom and the rest. It's in and as a person. The thing that draws all this together . . . is that many Jews of Jesus' day believed that one day Yahweh, the God of Israel, would come back in person to live within the Temple.[31]

It was not until after Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection that the disciples (the primary eyewitnesses) began to understand fully what Jesus was claiming by his actions and words. By presenting the Synoptics with their Jewish context in mind, Wright's paradigm is persuasive.

There are certainly some novel aspects to Wright's argument, but it also has similarities with other established positions. For instance, D. A. Carson, in his explanation of the unity and diversity between the Synoptics and the Fourth Gospel, points to the commonalities that can be observed:

> though the Christological distinctiveness of John's Gospel should not be denied, it should not be exaggerated. . . . the Synoptics, for all portrayal of Jesus as man, portray him as the one who has the right to forgive sins (Mk 2:1–12 par.—and who can forgive sins but God alone?), and relate parables in which Jesus transparently takes on the metaphorical role most commonly assigned to God in the Old Testament. . . . The Synoptic Gospels present in seed form the full flowering of the incarnational understanding that would develop only later; but the seed is there, the entire genetic code for the growth that later takes place.[32]

The main point in this section is twofold. First, Ehrman's argument that the Synoptic Gospels do not see Jesus as divine is unconvincing. As I. H. Marshall wrote, "the evidence in the Synoptic Gospels not only fits an incarnational understanding of Jesus but positively cries out for it."[33] Second, while

[30] Wright, "Appendix B" 190–91.

[31] Ibid. 192.

[32] Carson, *John* 57.

[33] I. Howard Marshall, "Incarnational Christology in the New Testament," in *Christ the Lord* (ed. H. H. Rowden; Leicester: InterVarsity, 1982) 15; cf. Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1987) 164.

there are scholars who pay careful attention to the historical and literary context each book and come to dramatically different conclusions from Ehrman, he fails to engage with or even reference any such work.

c. *The teaching of Jesus in Mark and John.* In his next argument for disunity, Ehrman contrasts the differences in the teachings of Jesus in Mark and John. In Mark, Jesus preaches about the future kingdom of God coming to earth, which will come during Mark's lifetime. On the other hand, John, who wrote after most of the disciples died, focuses on the experience of eternal life now because the Kingdom of God never arrived on earth. Ehrman concludes in summary fashion, "[In John] No longer is the kingdom coming to earth. The Kingdom is in heaven. And we get there by believing in the one who came from there to teach us the way. This is a very different teaching from what you find in Mark."[34]

Most will agree with Ehrman that the Gospel of John emphasizes inaugurated eschatology. However, Ehrman's claim, in the vein of Rudolf Bultmann, that the Jesus of John only had a realized dimension in his eschatology has failed to win the day in modern scholarship.[35] Köstenberger notes, "Yet while John clearly accentuates the inaugurated or realized aspect of eschatology, this does not mean that he reduces the end times entirely to present experience. The most notable instances are John 5:28–29; 11:23–26; and 14:2–7 (see also 6:39–40, 44, 54; 12:48)."[36] He continues by referencing Craig Keener's work, "the Pharisees and Christians agreed on futurist eschatology; what they differed on was whether 'the inauguration of that hope [was] in Jesus.' Hence John stressed realization in Jesus to further press Jesus' messianic claims."[37]

Against Ehrman's position, which alleges that Jesus in Mark claimed he would return during the lifetime of at least some of his disciples, stands the vast amount of Jesus' teaching that assumes an ongoing existence of a community of believers still following Jesus in the future (e.g. divorce, remarriage, taxes, and the significance of specific OT commandments). In addition, Ehrman's appeal to Mark 9:1 is an example of a proof text which fails to take the larger context into account. With Mark 9:1 preceding directly before the transfiguration, it is difficult to understand how Ehrman does not perceive this to be a reference to seeing the kingdom coming in power at the transfiguration, and possibly the resurrection as foreshadowing the final coming. Moreover, scholars have offered several possible suggestions for how Mark 13:30 and its parallel in Matt 24:34 can be interpreted without concluding that the Jesus in Mark or Matthew believed that the Parousia would come during his immediate hearers' lifetime.[38] Surveying the various possibilities falls outside the scope

[34] Ehrman, *Jesus* 81–82.

[35] See George R. Beasley-Murray, *Gospel of life: Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991) 1–14; Köstenberger, *Theology of John* 295–98; cf. Craig Keener, *The Gospel of John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 320–23.

