

“Are the Gospels Historically Reliable?”

*A Discussion between
Peter J Williams and Bart Ehrman
hosted by
Premier Christian Radio
in their “Unbelievable” series
hosted by Justin Brierley*

Reflections on the programme by
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About the Author

Dr Trevor R Allin graduated from the University of Leeds with a 1st Class Honours degree in Phonetics, French, Spanish and Philosophy and History of Religion. Following studies in linguistics, he undertook original research on a South American indigenous language, for which purpose he lived within the indigenous community and studied the language with native speakers over a period of more than a year. The University of St Andrews subsequently awarded him a Ph.D. for his thesis “A Grammar of Resígaro”.

For many years he taught a range of languages up to “Advanced” level standard in state schools in England and in Germany, and in state or state-recognised schools in Scotland and Spain. He also worked full time over a period of many years supporting and inspecting qualified Modern Language teachers and giving them professional development training. Teaching and examination materials written by him for French, German and Spanish at a wide range of levels, up to and including “A” Level, have been published by mainstream U.K. educational publishers and examination boards, for whom he has written and marked examination question papers.

He is also the published translator of books from Spanish and German into English and is the author of “Curso de Griego Bíblico: Los elementos del Griego del N.T.”¹, the Spanish edition of the leading textbook on New Testament Greek, Jeremy Duff’s “The Elements of New Testament Greek”.² He has taught New Testament (Koiné) Greek to Spanish-speaking adult students in Spain and has delivered lectures in various places in Spain on the important early Greek manuscript of the Bible, Codex Sinaiticus.

¹ CLIE, 2019 See <https://www.clie.es/curso-de-griego-biblico>

² Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005

**Premier Christian Radio “Unbelievable” discussion between
Peter J Williams and Bart Ehrman
Broadcast on-line 25.10.19.**

This discussion was posted on Youtube on 25th October 2019. At the time of writing (one day later), it is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZuZPPGvF_2I&t=380s Here are my personal thoughts on the discussion.

The title of the programme was, “Are the Gospels historically reliable?”, and Ehrman and Williams had different answers to this question.

Ehrman also repeatedly tried to discredit Williams by branding him “fundamentalist” and by claiming that Williams had said things that Ehrman could then criticise. Williams responded to this, but that did not deter Ehrman from repeating the same claims at various points in the discussion.

Williams and chairman Justin Brierley were far too polite with Ehrman, who was aggressive throughout, repeatedly interrupting Williams and not allowing him to finish speaking, while Williams politely allowed Ehrman to speak, without interrupting him. Ehrman dominated the agenda and prevented Williams from responding to the claims that he made.

Concerning the gospels, Ehrman made three claims:

1. He claimed that there is a progression in the status accorded to Christ from the earliest documents about Christ to the ones that were written later, and he tried to demonstrate this by contrasting the statements in the first gospel that was written with those that were written in the last.
2. He claimed that there are contradictions between the gospels – although in fact the only contradiction that he named was not between the gospels but between one reference in Matthew’s gospel and a reference to the same incident in the book of Acts.
3. He claimed that oral tradition is notoriously unreliable, and that stories are changed as they are told.

Let us look at each of those claims.

The status accorded to Christ in the early church

Williams responded to the first of Ehrman’s three points by showing in detail that in the first gospel to be written, Mark, Christ was repeatedly described as doing things that only God is described in the Old Testament as able to do, walking on water (Job), forgiving sins, healing the blind, describing himself as “I am”, etc. (about 65 minutes into the programme). Ehrman challenged this, although he ignored the harder claims in Mark (walking on water and forgiving sins), and claimed that other people heal the blind, initially seeming to claim that this had happened in the Old Testament, although subsequently conceding to Williams’ response that this was not the case.

Ehrman also claimed that in John’s gospel Christ says, “I am God”, whereas he does not say this in the earlier gospels. When Williams pointed out that Jesus does not say this in John’s gospel, either, Ehrman quietly assented.

