

# The Gospel According to Bart

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This is a series of excerpts from several Bart Ehrman books:

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

*Forged: Writing in the Name of God – Why the Bible's Author Are Not Who We Think They Are*

and

*Jesus Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (and Why We Don't Know About Them)*

## The Desolation of Inspiration

It is one thing to say that the originals were inspired, but the reality is that we don't have the originals – so saying they were inspired doesn't help much, unless I can reconstruct the originals. Moreover, the vast majority of Christians for the entire history of the church have not had access to the originals, making their inspiration something of a moot point. Not only do we not have the originals, we don't have the first copies of the originals. We don't even have copies of the copies of the originals, or copies of the copies of the copies of the originals. What we have are copies made later – much later. In most instances, they are copies made many centuries later. And these copies all differ from one another, in many thousands of places. These copies differ from one another in so many places that we don't even know how many differences there are. Possibly it is easiest to put it in comparative terms: there are more differences among our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament.

Most of these differences are completely immaterial and insignificant. A good portion of them simply show us that scribes in antiquity could spell no better than most people can today (and they didn't even have dictionaries, let alone spell check). Even so, what is one to make of all these differences? If one wants to insist that God inspired the very words of scripture, what would be the point if we don't have the very words of scripture? In some places, we simply cannot be sure that we have reconstructed the original text accurately. It's a bit hard to know what the words of the Bible mean if we don't even know what the words are!

This became a problem for my view of inspiration, for I came to realize that it would have been no more difficult for God to preserve the words of scripture than it would have been for him to inspire them in the first place. If he wanted his people to have his words, surely he would have given them to

them (and possibly even given them the words in a language they could understand, rather than Greek and Hebrew). The fact that we don't have the words surely must show, I reasoned, that he did not preserve them for us. If he didn't perform that miracle, there seemed to be no reason to think that he performed the earlier miracle of inspiring those words.

In short, my study of the Greek New Testament, and my investigations into the manuscripts that contain it, led to a radical rethinking of my understanding of what the Bible is. This was a seismic change for me. Before this – starting with my born-again experience in high school, through my fundamentalist days at Moody, and on through my evangelical days at Wheaton – my faith had been based completely on a certain view of the Bible as the fully inspired, inerrant word of God. Now I no longer saw the Bible that way. The Bible began to appear to me as a very human book. Just as human scribes had copied, and changed, the texts of scripture, so too had human authors originally written the texts of scripture. This was a human book from beginning to end. It was written by different human authors at different times and in different places to address different needs. Many of these authors no doubt felt they were inspired by God to say what they did, but they had their own perspectives, their own beliefs, their own views, their own needs, their own desires, their own understandings, their own theologies; and these perspectives, beliefs, views, needs, desires, understandings, and theologies informed everything they said. In all these ways they differed from one another. Among other things, this meant that Mark did not say the same thing that Luke said because he didn't mean the same thing as Luke. John is different from Matthew – not the same. Paul is different from Acts. And James is different from Paul. Each author is a human author and needs to be read for what he has to say, not assuming that what he says is the same, or conformable to, or consistent with what every other author has to say. The Bible, at the end of the day, is a very human book.

## Jesus Gets a Piece of Tale

The story of Jesus and the woman taken in adultery is arguably the best-known story about Jesus in the Bible; it certainly has always been a favorite in Hollywood versions of his life. It even makes it into Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, although that movie focuses only on Jesus' last hours (the story is treated in one of the rare flashbacks). Despite its popularity, the account is found in only one passage of the New Testament, in John 7:53-8:12, and it appears not to have been original even there.

The story is not found in our oldest and best manuscripts of the Gospel of John; its writing style is very different from what we find in the rest of John (including the stories immediately before and after); and it includes a large number of words and phrases that are otherwise alien to the gospel. The conclusion is unavoidable: this passage was not originally part of the gospel.

How, then, did it come to be added? There are numerous theories about that. Most scholars think that it was probably a well-known story circulating in the oral tradition about Jesus, which at some point was added in the margin of a manuscript. From there some scribe or other thought that the marginal note was meant to be part of the text and so inserted it immediately after the account that ends in John 7:52. It is noteworthy that other scribes inserted the account in different locations in the New Testament – some of them after John 21:25, for example, and others, interestingly enough, after Luke 21:38. In any event, whoever wrote the account, it was not John.

That naturally leaves readers with a dilemma: if this story was not originally part of John, should it be considered part of the Bible? Not everyone will respond to this question in the same way, but for most textual critics, the answer is no.

## Professional Copies of Amateur Texts

When did the church begin to use professional scribes to copy its texts? There are good reasons for thinking that this happened sometime near the beginning of the 4th century. Until then, Christianity

was a small, minority religion in the Roman Empire, often opposed, sometimes persecuted. But a cataclysmic change occurred when the emperor of Rome, Constantine, converted to the faith about 312 CE. Suddenly Christianity shifted from being a religion of social outcasts, persecuted by local mobs and imperial authorities alike, to being a major player in the religious scene of the empire. Not only were persecutions halted, but favors began to pour out upon the church from the greatest power in the Western world. Massive conversions resulted, as it became a popular thing to be a follower of Christ in an age in which the emperor himself publicly proclaimed his allegiance to Christianity.

More and more highly educated and trained persons converted to the faith. They, naturally, were the ones most suited to copy the texts of the Christian tradition. There are reasons to suppose that about this time Christian scriptoria arose in major urban areas. A scriptorium is a place for the professional copying of manuscripts. We have hints of Christian scriptoria functioning by the early part of the 4th century. In 331 CE the emperor Constantine, wanting magnificent Bibles to be made available to major churches he was having built, wrote a request to the bishop of Caesaria, Eusebius, to have fifty Bibles produced at imperial expense. Eusebius treated this request with all the pomp and respect it deserved, and saw that it was carried out. Obviously, an accomplishment of this magnitude required a professional scriptorium, not to mention the materials needed for making lavish copies of the Christian scriptures. We are clearly in a different age from just a century or two earlier when local churches would simply request that one of their members cobble together enough free time to make a copy of a text.