[36] Köstenberger, *Theology of John* 297.

[37] Ibid.

[38] For a sampling of the various possibilities see C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) 407–9.

of this paper, but perhaps the most likely interpretation sees the "all things" in Mark 13:30 as including only the signs which would lead to his return.[39]

d. *Miracles and signs in Matthew and John.* Ehrman also contrasts the reasons why Jesus performed miracles in Matthew and in John. In Matthew, Jesus refuses to perform a miracle to prove his own messianic nature.[40] In John, however, his spectacular deeds were not called miracles but signs to convince people of his true identity.

Yet a closer look at the Gospels reveals that both Gospels contain positive as well as negative remarks concerning miracles and signs. For instance, while Jesus' signs do display his glory to his disciples in John 2:11, the initial reply to call for help in John 4:48 seems to express dissatisfaction over the people's need for a sign: "Unless you *people* see signs and wonders, you *simply* will not believe." Moreover, in John, Jesus implies that while any belief is better than unbelief, faith that has to rely on observing miracles is inferior to faith where miracles are absent. Jesus' response to the religious leaders' disbelief in John 10:37–38 is an example: "Do not believe me unless I do what my Father does. But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may learn and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father." Also, Jesus implies in his post-resurrection conversation with Thomas that it is more commendable when faith is based on the testimony rather than on firsthand knowledge of Jesus' signs (John 20:24–29). On the other hand, while Jesus twice in Matthew (12:38–39, 16:1–4) refuses to perform a miracle in order to prove himself, he also indicates that miracles should in some way function to cause a positive response because he denounces cities where "most of his miracles were done because they did not repent" (Matt 11:20).[41]

3. *Paul and Matthew on salvation.* Third, Ehrman argues that the Gospels' theologies are at odds with Paul's writings. The primary contention for Ehrman is between Matthew and Paul on salvation and the law. In Pauline theology, explains Ehrman, salvation could only come by believing in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ apart from following the requirements of the Jewish law. The law and the prophets were meant to point to Jesus, God's ultimate solution. Because all people have failed to keep the law and have thus sinned, they cannot count on the law to make them right with God. They instead have to trust in Jesus Christ who has made atonement for sin on the cross.

Yet, according to Ehrman, Paul's theology on these points disagrees with Matthew. Working from Matt 5:17–20, Ehrman explains that in Matthew the entire law is preserved and must be kept. He writes, "If Matthew, who wrote some twenty-five or thirty years after Paul, ever read any of Paul's letter,

[39] It should be noted that just two verses later (Mark 13:32) Jesus himself says that the Son does not even know the day or hour of his return, so it is difficult to see Mark lodging a claim that Jesus will certainly return in his listener's lifetime.

[40] Ehrman, *Jesus*, *Interrupted* 81–82.

[41] D. A. Carson, "The Purpose of Signs and Wonders in the New Testament," in *Power Religion: The Selling Out of the Evangelical Church?* (ed. Michael Scott Horton; Chicago: Moody, 1992) 89–118.

he certainly did not find them inspiring, let alone inspired. Matthew has a different view of the law from Paul. Matthew thinks that they as followers of Jesus need to keep the law. In fact, they need to keep it better even than most religious Jews, the scribes, and the Pharisees."[42]

In summary, according to Ehrman, Matthew believed that the followers of Jesus who did not keep the law could not be saved, and this is in direct opposition to Paul. In Matthew, being great meant keeping the least of the commandments, and getting into the kingdom meant keeping the law better than the Pharisees. On the other hand, for Paul "getting into the kingdom (a different way of saying being justified) is made possible only by the death and resurrection of Jesus; for gentiles, keeping the Jewish law (for example, circumcision) is strictly forbidden."[43]

Ehrman has brought up several issues that are fairly involved, and scholars, even in conservative circles, have differed in how they understand the relationship between law and gospel.[44] Nevertheless, a closer look reveals that Ehrman has unsympathetically contrasted several emphases in Matthew and Paul.