As regards Ehrman’s claim that there is a “progression” in the claims about Christ from the first gospel that was written to the last of the gospels, and bearing in mind that in order to appeal to a contradiction in the gospels, he in fact referred to a report *outside the gospels*, we need to bear in mind that the gospels are not the earliest writings about Christ that we have in the New Testament: the earliest writings about Christ are some of the letters of the Apostle Paul, and in these Christ is repeatedly described as “God”. Key examples are Philippians 2:5-11 and Colossians 1:15-17 (although others could also be given). Paul also quotes from Old Testament statements about God and applies them to Christ, for instance, in Roman 10:13. He also significantly quotes to the largely-gentile church in Corinth an Aramaic statement that called Jesus “Lord” (1 Corinthians 16:22), thus showing that the Aramaic-speaking church in Palestine already treated Christ as divine and someone to whom prayer could be made. (Stephen had also shown the early practice of praying to Christ (Acts 7:59-60), although Ehrman might dispute this and claim that this detail had been invented many years later by the writer of Acts or the people who had recounted the event this writer.)

Key to all of this is that Paul’s statements were not contentious; they were accepted unchallenged by the churches to which he wrote as being true statements about the status of Christ.

Many detailed studies by highly-respected academics make this point. To cite just one example, I would refer to “Lord Jesus Christ” by Professor Larry Hurtado.³

As regards Ehrman’s claims that the writer of Mark’s gospel does not state that Jesus is God, we make two points:

1. We note Williams’ rebuttal of this: the gospel attributes divine characteristics to Christ.
2. Secondly, the gospel was written for people who already believed that Jesus was God. It filled in some background by recounting a few selected incidents from the life and teaching of Christ.

It is as though a newspaper article were to be written about Donald Trump, and – whether it praised him or attacked him – it nowhere mentioned that at the time he was President of the United States. This does not imply that the writer didn’t believe that Trump was President of the United States, nor that his or her readers didn’t believe it. On the contrary, it shows that this is such a well-known and undisputed fact that it is not necessary to mention it.

Likewise, if an article were written about a world-famous actor, but nowhere mentioned that he or she was an actor, this would not imply that the writer disagreed with this fact, merely that it was so well-known and undisputed that it didn’t need to be mentioned.

Claimed contradictions between the gospels

Williams challenged Ehrman’s claimed contradictions in the two accounts of the death of Judas, and Ehrman responded by requesting other historical accounts of people falling down headlong and dying. Williams didn’t bring forward any such accounts, but it must be questioned whether anyone tabulates data on such events through the centuries. In our own time there are numerous cases of people falling down, banging their head and dying, even

³ Hurtado, Larry, “Lord Jesus Christ”, Grand Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge, U.K.: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005.

including celebrities (one thinks of Cilla Black). However, this claim by Ehrman is in fact a diversion and doesn't even support his claim of contradictions between the gospels, since one of the accounts is not in a gospel.

Williams also pointed to the incredibly-detailed and accurate references to the local geography, trees and agriculture in the gospel accounts. This seems a crucial point in addressing the question posted by the programme, “Are the Gospels historically reliable?” However, Ehrman said that this was irrelevant. He then told a story about a hypothetical future writer who knew about Vauxhall Bridge in London (about 30 mins in). Ehrman says that even if at some point in the distant future a writer was right about Vauxhall Bridge, it doesn't mean that the rest of what he writes is accurate.

But this misses the point. Peter Williams is starting at the other end, and is addressing the core point of the discussion and those who claim that the gospels were written centuries later by people who weren't even in Palestine. Williams' point is that such writers are extremely unlikely to have been able to get the detailed geographical and botanical information right. The fact that this information in the gospels is so detailed, and can be demonstrated to be accurate, is a strong indication that the gospels were written by people who had detailed first-hand knowledge of Palestine in the first century, information that purported writers several hundred years later and in another land could not have obtained at that time.

This demonstrates that such conspiracy theories are unsustainable.

To go back to Bart Ehrman's example about Vauxhall Bridge, if all the circumstantial information about London were wrong, then the hypothetical writer's claims (in Ehrman's imagined account) about an explosion would not even be considered.

In contrast to this theoretical scenario, the circumstantial information given by the gospel writers is so detailed and so accurate that their claims about the events that they describe do merit serious consideration.

About 37 minutes in Ehrman makes the same argument, this time using as an example Trump referring to names of other people. This again misses the point of Williams' argument. Ehrman's repeated claim (about 84 minutes in) that Williams is stating that “if someone gets the geography right their stories are true” continues to miss the point that Williams is making (or perhaps he merely seeks to discredit Williams without engaging with his arguments).