Starting in the 4th century, then, copies of scripture began to be made by professionals; this naturally curtailed significantly the number of errors that crept into the text. Eventually, as the decades grew into centuries, the copying of the Greek scriptures became the charge of monks working out of monasteries, who spent their days copying the sacred texts carefully and conscientiously. This practice continued on down through the Middle Ages, right up to the time of the invention of printing with moveable type in the 15th century. The great

mass of our surviving Greek manuscripts come from the pens of these medieval Christian scribes who lived and worked in the East (for example, in areas that are now Turkey and Greece), known as the Byzantine Empire. For this reason, Greek manuscripts from the seventh century onward are sometimes labeled Byzantine manuscripts.

Anyone familiar with the manuscript tradition of the New Testament knows that these Byzantine copies of the text tend to be very similar to one another, whereas the earliest copies vary significantly both among themselves and from the form of text found in these later copies. The reason for this should now be clear: it had to do with who was copying the texts (professionals) and where they were working (in a relatively constricted area). It would be a grave mistake, though, to think that because later manuscripts agree so extensively with one another, they are therefore our superior witnesses to the original text of the New Testament. For one must always ask: where did these medieval scribes get the texts they copied in so professional a manner? They got them from earlier texts, which were copies of yet earlier texts, which were themselves copies of still earlier texts. Therefore, the texts that are closest in form to the originals are, perhaps unexpectedly, the more variable and amateurish copies of early times, not the more standardized professional copies of later times.

## The Gutenberg Factor

The text of the New Testament was copied in a fairly standardized form throughout the centuries of the Middle Ages, both in the East (the Byzantine text) and in the West (the Latin Vulgate). It was the invention of the printing press in the 15th century by Johannes Gutenberg (1400-1468) that changed everything for the reproduction of books in general and the books of the Bible in particular.

## Apologist in the Wilderness

In the intervening years I had become a born-again Christian, graduated from high school, gone off to a fundamentalist Bible college, Moody Bible Institute, and had two years of serious training in Biblical studies and theology under my belt. At Moody we weren't allowed to smoke, drink alcoholic beverages, or well, do lots of other things that most

normal human beings at that age do: go to movies, dance, play cards. I didn't actually agree with the conduct code of the school (there was also a dress code, and a hair code for men: no long hair or beards), but my view was that if I decided to go there, it meant playing by the rules. If I wanted other rules, I could go somewhere else. But more than that, I went from being a 14-year-old-sportsminded, better-than-average student with little clue about the world or my place in it and no particular commitment to telling the truth to a 19-year-old who was an extremely zealous, rigorous, pious (self-righteous), studious, committed evangelical Christian with firm notions about right and wrong and truth and error.

We were heavily committed to the truth at Moody Bible Institute. I would argue, even today, that there is no one on the planet more committed to truth than a serious and earnest evangelical Christian. And at Moody we were nothing if not serious and earnest. Truth to us was as important as life itself. We believed in the Truth, with a capital T. We vowed to tell the truth, we expected the truth, we sought the truth, we studied the truth, we preached the truth, we had faith in the truth.

Along with our commitment to truth, we believed in objectivity. Objective truth was all there was. There was no such thing as a subjective truth. Something was true or it was false. Personal feelings and opinions had nothing to do with it. Objectivity was real, it was possible, it was attainable, and we had access to it. It was through our objective knowledge of the truth that we knew God and knew what God (and Christ, and the Spirit, and everything else) was.

One of the ironies of modern religion is that the absolute commitment to truth in some forms of evangelical and fundamentalist Christianity and the concomitant view that truth is objective and can be verified by an impartial observer have led many faithful souls to follow the truth wherever it leads – and where it leads is often away from evangelical or fundamentalist Christianity. So if, in theory, you can verify the objective truth of religion, and then it turns out that the religion being examined is verifiably wrong, where does that leave you? If you are an evangelical Christian, it leaves you in the wilderness outside the evangelical camp, but with

an unrepentant view of truth. Objective truth, to paraphrase a not so Christian song, has been the ruin of many a poor boy, and God, I know, I'm one.

Before moving outside into the wilderness, I was intensely interested in objective proofs of the faith: proof that Jesus was physically raised from the dead (empty tomb! eyewitnesses!), proof that God was active in the world (miracles!), proof that the Bible was the inerrant word of God, without mistake in any way. As a result, I was devoted to the field of study known as Christian apologetics.

The term apologetics comes from the Greek work *apologia*, which does not mean apology in the sense of saying you're sorry for something; it means, instead, to make a reasoned defense of the faith. Christian apologetics is devoted to showing not only that faith in Christ is reasonable, but that the Christian message is demonstrably true, as can be seen by anyone willing to suspend disbelief and look objectively at the evidence.

The search for truth takes you where the evidence leads you, even if, at first, you don't want to go there. The more I studied the evangelical truth claims about Christianity, especially claims about the Bible, the more I realized that the truth was taking me somewhere I very much did not want to go.

It was not long before I started seeing that the truth about the Bible was not at all what I had once thought when I was a committed evangelical Christian at Moody Bible Institute. The more I saw that the New Testament (not to mention the Old Testament, where the problems are even more severe) was chock full of discrepancies, the more troubled I became. I wrestled with these problems, I prayed about them, I studied them, I sought spiritual guidance, I read all I could. I came to think that the Bible could not be what I thought it was. The Bible contained errors. And if it contained errors, it was not completely true. This was a problem for me, because I wanted to believe the truth, the divine truth, and I came to see that the Bible was not divine truth without remainder. The Bible was a very human book.

But the problems didn't stop there. Eventually I came to realize that the Bible not only contains

untruths or accidental mistakes. It also contains what almost anyone today would call lies.

## I Began to See the Errors

Three years after I graduated from Moody, I was studying in a master's program at Princeton Theological Seminary, a mainline Presbyterian school that stresses critical scholarship more than uncritical dogmatism. It was at Princeton Seminary that I came to think that I had previously been approaching the Bible in precisely the wrong way. As a conservative evangelical I had come to the Bible assuming certain things about it even before reading it. I claimed it couldn't have mistakes. And if it couldn't have mistakes, then it obviously didn't have mistakes. Anything that looked like a mistake, therefore, couldn't really be a mistake, because the Bible couldn't have mistakes.