First, most Pauline scholars, while having various views of how works are to be understood within the Pauline corpus, have noted that in Paul it is important for Christians to keep the "law." Though many understand this law to be some kind of NT ethic (law) or the moral law from the OT, keeping the "law" is nonetheless important. The recent debates over the New Perspective have highlighted the significance of keeping the law in Paul. This can be seen clearly in the back-and-forth between John Piper and N. T. Wright. While Piper accuses Wright of too closely linking justification with works, Piper himself writes, "I believe it is *actually* true, not just hypothetically true, that God 'will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life'" (Rom 2:6–7).[45] The point here is not to moderate the debate on the New Perspective on Paul, but simply to show that there is wide consensus, even among those who disagree on significant points in Paul, that Paul views good works as a necessary part of salvation.

Second, Matt 5:17–20 carefully exegeted in context actually bears a remarkable resemblance to Paul's understanding of the law. In Matt 5:17, καταλῦσαι is set against πληρῶσαι. In the context of Matthew, πληρῶσαι should be understood within a redemptive-historical framework, rather than simply as the antonym of "abolish" (καταλῦσαι). For this is how πληρῶσαι is used throughout the rest of Matthew (1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 27:9). Understood in this way, Jesus claims that in himself he "fulfills" (i.e. "completes" or "brings to full expression") what the law and the prophets anticipated.

[42] Ehrman, *Jesus*, *Interrupted* 89.

[43] Ibid. 90.

[44] For a helpful overview of different views just in conservative scholarship see Stanley Gundry, *Five Views on Law and Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

[45] John Piper, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007) 110.

Moreover, "law" in Matt 5:18 is not a simply a reference to the precepts given in the Mosaic law or simply the moral law, but rather in the context it refers to the entire OT Scriptures. Jesus is explaining in Matt 5:18 that the OT will remain authoritative and relevant until the end of the age, as it is read in light of Jesus' fulfillment of it (Matt 5:17). Hence, Matt 5:19 is understood as a call to teach and submit to the law, but it must be obeyed and taught through Christ's fulfillment of the law. Matthew 5:20 links Jesus' announcement about his relation to the OT and the specific teaching (5:17–19) that he is about to put forth (5:21–48). This reading of 5:17–20 is confirmed by what Jesus taught in 5:21–48, where Jesus is not simply extending or intensifying what Moses once said. In these subsequent verses, Jesus is announcing that he has fulfilled the OT and thus he is elevating the OT realities, as the "lesser" gives way to the "greater." As Carson writes,

> By now it is clear that the Sermon on the Mount is not soporific sentimentality designed to induce a kind of feeble-minded do-goodism. Nor do these chapters tolerate the opinion that Jesus' view on righteousness has been so tempered with love that righteousness slips to a lower level than when its standard was dictated by the law. Instead, we discover that the righteousness demanded by Jesus surpasses anything imagined by the Pharisees, the strict orthodox religious group of Jesus' day. Christ's way is more challenging and more demanding—as well as more rewarding—than any legal system can ever be. Moreover, his way was prophetically indicated before it actually arrived, as Paul says, "But now a righteousness from God, apart from the law, has been made known, to which *the Law and the Prophets testify"* (Rom 3:21).[46]

Carson references the connection between Rom 3:21 and the view of the law in the Sermon on the Mount. However, this is by no means the only link between the two authors.

Romans 10:4 says, "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." The way νόμος and τέλος are understood in this passage is critical. It is unlikely in this verse that the law is referring to some kind of legalism as some have advocated.[47] Instead, as usual in Paul, νόμος here likely refers to the Mosaic law. "End," which is the standard English translation, is inherently ambiguous. "End" could be reference to "termination of the law" or the "goal of the law." Both of these meanings are within the semantic range for τέλος. However, it has been demonstrated that the word in this context probably combines both meanings and is best translated "culmination."[48] Thus, Paul is saying that the Mosaic law has reached its goal and that the Mosaic law ceases to play the same central role it once had, though it still is relevant as it is seen through Christ, its τέλος.

Hence, Matt 5:17 and Rom 10:4 both portray Christ as the culmination of the OT law. Jesus and Paul caution against "undervaluing the degree to

[46] Carson, *Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: And His Confrontation with the World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978) 41.

[47] For a full argument for why this should not be seen as legalism see Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 636.

