

DATES OF THE GOSPELS

	According to F. F. Bruce (in <i>The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?</i>)	According to majority of English scholars (as rptd by F. F. Bruce)	according to Thiessen (early 20 th -cent. Amer. conservative evangelical scholar)
MARK	60+	65	67-68
LUKE	60-70	80-85	58
MATTHEW	70+ (but possibly an earlier Aramaic version)	85-90	50 (Aramaic ca. 45)
JOHN	90-100	90-100	85-90

(Note: The fall of Jerusalem and destruction of Temple in AD 70 influence scholars' opinion, along with whether they believe in prophecy and believe Jesus actually prophesied the destruction of the Temple.)

review by Joseph S. O'Leary (from http://josephsoleary.typepad.com/my_weblog/liberals_vs_neocats/index.html)

TEXTUAL CRITICISM AS AN ANTIDOTE TO FUNDAMENTALISM

With the growing popularity of Evangelical churches in Ireland it may happen that biblical fundamentalism, a rigid adherence to the literal inerrancy of every word of Scripture, will become as formidable a force here as it is in the United States, where theologians seem to spend a lot of time refuting it. The very prolific Bart D. Ehrman tackles this theological disease laterally by writing a book on New Testament textual criticism – perhaps the most accessible treatment ever of what to most people is a rebarbative subject. He claims to have been awoken from dogmatic slumbers by the realization that the text of the NT has about 30,000 variant readings, so that we do not even know exactly what its allegedly inerrant words actually were.

Curiously, his book exists under two titles – a state of textual confusion not matched by the NT. One title is: *Whose Word is It?: The Story Behind Who Changed the New Testament and Why* (New York: Continuum, 2006); the other is: *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York: HarperCollins; Edinburgh: Clark, 2005). Close study of the variant texts reveals that *Whose Word is It?* corrects "Timothy LeHaye and Philip Jenkins" to "Timothy LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins" on p. 13, though it continues to misspell LaHaye on pp. 110 and 236 and to leave a few other errata uncorrected. We may surmise that the newer title, too, is not a mere alternative to, but the author's or some later redactor's correction of the older one, *Misquoting Jesus*, discovered to be vulgarly attention-getting and to have little relation to the contents of the book.

Readers of this book who have up to now been content to leave textual criticism to the experts may not be persuaded to alter their attitude. The reason is that the textual variants discussed are the best-known ones, most of them noted in English translations such as the RSV, e.g. Mk 1:41; 16:9-20; Lk 22:19; 22:43-4; Jn 1:18; Jn 7:53-8:11; 1 Tim. 3:16. Only a handful are less familiar, such as the reading "apart from God" instead of "by the grace of God" in Heb. 2:9. Others are so late as to have only anecdotal interest, or are no longer given any credit, such as the Johannine Comma.

The most interesting feature of the book is the wider theological lesson it draws. The absence of a fully definitive text of Scripture causes the concept of the Canon to be blurred. Moreover, the theological motives of some textual variants – harmonization in the direction of orthodoxy; anti-docetism or anti-adoptionism – lead to reflection on the theological motives of different emphases within the Synoptic tradition. Most students of Scripture come to reflect on the latter independently of text-critical questions, but Ehrman is no doubt trying to reach a constituency who are hostile to recognition of theological pluralism in the NT and whom he hopes to lure to it along the trajectory he himself followed.

The suggestion that instability in transmission is of a piece with a certain instability in the very composition of the texts takes a sharper edge when Ehrman imagines Paul dictating Galatians to one or several scribes, who could have written the wrong words. Or perhaps Paul merely spelt out basic points, leaving it to a scribe to fill in the rest; so that even at the origin of the transmission we cannot speak of a definitive text.

Some troubling pages touch on one of the most intractable problems of Christian theology – the need the early Christians found to portray the Jews as essentially murderers of Christ and the prophets (1 Thess. 2:14-15) and as incapable of understanding their own Scriptures. Anti-Judaism underlies some interesting variants such as the omission of Lk. 23:34 ("Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do") in important early witnesses, reflecting a belief that "God had not forgiven the Jews... he had allowed Jerusalem to be destroyed as a punishment" (p. 193). The alteration of "handed him over to be crucified" (Mt. 27:26) to "handed him over to them [i.e. to the Jews] in order that they might crucify him" marks a sinister drift. In other examples, Mt. 1:21, "he will save his people from their sins" becomes "he will save the world from its sins"; "Salvation comes from the Jews" (Jn 4:2) becomes "salvation comes from Judea". Today, a new respect for the integrity of the Hebrew Scriptures, after two millennia of the Christological heist perfected in Origen's allegorical reading, is moving us to a new, more realistic grasp of the mission of Jesus within its Jewish context, a refocussing that may in time greatly alter the complexion of Christianity.

At a time when scripture texts are used as rocks to hurl at ideological opponents, it is salutary to reconsider, led by the Church's practice, what it is in Scripture that truly holds us and binds us. Historical-critical scholarship has brought a more relaxed attitude to the details of biblical narratives and a readiness to recognize the element of normal human fallibility that enters into the fabric of the scriptural text. Ehrman's effort to face the implications of the human authorship of Scripture is hardly likely to ruffle Catholics who have absorbed what Vatican II and the Pontifical Biblical Commission say about the integrity of the human authorship and its dependence on the culture and literary conventions of the times. The idea that Scripture is the Church's book, to be read discerningly, by the community, under the guidance of the Spirit, affords a latitude of interpretation that makes less dramatic the issues he raises. The answer to the question, "Whose Word is it?" is: "God's, to his Church, despite imperfections of transmission that do not prevent the Church using Scripture so that it becomes again and again an occasion of revelation".