And how did I know that the Bible couldn't have mistakes? Not on the basis of any examination or investigation of the Bible, but simply on the basis of what other people had told me, backed up by a few proof texts. I brought the belief in an error-free text to the Bible, and so naturally I found no mistakes, because there couldn't be any.

But why should I have believed this view was true? There were plenty of other Christians who believed other things, especially at a place like Princeton Theological Seminary. It was there that I realized that since the Bible is a book, it makes better sense to approach it the way one approaches books. There are certainly books in the world that don't have any mistakes in them. But no one would insist that a particular phone book, chemistry textbook, or car instruction manual has absolutely no mistakes in it before reading it to see whether it does or not. Rather than thinking that the Bible cannot have mistakes, before looking to see if it does, why not see if it does, and only then decide whether it could?

If God created an error-free book, then the book should be without errors. If what we have is not an error-free book, then it is not a book that God has delivered to us without errors. As I studied the Bible I began to see the errors, here and there. And then they started to multiply. And eventually they came to involve not just little details, but very big

questions and issues of real importance. I came away convinced that the Bible, whatever else it might be, is a very human book.

## Forgery Is Deceitful. Claims that Forgery is Not Deceitful are Deceitful.

A surprising number of scholars have claimed that, even though the Bible may contain forgeries, these forgeries were never meant to deceive anyone. According to this view, ancient authors who assumed a false name were not trying to lead their readers astray. They were not lying, they were not being deceitful, and they were not condemned.

It is hard to understand how anyone who has actually read any of the ancient discussions of forgery can make such claims. But this view is so widespread that it has become a complete commonplace in New Testament scholarship.

## Killers for Christ

In the New Testament, Jesus is reputed to have said, "I did not come to bring peace on earth, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34). Truer words were never spoken. Many Christians in the modern age think of their religion as peace-loving, as well it often has been and should be. But anyone with any grasp of history at all knows also just how violent Christians have been over the ages, sponsoring oppression, injustice, wars, crusades, pogroms, inquisitions, holocausts – all in the name of the faith. Maybe all the Christians behind history's hateful acts were acting in bad faith; maybe they were violating the true principles of their own religion; maybe they were out of touch with the peace-loving teachings of the Good Shepherd of the sheep. And no one should deny the amazing good that has been done in the name of Christ, the countless acts of selfless love, the mindboggling sacrifices made to help those in need. Even so, few religions in the history of the human race have shown a greater penchant for conflict that the religion founded on the teachings of Jesus, who, true to his word, did indeed bring a sword.

## Persecution Complex

It is widely thought that from its early days Christianity was an illegal religion, that Christians

could not confess their faith openly for fear of governmental persecution, and that as a result they had to go into hiding, for example, in the Roman catacombs. As it turns out, none of that is true. Strictly speaking, Christianity was no more illegal than any other religion. In most times and places, Christians could be quite open about their faith. There was rarely any need to “lie low”.

It is true that Christians were sometimes opposed by pagans for being suspicious and possibly scurrilous, just as most new religions found opponents in the empire. But there were no imperial decrees leveled against Christianity in its first 200 years, no declarations that it was illegal, no attempt throughout the empire to stamp it out. It was not until the year 249 CE that any Roman emperor – in this case it was the emperor Decius – instituted an empire-wide persecution of Christians.

Before Decius, persecutions were almost entirely local affairs. More often than not they were the result of mob violence rather than official opposition initiated by local authorities. When there was official opposition, it was usually in order to placate the crowds, who did not approve of the Christians in their midst.

## Liars for Christ

Christians of the first three centuries often felt themselves under attack for their faith, and for good reason. They were under attack. From the early years of the church, non-Christian Jews rejected the Christian message that Jesus was the Jewish messiah sent in fulfillment of the Jewish scriptures, and this led not only to serious debate over the proper interpretation of scripture but also to serious animosity. The animosity heightened as Christian Jews felt that their non-Christian Jewish opponents refused to listen to reason and were obviously being either willful or blind. As Christianity grew in numbers and power, the tensions increased. Eventually, of course, Christianity would get the upper hand, and once that happened, it became an unfair fight. The entire ugly history of Christian anti-Judaism was the result.

Far more than official persecution, it was local opposition to Christians among their former families, friends, and neighbors – and eventually

mobs – that caused Christians the most problems in the early centuries before the Roman emperors came to be active sponsors of empire-wide persecutions in the mid-third century. By painting the Jews as immoral haters of God, Christians were able to pass themselves off as superior moral beings of no threat to the social order.

So, once more we have one of the great ironies of the early Christian religion: some of its leading spokespersons appear to have had no qualms about lying in order to promote the faith, to practice deception in order to establish the truth.

## Forgery Thrived in Era of Internal Conflicts Between Competing Christian Groups

Internal Christian debates were often filled with vitriol and hatred. Christians called one another nasty names, said ugly things about one another, and pulled out all stops to make their Christian opponents look reprehensible and stupid, denying, in many instances, that the opponents even had the right to call themselves Christians. Anyone perceived as a false teacher was subject to verbal lashing; outsiders to the faith – pagans and Jews – were treated with kid gloves by comparison.

Christian arguments with false teachers in their midst happened a lot, as far back as we have records. Our earliest Christian author was Paul, and in virtually every one of his letters it is clear that he had opponents on all sides. If we could transport ourselves back to the 50s CE, we could find that everywhere Paul went, he confronted Christian teachers who thought he preached a false gospel. This was true even in the churches that he himself founded. And these opponents were not the same in every place; different locations produced different opponents, with different views.

Paul was not the only apostle under fire. In every early Christian community believers attacked other believers for their false beliefs. Early Christians were nothing if not radically diverse. Yet all of these Christian groups claimed not only to be right, but also to be uniquely right – their view, and their view alone, represented the one and only divine truth. As a corollary, they each claimed that their view of the truth was the view taught by Jesus himself and

through him to the apostles. And all of these groups had books to prove it, books allegedly written by apostles that supported their points of view.