Oral tradition

On the reliability of oral tradition Ehrman overstates his claims, as indicated by Williams, who stated that what Americans call “the telephone game” (an example used by Ehrman in his writings) is not relevant, although Williams was not accorded the time necessary to explain his argument in detail, and perhaps was too polite to push his point home. Ehrman sought to support his own claims by naming writers who agreed with him, but without quoting from any of them, a contrast with his demand for Williams to give specific historical cases of people who had died after falling down.

Ehrman also fails to recognise that one of the main ways that teachers taught their disciples in the first century was by getting them to memorise their teachings. (See Bauckham, “Jesus and

the Eyewitnesses”⁴.) As Bauckham states, it was also common for such disciples of great teachers to have notebooks in which they wrote down sayings of their teacher.

It is clear that many of Christ’s sayings and accounts of his actions circulated amongst believers in the early decades of Christianity, before the gospels were written. Such sayings are sometimes referred to as “*agrapha*” (“unwritten”). An example is found in Acts 20:35 (“It is more blessed to give than to receive”), a phrase that was well-known among believers to have been said by Christ, although it is not included in any of the gospels (which, in any case, had at that point not yet been written). Likewise, the earliest written account of the Last Supper that has survived to our day is not in the gospels but in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. The wording there is virtually identical with the wording that was subsequently given in the gospels.

My own research reveals oral tradition passed down from one generation to another with a phenomenally high degree of accuracy extending to the exact words used, memorised by people in a culture that did not have any form of writing. (Unpublished part of my research on a South American indigenous language, for which I was awarded a Ph.D. by St Andrews University.) In contrast, the early Christians and the Jews lived in a culture where the reading of written texts was important, and reading and writing levels were higher than in many other parts of the Roman empire.

Conclusion

One must ask questions about the suitability of the format used for this discussion. It may work with two speakers who show mutual respect, but in this case Williams demonstrated charity towards Ehrman, while Ehrman was aggressive throughout, constantly interrupting Williams and preventing him from finishing the points that he wished to make. Ehrman chose the topics he wished to discuss and sought to dominate throughout, making unsubstantiated and even wild claims, for instance, that there are “hundreds of contradictions between the gospels”.

Ehrman picked out one detail from Williams’ most recent book⁵ and challenged it, ignoring all the other information in the book that was not favourable to his claims. It would have been easy to point to large numbers of unsupported claims in Ehrman’s writings, and the chairman referred to one (Ehrman’s book “How Jesus Became God”⁶), although Williams was too charitable to take the offensive in this way.⁷

Ehrman conceded a few minor points, and Williams was again too polite to highlight these concessions.

The chairman accorded Ehrman a greater degree of latitude than his behaviour merited, resulting in a one-sided encounter in which Ehrman interrupted, bullied and accused Williams. The chairman demonstrated that he appreciated that this behaviour had been unsatisfactory, when at the end he asked Williams and Ehrman to shake hands.

⁴ Bauckham, Richard, “Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony”, Grand Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge, U.K.: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006.

⁵ Williams, Peter J, “Can We Trust the Gospels?”, Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2018.

⁶ Ehrman, Bart D, “How Jesus became God”, HarperOne: Reprint edition 2015.

⁷ It might have been good to introduce some balance at this point by referring also to the response by multiple authors to Ehrman’s book, which was published at approximately the same time: Bird, Michael F & others, “How God became Jesus”, Zondervan, 2014

Perhaps some rules are needed for future encounters:

- Timed presentations by each speaker, strictly adhered to.
- No interruptions allowed.
- No accusations.
- No trying to put words into the other speaker’s mouth.

Ultimately, the best format might be written and published, to enable each speaker to reflect on what the other person had stated and to check appropriate references. For instance, it is notable that near the end Ehrman challenged Williams (again!) and claimed that Luke had not interviewed people before writing his gospel, and to support this he quoted from Luke 1:1-2, conveniently stopping just before verse 3, where Luke writes, “I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning” (New International Version), since this would have proved that his own claim contradicted what Luke had written.

Whenever Ehrman conceded a few points to Williams, these concessions were drowned out in his next attack. My impression was that Ehrman came over as determined to undermine Williams, anxious to prevent him from giving full answers and resolved to destroy his position. In contrast, Williams came over as dignified, respectful and pleasant.

Ultimately, the encounter did not reveal Ehrman in a positive light, although viewers with little knowledge of the facts might have concluded that he came out on top. He definitely came out as aggressive and dominant, which is not the same thing as being right.