

BOOK REVIEW

Ehrman, Bart D., *The Bible: A Historical and Literary Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). xvii + 410 pp. Pbk. USD71.00.

Bart Ehrman needs little introduction to readers of *JGRChJ*. He has been teaching undergraduate and graduate courses for many years and knows well what students need in a textbook. His experience combined with the publishing reputation of Oxford University Press makes *The Bible* a visually appealing and user-friendly textbook.

The goal of producing an undergraduate course book to cover the entire Bible in a single semester is admittedly a daunting one as Ehrman himself acknowledges (see p. xv). Too often, these types of comprehensive introductory works fail in many aspects and respects. They can be too long, too boring or too outdated. Some are produced by an entire team of authors and lack the cohesive flow of thought in writing. Ehrman, however, does much better in numerous categories. From the initial impression of picking up the book, one sees that it is significant but not overwhelming. The glossy pictures and large textual print without footnotes invite students to read the book rather than just simply analyze it as with other textbooks.

The Bible covers the material one would expect and require from an introductory book to the Bible. After a brief introduction to the Bible's significance in Western society, Ehrman works through every section and book of the Bible beginning with Genesis. As the subtitle suggests, he focuses on historical and literary features. The unique character and content of each book are drawn out for students. The defining characteristic is the effort made to be student-friendly. It is clear that much thought went into producing a book without assuming any prior knowledge of the students. It truly is an intelligent introduction.

The best features are its design and formatting. Each chapter begins with a 'What to Expect' of around 200 words to helpfully orient students to the chapter's material. Section headings are emboldened to

give structure to the double columns of the body text. The page layout makes for a pleasant reading experience.

Additional design features include numerous inset boxes offering additional information. Some are excursions offering tangential information (e.g. p. 26), while others present further depth for readers who want more explanation (e.g. p. 172). Having these inset boxes enables professors to make choices about what material to cover and emphasize. There are also colorful maps, pictures and charts in virtually every few pages. For many students, the inclusion of archeological and historical items helps make history come alive (see pp. 124, 152, 265).

A few additional features make it well suited for the classroom. Each chapter has a summary called 'At a Glance', and includes a list of key terms and a short bibliography for further reading. One feature readers and professors will find most interesting is the section labeled, 'Take a Stand'. Here Ehrman creates realistic scenarios with practical questions. The intent is to foster student learning by encouraging students to think how the material applies to everyday life. For instance, after examining the Old Testament wisdom literature, Ehrman challenges students to think about how they would explain to others whether Job 'satisfactorily explains why there is suffering' (p. 213).

Though the 'Take a Stand' questions would indeed foster discussion in a classroom, the questions stated reveal a common Ehrman theme. The questions consistently strive to juxtapose academics with religion. This is why the 'traditional view' is laid out, thoroughly critiqued and then concluded with the proposed scholarly view. The problem is not with exposing students to the challenges of Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch or of historical reconstructions of the Exodus. The problem is with stating dogmatically that Moses did not write 'even a part' (p. 53) of the Pentateuch and that the Exodus event did not happen and was instead a legend, even though the 'Take a Stand' still drives at questions of religious significance.

I observe one thing that drives Ehrman's popularity is his ability to write in a comprehensible manner. His ability to summarize topics without being overly reductionistic can definitely benefit students. For instance, concerning Hebrew poetry, Ehrman adequately displays the big picture without losing students in the minutiae (see 166-68).

However, given Ehrman's extensive experience with students, it is clear that he has chosen not to write a neutral historical textbook on the Bible, but rather a book that promotes his particular brand of

skepticism. Even though repetition is helpful for pedagogical goals, the repetitious mentioning of doubt and contradiction concerning historical facts is unnecessary. Ehrman could have simply stated upfront that he finds errors, flaws and flat-out bogus material in the Bible and then moved on. He also could have focused purely on the literary and historical, as he claims to do, without asking questions of religious ramifications. However, at many places, one gets the impression of scare tactics. While Ehrman's typical argument of there being more variants 'than there are words in the New Testament' is restricted to pp. 384-86, the air of distrust is strongly felt throughout. In fact, it begins with the second sentence that sets the tone for the rest of the book: the Bible 'is also the most widely misunderstood, misinterpreted, and misused' (p. 2) book.