Christians today may wonder why these various groups didn't simply read their New Testament to see that their views were wrong. The answer, of course, is that there was no New Testament. The New Testament emerged out of these conflicts, as one of the Christian groups won the arguments and decided which books would be included in scripture. Other books representing other points of view and also attributed to the apostles of Jesus were not only left out of scripture; they were destroyed and forgotten. As a result, today, when we think of early Christianity, we tend to think of it only as it has come down to us in the writings of the victorious party. Only slowly, in modern times, have ancient books come to light that support alternative views, as they have turned up in archaeological digs and by pure serendipity, for example, in the sands of Egypt.

What were Christian teachers to do when they were convinced that their particular understanding of Jesus and of the faith was true, but they didn't have any apostolic writings to back it up? One thing they sometimes did – or, arguably, often did – was to invent apostolic writings. Nothing generated more literary forgeries in the names of the apostles than the internal conflicts among competing Christian groups. These forgeries established apostolic authority for a group's own views and attacked the views of other groups.

## Peter, Paul, and James

Visions cannot be trusted, because you have no way of knowing, really, what you are seeing. So if Paul's authority is rooted exclusively in a vision, it is no authority at all.

Paul may have had a brief vision of Jesus. But Peter was with him for months – a year – not asleep and dreaming, but awake, listening to his every word. And Jesus himself declared that it was Peter, not Paul, who was the Rock on whom the church would be built. Paul is a late interloper whose authority rests on entirely dubious grounds. It is the teachings of Peter that are to be followed, not those of Paul.

Whether or not this is the view of the historical Peter is something we will probably never know. But it is certainly the view of Peter set forth in the forged writings known as the Pseudo-Clementines.

## James

In the New Testament itself we find a book that appears to attack Paul's teachings, or at least a later misinterpretation of Paul's teachings. This is a letter that claims to be written by someone named James. In the early church it was widely assumed that this James was the brother of Jesus. James was known throughout the history of the early church to have been firmly committed to his Jewish roots and heritage even as a follower of Jesus. According to the New Testament he was not a disciple of Jesus during his lifetime, but he was one of the first to see the resurrected Jesus after his death, and because of that, presumably, he came to believe in him. No doubt it was his filial connection that elevated him to a position of authority in the church.

The book [of James] contains a number of ethical admonitions that urge readers to live in ways appropriate for the followers of Jesus. Many of these admonitions seem to reflect the teachings of Jesus himself, for example, from the Sermon on the Mount. The author is particularly concerned with one issue, however, an issue that reflects a bone of contention with other Christians. Some Christians are evidently saying that to be right with God, all you need is faith; for them, doing good works is irrelevant to salvation, so long as you believe. James thinks this is precisely wrong, that if you do not do good deeds, then you obviously don't have faith.

The author goes on to argue that having faith apart from works cannot bring salvation and in fact is worthless. This is shown above all by the example of Abraham, father of the Jews, who was saved by what he did, not just by what he believed. Here, then, is a sharp invective against anyone who maintains that it is faith alone that can put a person into a right standing before God.

## Fabrications in the New Testament

It should not be thought that Christians started fabricating stories about Jesus only after the New

Testament was completed. In fact, there can be little doubt that some accounts were manufactured in the early years of the Christian movement. Some of these fabrications made their way into the New Testament.

With regard to the stories of Jesus birth, fabricated accounts are already there in the familiar versions of Matthew and Luke. There never was a census under Caesar Augustus that compelled Joseph and Mary to go to Bethlehem just before Jesus was born; there never was a star that mysteriously guided wise men from the East to Jesus; Herod the Great never did slaughter all the baby boys in Bethlehem; Jesus and his family never did spend several years in Egypt. These may sound like bold and provocative statements, but scholars have known the reasons and evidence behind them for many years.

My guess is that most of the people who told these stories genuinely believed they happened. Even so, we should not say that these storytellers were not involved in deception. They may not have meant to deceive others (or they may have!), but they certainly did deceive others. In fact, they deceived others spectacularly well. For many, many centuries it was simply assumed that the narratives about Jesus and the apostles – narratives both within and outside the New Testament – described events that actually happened. Most readers still read the canonical accounts that way. But many of these stories are not historical narratives. They are, instead, fabricated accounts.

## To Err is Inevitable

The practice of altering texts in the process of copying them happened all the time in antiquity. In a world without electronic means of publication, photocopy machines, or even carbon paper, it was well-nigh impossible to ensure that any copy of a text would be 100% accurate, without changes of any kind. This is true for all books copied in the ancient world. That is why, when great kings wanted to start significant libraries in their cities, they were sometimes willing to pay sizable amounts of money for originals of the great classics. You never could be sure if copies would be completely true to the original.

All of the early Christian writings were, necessarily, susceptible to the vicissitudes of copying. We don't have any original copies of any books of the New Testament or of any other early Christian book. What we have are copies that have been made from copies of the copies of the copies. In most instances our earliest complete copies are from centuries after the originals.

Just about every copyist made mistakes in copying. As a result, if you were to copy a copy of an original, in most instances you would copy not just the words of the original, but also the mistakes your predecessor made in copying the original. And whoever came after you and copied your copy would reproduce both your mistakes and the mistakes of your predecessor as well as introduce some mistakes of her own. And so it goes, year after year, century after century. The only time mistakes are removed is when a copyist realizes that a predecessor had copied something incorrectly and then tries to correct the mistake. The problem is that there is no way to know whether the copyist corrects the mistake correctly or not. He may also correct it incorrectly, that is, change it to something that is different from both the copy he is copying and from the original that was first copied. The possibilities are endless.

We do not need to speculate that Christian scribes altered the texts they copied. You can take any book of early Christianity and compare the surviving copies. The copies will all differ, often in lots of minor insignificant ways and sometimes in big ways. In the vast majority of the cases, the changes that copyists made were simply an accident; the slip of a pen, the misspelling of a word, the accidental omission of a word or a line. Sometimes, though, scribes changed their texts because they wanted to do so.

## Divine Deception

There were numerous ways to lie in and through literature in antiquity, and some Christians took advantage of the full panoply in their efforts to promote their view of the faith. It may seem odd to modern readers, or even counterintuitive, that a religion that built its reputation on possessing the truth had members who attempted to disseminate their understanding of the truth through deceptive

means. But it is precisely what happened. The use of deception to promote the truth may well be considered one of the most unsettling ironies of the early Christian tradition.