[48] Douglas Moo, "The Law of Christ as the Fulfillment of the Law of Moses," in *Five Views on Law and Gospel* 358.

which Christ now embodies and mediates to us what the OT law was teaching and doing. Our relationship with God is now found in Christ, not through the law."[49] Yet, they both are also careful to avoid separating Christ from the law. For Christ has fulfilled the law and cannot be understood properly without seeing how the law points to him. Moo writes concerning Rom 10:4, "[W]e find in Paul's teaching about Christ as the culmination of the law another evidence of the beautiful unity of the NT message. For what Paul says here is almost exactly what Jesus claims in one of his most famous theological pronouncements [Matt 5:17]."[50] Romans 10:4 and 3:29 are just two examples of passages from Paul that are similar to this reading of Matthew.

Third, while legitimate differences exist between Matthew and Paul, Matthew's emphasis on moral obedience should not be seen as a call to rely on obedience to the law to justify individuals before God. It appears that "Paul explains the function of the law; and what Paul is explaining in Romans and Galatians, Jesus is doing in the Sermon on the Mount [and throughout the Gospel of Matthew]."[51] In Jesus' most famous sermon in Matthew, he begins with a call for poverty of the spirit and for people to admit their desperate spiritual condition. Jesus' call to living out kingdom priorities has the effect of both making disciples and making people conscious of their inadequacies. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount not only leaves people experiencing guilt for failing to meet such high standards (5:27–48), it ends with a call to pray to God for his favor, which is essential for entrance into the kingdom (7:7–11). Moreover, it is Jesus in Matthew who instructs people to petition the Father (7:7–11) and to ask him for the forgiveness of sin (6:12).

Yet, one must be careful—and this is where Ehrman's observations can be helpful if he is appropriated correctly—to avoid importing Paul into Jesus, for the two clearly have different ways of addressing the matter of salvation. The mistake of reading Paul into Matthew (or any of the Gospels) is always a danger, especially for conservatives who do see an inherent unity in the NT. The danger on the other end of the spectrum is to see the development from Jesus' teaching to Paul's teaching as a sign of conflicting theologies. Instead, an understandable progression from Jesus to Paul is likely in which the two theologies are compatible. Jesus is preaching to people before they have witnessed his death or his resurrection. Hence, his listeners have yet to grapple with the theological implications of Jesus' death, the event that each Synoptist spends the most time highlighting. After all, Jesus' own disciples, even after he told them, did not accept that Jesus was actually going to die and rise again, so to flesh out the theological implications that would flow from these events, as Paul does, would have been premature and is something Jesus apparently left for his disciples to do subsequent to his death.

This section has sought to explain the main points at which Ehrman sees disunity in the theology of the NT writers and then offer a response, which

[49] Ibid. 642–43.

[50] Moo, *Epistle to the Romans* 642.

[51] Carson, *Sermon on the Mount* 128. For an example of a responsible treatment on the relationship between Paul and Jesus, see David Wenham, *Paul: Founder of Christianity or Follower of Jesus?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

accepts the diversity within the canon but allows for an underlying unity in the theology of the NT. Ehrman's style of writing, where he rapidly moves from subject to subject, has demanded a response that is only able to touch briefly on many important issues—issues on which entire books have been written. Finally, with Ehrman's writing style in mind, it is important to note the form by which he communicates and argues for his view of biblical theology.

III. EHRMAN'S RHETORIC

At the beginning of chapter three, Ehrman writes,

> I had the same experience [having a hard time figuring out what to leave out] with this book. When talking about discrepancies in the Bible, I want to go on and on—there are so many of them that are both interesting and important. But I've managed to restrain myself and have kept my discussion to one chapter—the previous one. Yet, I have the same problem with this chapter. I—or any other historical critic—could easily devote an entire book to its topic, but I've restricted myself to a single chapter.[52]

This type of rhetoric might give Ehrman a psychological edge with a lay audience, yet it proves unhelpful in actually dealing with the hard data of the text. How is someone to offer a response to alleged issues that he never mentions? Ehrman needs to extend the chapter to include all the discrepancies he has in mind or not make a comment like this. Furthermore, it is only by defining "historical critic" in his own terms and thereby *a priori* excluding other scholars that he can imply that he is supported by all other scholarship. It appears that this type of language is designed to intimidate the lay reader rather than actually explaining the diversity in Scripture.

Another example of Ehrman's rhetoric can be seen when he argues that only seven of the thirteen letters attributed to Paul were actually written by Paul. He admits that even scholars within his circles disagree with him on this; he explains: "There are lots of good scholars on both sides of the debate [over the authorship Deutero-Pauline Epistles] (as opposed to, say, the Pastoral Epistles or 2 Peter, where the vast majority of critical scholars think the letters are pseudonymous)."[53] Notice what Ehrman does here: "good scholars" and his own brand of "critical scholars" are used synonymously. This has the effect of drawing the circle around everyone who is in agreement with him on this issue and then labeling them as the "good scholars."