Given that his target audience is undergraduate students who are likely taking their only biblical studies course, the personification of all knowing 'scholars' is less about education and more a domineering effort (see p. 22). Ehrman does a fair job in selecting popular views, but he personifies scholars as an all-knowing force that glares down as readers think through topics. Students studying the material for the first time are given the stark impression that to disagree is unintelligent and criminal, which is odd, since these scholars, specifically Ehrman himself, became scholars because of their willingness and desire to disagree. In truth, the career and immense popularity of Ehrman stem from his desire to disagree with other scholars. The tone of the book and the ever-present voice of the scholars could have been tempered to allow undergraduates more freedom to explore and think. In fact, Ehrman should have been more mindful of his own words: 'scarcely any view is unanimous among biblical scholars' (p. 245).

The scare tactic is coupled with an overemphasis of historical similarities without noting historical differences. For instance, Ehrman begins his New Testament section with Apollonius of Tyana from *The Life of Apollonius*, and not with something actually in the New Testament. He crafts it like a good campfire story blurring the parallels with Jesus of Nazareth, in order to create shock and awe in undergraduate readers. Moreover, why introduce the Nag Hammadi literature and apocryphal gospels in the middle of the chapter on John rather than presenting them as distinct writings? Ehrman is not required to adopt the Christian distinction between canonical and non-canonical

books, but a literary study of the Bible, as the title suggests, should have examined first what is in the Bible before turning to what is not.

A couple more weaknesses are worth noting. There are some places where Ehrman makes blatantly wrong claims. One example concerns the authorship of 1, 2 and 3 John. He states, ‘John almost certainly did not write any of these books, since...he too would not have been able to write’ (p. 363). But are we to think that penmanship and authorship are to be equated? Surely, Ehrman knows such a position is contrary to the scholarly consensus. Ehrman began his career with papyri and textual criticism, so he is acutely aware that senders rarely ever penned their own letters in the ancient world. Village scribes (κωμογραμματεῖς) and professional scribes were the people’s secretaries, some of whom we even know by their names, such as Ischyron and Petaus. They incidentally were said to be illiterate and yet did write letters. Thus, saying that John could not write does not disprove or even directly comment on authorship. The distinction between writing and authorship is why it was common for senders to sign their letters, as found in the final greeting of Col. 4.18, 2 Thess. 3.17 and Phlm. 19 (debates over pseudonymity are of no consequence in distinguishing between author and writer).

Another strange presentation choice is the critique of ancient Jewish monotheism. While not an unfamiliar topic among scholars, the desire to show Judaism might have evolved from polytheism deserves better references. Ehrman’s choice to cite a single short article is peculiar (see p. 154). What is even more interesting is that he gives a long URL address to an article by William G. Dever in the *Biblical Archaeology Review*. However, you cannot access the article without signing up for a fee. It would seem prudent for Ehrman to substantiate his scare tactics with peer-reviewed articles published in available resources like journals and monographs.

In conclusion, even though the book competes in a market saturated with introductory works, Ehrman will likely find market appeal. The book is up-to-date on scholarship (though selective), well designed and easy to implement in the classroom. Many professors and schools will find it to be a good choice for their classrooms. Nevertheless, in more evangelical or neutral settings and schools, it is likely to be concluded that the book is good in what it affirmatively presents, but fails in its negative tone. It is up to the professor, and perhaps the school board, what type of introductory work is appropriate for their environment. If

Ehrman's overarching goal was to provide students with a well-written book covering the significant issues in a single semester, then I believe Ehrman has succeeded. But I do not believe Ehrman has offered a bias-free historical and literary introduction to the contents of the Bible.

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