## Thou Shalt Not Lie. Just Kidding!

From the first century to the 21st century, people who have called themselves Christian have seen fit to fabricate, falsify, and forge documents, in most instances in order to authorize views they wanted others to accept.

My particular interest in this book, of course, is with the forgeries of the early Christian church. No one doubts that there were lots of them. Today we have only a fraction of the ones that were produced in antiquity, as the vast majority of them have been lost or destroyed. But what we have is more than enough to give us a sense of how prominent the practice of forgery was. We have numerous gospels, letters, treatises, and apocalypses that claim to be written by people who did not write them. Some of the writings made it into the Bible.

This practice was widely talked about in the ancient world and was almost always condemned as lying, illegitimate, and just plain wrong. But authors did it anyway. Whenever we have a record of those being caught in the act, they try to justify what they did. It is possible that many of the authors whose works we have considered, both within and outside of the New Testament, felt completely justified in what they were doing. If so, they were accepting the ancient view, held by many people still today, that lying is the right thing to do in some instances.

If a doctor needs to lie to a patient in order to get her to take the medicine she needs, then that can be a good form of deception. If a commander-in-chief needs to lie to his troops that reinforcements are about to arrive in order to inspire them to fight more courageously, then that can be a good thing. Some lies are noble.

Most of us see lying as a complicated matter. Ethicists, philosophers, and religious scholars all disagree, even today, on when lying is appropriate and when it is not. At the end of the day, this a question that each and every one of us needs to decide for ourselves, based on our own

circumstances and the specific situations we find ourselves in. Maybe sometimes it is okay to lie.

The authors of these lies were no doubt like nearly everyone else in the world, ancient and modern; they too probably did not want to be lied to and deceived. But for reasons of their own they felt compelled to lie to and deceive others. To this extent they did not live up to one of the fundamental principles of the Christian tradition, taught by Jesus himself, that you should do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Possibly they felt that in their circumstances the Golden Rule did not apply.

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If God wanted us to have his words, why didn't he preserve his words?

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There came a time when I left the faith. This was not because of what I learned through historical criticism, but because I could no longer reconcile my faith in God with the state of the world that I saw all around me.

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The views I set out in this book are standard fare among scholars. I don't know a single Bible scholar who will learn a single thing from this book, although they will disagree with conclusions here and there. In theory, pastors should not learn much from it either, as this material is widely taught in seminaries and divinity schools. But most people in the street, and in the pew, have heard none of this before. That is a real shame, and it is time that something is done to correct the problem.

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Whereas the New Testament, consisting of 27 books, was written by maybe 16 or 17 authors over

a period of 70 years, the Old Testament, the Jewish Scriptures, consists of 39 books written by dozens of authors over at least 600 years.

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This is the most natural way of reading any book, from beginning to end. I call this approach “vertical” reading. You start at the top of the page and move to the bottom; start at the beginning of the book and move to the end. There is absolutely nothing wrong with reading the gospels this way, as this is no doubt how they were written to be read. But there is another way to read them: horizontally. In a horizontal reading you read a story in one of the gospels, and then read the same story as told by another gospel, as if they were written in columns next to each other. And you compare the stories carefully, in detail.

Reading the gospels horizontally reveals all sorts of differences and discrepancies.

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Mark was probably the first gospel to be written. Scholars have long thought that it was produced about 35 or 40 years after Jesus’ death, possibly around 65 or 70 CE.

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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 27 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.

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One story told very differently in the gospels is the key story in them all: the crucifixion of Jesus. You might think that all the gospels have exactly the same message about the crucifixion, and that their differences might simply reflect minor changes of perspective, with one author emphasizing one thing, and another something else. But in fact the differences are much larger and more fundamental than that. Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than in the accounts of Jesus’ death in Mark and Luke.

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Both Matthew and Luke, writing 15 or 20 years later [than Mark], used Mark as one of their sources for much of their own accounts. That is why almost all of Mark’s stories can be found in Matthew or Luke, and it is also why sometimes all three of these gospels agree word for word in the way they tell the stories. Sometimes just two agree and the third doesn’t, because occasionally only one of the later gospels changed Mark. This means that if we have the same story in Mark and Luke, say, and there are differences, these differences exist precisely because Luke has actually modified the words of his source, sometimes deleting words and phrases, sometimes adding material, even entire episodes, and sometimes altering the way a sentence is worded. It is probably safe to assume that if Luke modified what Mark had to say, it was because he wanted to say it differently. Sometimes these differences are just minor changes in wording, but sometimes they affect in highly significant ways the way the entire story is told. This appears to be true for the portrayal of Jesus going to his death.

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For nearly 25 years now I have taught courses on the New Testament in universities, mainly Rutgers and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

In all this time, the lesson that I have found most difficult to convey to students – the lesson that is the hardest to convince them of – is the historical-critical claim that each author of the Bible needs to be allowed to have his own say, since in many instances what one author has to say on a subject is not what another says. Sometimes the differences are a matter of stress and emphasis; sometimes they are discrepancies in different narratives or between different writers' thoughts; and sometimes these discrepancies are quite large, affecting not only the small details of the text but the very big issues that these authors were addressing.

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For over a century there has been a broad consensus among scholars that many of the books of the New Testament were not written by the people whose names are attached to them.

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The Gospels are filled with discrepancies large and small. Why are there so many differences among the four gospels? These books are called Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John because they were traditionally thought to have been written by Matthew, a disciple who was a tax collector; John, the beloved disciple mentioned in the fourth gospel; Mark, the secretary of the disciple Peter; and Luke, the traveling companion of Paul. These traditions can be traced back to about a century after the books were written.

But if Matthew and John were both written by earthly disciples of Jesus, why are they so very different, on all sorts of levels? Why do they contain so many contradictions? Why do they have such fundamentally different views of who Jesus was? In Matthew, Jesus comes into being when he is conceived, or born, of a virgin; in John Jesus is the incarnate Word of God who was with God in the beginning and through whom the universe was made. In Matthew, there is not a word about Jesus being God; in John, that's precisely who he is. In

Matthew, Jesus teaches about the coming kingdom of God and almost never about himself (and never that he is divine); in John, Jesus teaches almost exclusively about himself, especially his divinity. In Matthew, Jesus refuses to perform miracles in order to prove his identity; in John, that is practically the only reason he does miracles.