Scholarship, whether written for a lay audience or not, should set out to defend a position against the best of the opposing position(s). As this paper has demonstrated, Ehrman routinely misrepresents, underrepresents, or never represents those who oppose his positions. Often, his comments appear to try to force the readers into accepting his assertion by the mere weight of the unanimity in his circle of scholarship, which he makes out to be the only real type of scholarship.

[52] Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted* 62.
[53] Ibid. 123.

IV. CONCLUSION

At the beginning of chapter three, Ehrman describes the method that he adheres to as follows:

> The historical-critical method maintains that we are in danger of misreading a book if we fail to let its author speak for himself, if we force his message to be exactly the same as another author's message, if we insist on reading all the books of the New Testament as one book instead of as twenty-seven books. These books were written in different times and places, under different circumstances, to address different issues; they were written by different authors with different perspectives, beliefs, assumptions, traditions, and sources. And they sometimes present different points of view on major issues.[54]

Ehrman's remarks concerning the problem with not allowing the various NT authors to have their respective voices have some legitimacy and could serve as a helpful reminder for some in the conservative ranks. Yet, one wonders if Ehrman's realizes that many conservative scholars have long been saying this sort of thing. In fact, Ehrman in some ways sounds remarkably similar to many conservative scholars, such as Craig Blomberg:

> In the midst of Scripture's unity, we must not lose sight of its diversity. This takes several forms. The books of the Bible are written by different authors, in different times and places, to different audiences in distinct circumstances, using various literary genres. Each book thus displays unique purposes and themes. In some instances, different portions of Scripture are so closely parallel that we can postulate a literary relationship between them and assume that their differences are intentional: sometimes theologically motivated; sometimes merely for stylistic variation.[55]

Both appear to be saying similar things, yet their tone and ultimate conclusions are in stark contrast. The difference between Ehrman and Blomberg seems to be bound up more in the presuppositions which they carry into the interpretation process itself, rather than a refusal, on the part of either scholar, to recognize diversity. Both argue that the different writers have different theological emphases and should be allowed to speak for themselves. However, based on their witness to the same core truths, Blomberg sees the NT documents expressing different yet compatible theologies. Ehrman, maintaining a radical skepticism, declares that he sees no central core beliefs and that any effort to relate the various emphases to form a consistent NT theology is a hopeless enterprise.

When approaching history, there are two polar extremes: credulity or skepticism. Both are dangerous. While Ehrman reminds evangelicals of the problems with overly rigid definitions of what Scripture is and glib responses to hard passages, good scholarship—for Ehrman—has almost become synonymous with cynical scholarship. N. T. Wright offers a helpful critique of the hermeneutic of suspicion that epitomizes Ehrman's approach:

[54] Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted* 64.
[55] Craig Blomberg, "Unity and Diversity," *NDBT* 69–70.

> The guild of New Testament studies has become so used to operating with a hermeneutic of suspicion that we find ourselves trapped in our own subtleties. If two ancient writers agree about something, that proves one got it from the other. If they seem to disagree, that proves that one or both got it wrong. If they say an event or saying fits a prophecy, they made it up to look like that. If there are two accounts of similar events, they are a "doublet" (there was only one event); but if a single account has anything odd about it, there must have been two events, which are now conflated. And so on. Anything to show how clever we are, how subtle, to have smoked out the reality behind the text. . . . Suspicion is all very well; there is also such a thing as a hermeneutic of paranoia. Somebody says something; they must have a motive; they must have made it up. Just because we are rightly determined to avoid a hermeneutic of credulity, that does not mean there is no such thing as appropriate trust, or even readiness to suspend disbelief for a while, and see where it gets us.[56]

While most scholars will not have their current positions swayed by Ehrman, he cannot simply be ignored by less radical scholars. Leaving the general public and the laity in the pews in the dark about these matters is no longer sustainable. Scholars must set the pace for Christian teachers and pastors by responding with the same kind of enthusiasm for distilling academic work down-to-size for the masses as Ehrman demonstrates, yet with scholarly precision and fairness, demonstrating that the Bible can be trusted.

[56] N. T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus,* 18.