Did two of the earthly followers of Jesus really have such radically different understandings of who he was?

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. They never could be trusted and can't be trusted still. If two eyewitnesses in a court of law were to differ as much as Matthew and John, imagine how hard it would be to reach a judgment.

All the gospels were written anonymously, and none of the writers claims to be an eyewitness. Names are attached to the titles of the gospels, but these titles are later additions to the gospels, provided by editors and scribes.

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Who were Jesus' disciples? Lower-class, illiterate, Aramaic-speaking peasants from Galilee.

Who were the authors of the Gospels? Highly educated, Greek-speaking Christians who probably lived outside Palestine. That they were highly educated Greek speakers goes virtually without saying. Although there have been scholars from time to time who thought that the gospels may originally have been written in Aramaic, the overwhelming consensus today, for lots of technical linguistic reasons, is that the gospels were all written in Greek.

Only about 10% of the people in the Roman Empire, at best, could read, even fewer could write

out sentences, far fewer still could actually compose narratives on a rudimentary level, and very few indeed could compose extended literary works like the gospels. To be sure, the gospels are not the most refined books to appear in the empire – far from it. Still, they are coherent narratives written by highly trained authors who knew how to construct a story and carry out their literary aims with finesse.

Whoever these authors were, they were unusually gifted Christians of a later generation. Scholars debate where they lived and worked, but their ignorance of Palestinian geography and Jewish customs suggests they composed their works somewhere else in the empire – presumably in a large urban area where they could have received a decent education and where there would have been a relatively large community of Christians. These authors were not lower-class, illiterate, Aramaic-speaking peasants from Galilee.

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Most of the books of the New Testament go under the names of people who didn't actually write them. This has been well known among scholars for the greater part of the past century, and it is taught widely in mainline seminaries and divinity schools throughout the country. As a result, most pastors know it as well. But for many people on the street and in the pews, this is news.

Of the 27 books of the New Testament, only eight almost certainly go back to the author whose name they bear: the seven undisputed letters of Paul (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon) and the Revelation of John (although we aren't sure who this John was).

The other 19 books fall into three groups:

**Misattributed writings.** The Gospels are probably misattributed. The book of Hebrews does not name Paul as its author and it almost certainly was not written by Paul. But it was eventually admitted into the canon because church fathers came to think it was written by Paul.

**Homonymous writings.** A homonymous writing is one that is written by someone who has the same name as someone who is famous. For example the book of James was no doubt written by someone named James, but the author does not claim to be any particular James.

**Pseudepigraphic writings.** Some books of the New Testament were written in the names of people who did not actually write them. Scholars have known this for well over a century. Pseudepigraphy [means] writing that goes under a false name. Scholars tend to use [this term] because it avoids the negative connotations associated with the term forgery.

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Literary forgery was a common phenomenon in the ancient world. We know this because ancient authors themselves talk about it, a lot. Among Christian authors there are discussions in the writings of such well-known figures as Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Eusebius, Jerome, Rufinus, and Augustine.

Ancient sources took forgery seriously. They almost universally condemn it, often in strong terms. The practice of forgery is sometimes condemned even in documents that are forged. People were fooled all the time. That's why people wrote forgeries – to fool people.

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No one can reasonably doubt that a lot of the early Christian literature was forged.

From a historical perspective, there is no reason to doubt that some forgeries very well could have made it into the canon. We have numerous forgeries outside the New Testament. Why not inside? I don't think one can argue that the church fathers, starting at the end of the second century, would have known which books really were written by apostles and which ones were not. How would they know? Or perhaps more to the point, how can we ourselves know?

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Jesus' divinity was part of John's theology, not a part of Jesus' own teaching. Jesus probably never called himself God.

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Our earliest surviving written accounts of Jesus life come from 35 to 65 years after his death. What was happening during all the intervening years?

Christianity was spreading throughout major urban areas of the Mediterranean region. By the end of the first century – thanks to the missionary efforts of the apostles and of converts like Paul – the religion could be found in the villages, towns, and cities of Judea, Samaria, Galilee, and Syria; it had moved north and west into Cilicia and throughout Asia Minor (modern Turkey) and Macedonia and Achaia (modern Greece); it had made its way as far as Rome, the capital of the empire, and possibly as far west as Spain. It had also traveled south, possibly to North Africa and probably to parts of Egypt.

It was not that thousands and thousands of people were converting overnight. But over the years, dozens and dozens of people – probably hundreds – were converting in major urban areas. The only way to convert people was to tell them stories about Jesus: what he said and did, and how he died and was raised from the dead. Once someone converted to the religion and became a member of a Christian church, they, too, would tell the stories. And the people they converted would then tell the stories. And so it went, a religion spread entirely by word of mouth, in a world of no mass media.

Who was telling the stories about Jesus? In almost every instance, it was someone who had not known Jesus or known anyone else who had known Jesus. Is it any wonder that the gospels are so full of discrepancies? John heard different stories than did Mark, and when he heard the same stories he heard them differently. The gospel writers themselves evidently changed the stories of their sources. If things could change that much just from one writer to the next, imagine how much they could change in the oral tradition.

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Jesus is by all accounts the most significant person in the history of Western Civilization. But he was not the most significant person in his own day. Quite the contrary, he appears to have been almost a complete unknown.

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Like other apocalypticists of his day, Jesus saw the world in dualistic terms, filled with the forces of good and evil. The current age was controlled by the forces of evil – the Devil, demons, disease, disasters, and death; but God was soon to intervene in this wicked age to overthrow the forces of evil and bring in his good kingdom, the Kingdom of God, in which there would be no more pain, misery, or suffering. Jesus' followers could expect this kingdom to arrive soon – in fact, in their lifetimes. It would be brought by a cosmic judge of the earth, whom Jesus called the Son of Man (alluding to Daniel 7:13-14). When the Son of Man arrived there would be a judgment of the earth, in which the wicked would be destroyed but the righteous rewarded. Those who were suffering pain and oppression now would be exalted then; those who had sided with evil and as a result were prospering now would be abased then. People needed to repent of their evil ways and prepare for the coming of the Son of Man and the Kingdom of God that would appear in his wake, for it was to happen very soon.

You don't hear this view of Jesus very often in Sunday School or from the pulpit. But it is the view that has been taught for many years in leading seminaries and divinity schools throughout the country. There are strong and compelling arguments for thinking of Jesus in these apocalyptic terms.

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The Son of Man is coming, he will judge the world, those who side with Jesus will be rewarded, others will be punished, and it will happen within Jesus' own generation. This apocalyptic message is found throughout our earliest accounts of Jesus' proclamation.

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Jesus' ethical teachings need to be placed in that apocalyptic context. Many people understand Jesus as a great moral teacher, and of course he was that. But it is important to recognize why he thought people should behave properly. In our day, ethicists typically argue that people should behave in ethical ways so that we can all get along for the long haul, in happy and prosperous societies. For Jesus, there wasn't going to be a long haul. The end was coming soon, the Son of Man was to appear from heaven, imminently, in judgment on the earth, the Kingdom of God was right around the corner. The reason to change your behavior was to gain entrance to the kingdom when it came. It was not in order to make society a happy place for the foreseeable future. The future was bleak – unless you sided with Jesus and did what he urged, in which case you could expect a reward when God intervened in history to overthrow the forces of evil and set up his good kingdom on earth, which would happen very soon.

Understanding Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet who anticipated the judgment of this world and the imminent appearance of the Kingdom of God helps us make sense of the deeds and activities of Jesus that can be established as historically probable.

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[Regarding] the original text of the New Testament:

[[[]]] We don't have the originals of any of the books of the New Testament.

[[[]]] The copies we have were made much later, in most instances many centuries later.

[[[]]] We have thousands of these copies, in Greek – the language in which all of the New Testament books were originally written.

[[[]]] All of these copies contain mistakes – accidental slips on the part of the scribes who made them or intentional alterations by scribes wanting to change the text to make it say what they wanted it to mean (or thought that it did mean).

[[[]]] We don't know how many mistakes there are among our surviving copies, but they appear to number in the hundreds of thousands. It is safe to put the matter in comparative terms: there are more differences in our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament.

[[[]]] The vast majority of these mistakes are completely insignificant, showing us nothing more than that scribes in antiquity could spell no better than most people can today.

[[[]]] But some of the mistakes matter – a lot. Some of them affect the interpretation of a verse, a chapter, or an entire book. Others reveal the kinds of concerns that were affecting scribes, who sometimes altered the text in light of debates and controversies going on in their own surroundings.

[[[]]] The task of the textual critic is both to figure out what the author of a text actually wrote and to understand why scribes modified the text (to help us understand the context within which scribes were working).

[[[]]] Despite the fact that scholars have been working diligently at these tasks for 300 years, there continue to be heated differences of opinion. There are some passages where serious and very smart scholars disagree about what the original text said, and there are some places where we will probably never know what the original text said.

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The debate over which books to include in the Bible was long and hard fought. As difficult as this is to believe, there never was a final decision accepted by every church in the world; historically there have always been some churches in some countries (Syria, Armenia, Ethiopia) that have slightly

different canons of scripture from the one we have. Even the 27-book canon with which all of us are familiar did not ever get ratified by a church council of any kind – until the anti-Reformation Catholic Council of Trent in the 16th century.

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You might think that from the beginning, Christianity was always basically one thing: a religion descended from Jesus, as interpreted by Paul, leading to the church of the Middle Ages on down to the present. But things were not at all that simple. About 150 years after Jesus' death we find a wide range of different Christian groups claiming to represent the views of Jesus and his disciples but having completely divergent perspectives, far more divergent than anything even that made it into the New Testament.

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The decision about which books should make up the canon was not made overnight. Not until the end of the fourth century – some 300 years after most of the books of the New Testament had been written – did anyone of record indicate that he thought the New Testament consisted of the 27 books we have today, and only those books.

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When I started studying the Bible as a teenager, with more passion than knowledge, I naturally assumed that this book was given by God. My early teachers in the Bible encouraged that belief and drove it home for me, with increasingly sophisticated views about how God had inspired scripture, making it a kind of blueprint for my life, telling me what to believe, how to behave, and what to expect would happen when this world came to a crashing halt, soon, with the appearance of Jesus on the clouds of heaven.

Obviously I no longer look at the Bible that way. Instead I see it as a very human book, not a divinely inspired one. To be sure, a good many parts of it are inspiring, but I no longer see God's hand behind it all. We don't have the originals that any of these authors wrote, only copies that have been changed by human hands all over the map. And the books that we consider scripture came to be formed into a canon centuries after they were written. This was not, in my opinion, the result of divine activity; it was the result of very human church leaders (all of them men) doing their best to decide what was right.

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In the Jewish tradition, before the appearance of Christianity, there was no expectation of a suffering Messiah. But doesn't the Bible constantly talk about the Messiah who would suffer? As it turns out, the answer is no.

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The term Messiah literally means anointed one. It was used of various figures in the Old Testament – for example, priests and kings – who were ceremonially anointed with oil as a symbol of divine favor, indicating that God had set them apart to perform their tasks. The classical Jewish view of the Messiah derived from the ancient Israelite view of kingship.

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That the Messiah would be a powerful warrior-king was the expectation of many Jews in Jesus' day. But there were other Jews who had other expectations about what the future deliverer of Israel would be. Especially in the apocalyptic tradition, within which Jesus and his followers stood, it was sometimes thought that the future savior would not be merely an earthly king. He would be a cosmic judge of the earth, sent from God to overthrow the forces of evil with a show of

strength. This divine figure was called a variety of things in different texts, including the Son of Man (based on a reading of Daniel 7:13-14).

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In reality, the idea that Jesus was the suffering Messiah was an invention of the early Christians.

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There was nothing about Jesus' message or his mission that stood outside Judaism. He was a Jew, born to Jewish parents, raised in a Jewish culture; he became a teacher of the Jewish law, gathered around himself a group of Jewish followers, and instructed them in the essence of what he saw to be the true worship of the Jewish God.

Jesus was an apocalyptic Jewish prophet. He anticipated that the God of the Jews was soon to intervene in history, overthrow the forces of evil, and set up his good kingdom on earth. In order to enter this kingdom, Jesus told the Jewish crowds, they needed to do what God had commanded in the Jewish law. Specifically they needed to carry out the two greatest commandments of the law: love God with all their heart, soul, and strength (quoting Deuteronomy 6:4-6) and love their neighbors as themselves (quoting Leviticus 19:18). On these two commandments, urged Jesus, hang all the law and the prophets. (Matthew 22:40)

When one reconstructs the actual sayings and deeds of Jesus, they all stand firmly within this Jewish apocalyptic framework. It was only his later followers who saw him as starting a new religion. He appears to have had no intent to start a new religion. His was the religion of the Jews, correctly interpreted (in opposition, of course, to other interpretations, such as those of the Pharisees and Sadducees).

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When I was in college I had already for many years believed that Jesus was God, that this was and always has been one of the most central and fundamental tenets of the Christian tradition. But when I began studying the Bible seriously, in graduate school, I began to realize that this was not the original belief of Jesus' earliest followers, nor of Jesus himself.

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The view of Jesus as divine did not develop in every early Christian Community at the same time or in the same way. For centuries there continued to be some communities that did not hold to this view, such as the Ebionites. In some communities the view came into being remarkably early (evidently in Paul's). In others there is no evidence that it happened at all (Matthew or Mark's). In others it took several decades (John's). But by the second and third centuries it became quite a common doctrine as these various communities exchanged views. Jesus was not simply the Jewish son of God whom God had exalted at his resurrection. He was himself God. This was one of the most enduring theological creations of the early Christian church.

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The earliest Christians, starting with Jesus, did not believe in that sort of heaven and hell as a place that your soul goes when you die. This, too, is a later Christian invention.

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For Jesus, Paul, and the earliest Christians, eternal life was a life lived in the body, not above in heaven but down here where we are now. Paul emphasizes this point strenuously in the book of 1 Corinthians. The fact that Jesus' body was raised from the dead shows what the future resurrection would involve: bodies being raised physically from the dead and transformed into immortal bodies. Paul scoffed at

his opponents in Corinth for thinking they had already experienced a spiritual resurrection, so that they were enjoying the full benefits of salvation now, in the spirit. The resurrection was physical, and since it was physical, it obviously had not happened yet. This world is still carrying on under the forces of evil, and only at the end will all be resolved and the followers of Jesus be vindicated, transformed, and given an eternal reward. This was also the view of the Apocalypse of John.

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In short, with the passing of time, the apocalyptic notion of the resurrection of the body becomes transformed into the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. What emerges is the belief in heaven and hell, a belief not found in the teachings of Jesus or Paul, but one invented in later times by Christians who realized that the kingdom of God never would come to this earth. This belief became a standard Christian teaching, world without end.

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What we might think of as traditional Christianity did not simply drop from the sky, full grown and fully developed, soon after the ministry of Jesus. Nor did it emerge directly and simply from his teachings. In many ways, what became Christianity represents a series of rather important departures from the teachings of Jesus. Christianity, as has long been recognized by critical historians, is the religion about Jesus, not the religion of Jesus.

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Whether one stresses the continuities or the discontinuities in the development of early Christianity, it is clear that the beliefs and perspectives that emerged among Jesus' later followers were different from the religion of Jesus himself. Paul was not the only one responsible for this set of theological innovations, this invention of what we think of as Christianity. He may not even

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bear the greatest responsibility among those who transformed the religion of Jesus into the religion about Jesus. There were numerous Christians involved in these transformations, the vast majority of them lost in the mists of antiquity, unnamed Christian thinkers and preachers who reinterpreted the traditions of Jesus for their own time, whose reinterpretations were guided and molded by historical and cultural forces that we, living later, can sometimes only surmise and ponder.

Christianity as we have come to know it did not, in any event, spring into being overnight. It emerged over a long period of time, through a period of struggles, debates, and conflicts over competing views, doctrines, perspectives, canons, and rules. The ultimate emergence of the Christian religion represents a human invention – in terms of its historical and cultural significance, arguably the greatest invention in the history of Western civilization.

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None of the information presented here is news to scholars or their students, many of whom have attended top-level seminaries and divinity schools throughout North America and Western Europe. The historical-critical approach to the New Testament is taught in all these schools.

The basic views that I've sketched here are widely known, widely taught, and widely accepted among New Testament scholars and their students, including the students who graduate from seminaries and go on to pastor churches. Why do these students so rarely teach their congregations this information, but insist instead on approaching the Bible devotionally rather than historical-critically, not just in the pulpit (where a devotional approach would be expected) but also in their adult education classes? That has been one of my leading questions since I started writing this book.

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You might think that someone who came to realize that Christianity was a human creation would decide to opt out of the Christian faith, quit the Church, and start doing something else with his Sunday mornings. But it didn't work that way for me, and it hasn't worked that way for lots and lots of other scholars like me, who started out as strong evangelicals, came to realize the persuasiveness of the historical-critical perspectives on the New Testament, but continued in one way or another to be people of faith. Some of my closest friends teach in divinity schools and seminaries, training Christian pastors. And they agree up and down the line with most of what I've said in these chapters. A number of them use my textbook on the New Testament for their introductory courses, a book that spells out many of the views discussed here.

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I did not leave the Christian faith because of the inherent problems of faith per se, or because I came to realize that the Bible was a human book, or that Christianity was a human religion. All that is true – but it was not what dismantled my acceptance of the Christian myth. I left the faith for what I took to be (and still take to be) an unrelated reason: the problem of suffering in the world.

There came a time in my life when I found that the myths no longer made sense to me, no longer resonated with me, no longer informed the way I looked at the world. I came to a place where I could no longer see how – even if viewed mythically – the central Christian beliefs were in any sense true for me, given the oppressive and powerful reality of human suffering in the world.

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It would be impossible, I should think, to argue that the Bible is a unified whole, inerrant in all its parts, inspired by God in every way. It can't be that. There are too many divergences, discrepancies, contradictions; too many alternative ways of looking at the same issue, alternatives that often are at odds with one another. The Bible is not a unity, it is

a massive plurality. God did not write the Bible, people did. Many of these people were inspired in the sense that they wrote works that can inspire others to think great and important thoughts and to do great and important deeds. But they were not inspired in the sense that God somehow guided them to write what they wrote.