

CONTEXTUAL DISCONNECTION IN BART EHRMAN'S *LOST
CHRISTIANITIES*¹

Jonathan M. Watt

Geneva College, Beaver Falls, PA

An axiom of good interpretive research, and of common sense, is that *meaning is rooted in context*. Whether it is the archaeologist who requires provenance for an artifact, the historian who observes the ebb and flow of political persuasions, the physicist seeking to describe an action and its *reaction*, or a casual reader pondering a novelist's intended nuance, the axiom holds that the best understanding is accomplished *in context*. Canons of context apply to all fields of investigation, including biblical studies.

Seeing more than 250 pages of small print within the body of the book *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* by Bart D. Ehrman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003),² one assumes the author would clarify any unique historiographic presuppositions and contextual connections he might hold with regard to early documents. After all, the book *is* informative and winsome. Ehrman is a good story teller, and I found his accounts of early Christian literature with its periodic losses and subsequent discoveries (or forgeries) to be quite engaging. The book's companion volume, entitled *Lost Scriptures: Books that Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), provides a useful resource for those curious enough to peer into extra-canonical, church-related materials. The introductory paragraphs provided for each item are, in general, a helpful orientation for first-time readers.

1. This paper was originally presented at the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theology Society in Philadelphia, PA, November 17, 2005. The author wishes to thank participants for insightful feedback.

2. Page references to this work by Ehrman are cited in the body of the text.

It appears, however, that consideration of the loose treatment of historical and literary contexts in *Lost Christianities* will bring into question its author's assertion that there existed a 'wide diversity of early *Christianity* and its sacred texts' (p. ix; emphasis mine) and will weaken his claim that these 'ancient forms' were 'stamped out' by an emerging orthodox 'group' (p. 94 and *passim*). The contextual disconnections that I will demonstrate are, for the most part, anticipated in the Introduction to the book and then worked out through subsequent pages. They have in common a lack of *context*, as I shall call that common thread running between them, which opens the door for the author's contention that modern believers have lost a diverse and rich spiritual heritage because of the actions of a single, self-proclaiming orthodox group (p. 94 and elsewhere; his wording). By labeling certain documents in this fashion, Ehrman begs the question of authenticity and truthfulness and thereby compromises what is otherwise useful resource material for students or early Christian history.

Problems of Context in Lost Christianities

There are a number of problems of context in *Lost Christianities*. First, Ehrman owes his readers a clarification of *his own philosophical context*. He will be quite aware that, in countering an authoritative approach to biblical canon that has been held historically by most branches of the historic Christian Church, he is confronting modern evangelicals as well as widely-held general orthodoxy. His own assumption that appears *not* to have been clarified is that any 'truth' can be truth—an implicit position of postmodern relativism. An example (among many) appears in Chapter Five, on Ebionites and Marcionites, in connection with his discussion of Paul's Galatian epistle, which he claims is merely 'Paul's version' (p. 98) of the situation. In one sense, this is true, of course; we certainly do not have in print any of the Judaizers' original works or historical responses to Paul. Ehrman states: 'This letter...made it into the New Testament, and so most people [today] simply take it at face value'. In other words, he disagrees with the concept of an authoritative canon, and this book in its entirety assumes such a position, yet he has not clearly articulated this foundational difference. If a writer critiques a position because of its philosophical or theological presuppositions, that writer owes his reader an explanation of his own.

This foundation is evidenced in other ways too. For example, Ehrman shows that ‘proto-orthodox’ Christians (as he calls those of the patristic era) came to succeed over other groups (such as Marcionites), in part, by virtue of their self-proclaimed connections with the Jewish Scripture tradition and by their self-consciously world-wide intercommunication and evangelistic reach under the umbrella of the Roman empire (pp. 179-80). The suggestion is that the isolated sectarian groups were just as valuable, even though they lost out in the long run. There is no attempt on his part to address what early Christians (and those today) have usually concerned themselves with, namely, what is truthful and accurate.

While there is no guarantee that zealots for truth are always right, of course, this recurrent concern within Christian history is effectively nullified as Ehrman seeks purely *situational* explanations for the course of history without recourse to their—or his—philosophical or hermeneutic underpinnings. Realism has trumped idealism, something seen in the book’s closing page (p. 257) when the author bemoans ‘a sense of loss upon realizing just how many perspectives once endorsed by well-meaning, intelligent and sincere believers came to be abandoned, destroyed and forgotten’. This is truly a declaration of postmodern perspectivalism.

Secondly, Ehrman appears to ‘play dumb’ in the earlier chapters of *Lost Christianities* with regard to the *early ecclesiastical situations* that led to the development of the canon. Admittedly, he may have done this for poetic effect, leaving the reader in tension as he waits to find who wore the black hats (in Ehrman’s screen play) and cruelly suppressed the early diversity. Ehrman appears to make an *a priori* assumption of a conspiracy by emergent orthodoxy, stating early (p. 3) in his discussion of non-canonical gospels: ‘Someone decided that four of these early Gospels, and no others, should be accepted as part of the canon’. Ah! – A mystery arises! Someone has done deceit and disservice by hiding from modern eyes that rich treasure trove of early ‘knowledge’! But Ehrman can only claim such a thing by ignoring the patristic developments between the second and fourth centuries which, by stages, made the process of canonization a reality. By neglecting the values that the early Church held (or *may* have held) with regard to apostolic authorship or apostolic connection (as understood by the Church Fathers and their councils, as they sought to determine the New Testament canon, p. 4), Ehrman further supports his conspiratorial implications. What makes for

good fiction may be inappropriate, indeed misleading, if it dresses in the genre of historical theology. I shall return to this matter a little later.

Thirdly, Ehrman shows disregard for *first- and second-century historical contexts* by playing fast and free with datings for certain early documents which, in some cases, even he himself has identified. For example, he notes (p. 3 and elsewhere) that various epistles allegedly written by Paul were excluded from the New Testament, noting elsewhere that these were from as late as the fourth century. Yet he implies that they were unfairly and inappropriately excluded. The fact that (by his own acknowledgment) they could not possibly have originated from an apostolic hand seems not to figure into the matter. In a similar spirit (pp. 44-46), the author connects the rabid asceticism ('renunciation') of the third century onward very closely with the New Testament, calling it 'one strand of Pauline Christianity' (p. 45), even 'tied closely to the kind of Pauline Christianity known throughout the ages as the Christianity of Tertullian...'. To be sure, such a step is not without parallel in historical and theological treatises. But Tertullian's trademark asceticism went well beyond what Paul or Jesus advocated. Ehrman treads these same steps when it comes to apocalyptic literature, specifically of the canonical Apocalypse of John, which (Ehrman claims) was inappropriately *preferred* over fourth-century apocalypses (p. 3)—even though they post-dated the original events and authors. Objective historical criteria pertaining to authorship are being discounted in this book.

Fourthly, Ehrman is incautious with regard to word definitions (as they play both defining and excluding roles), practicing a sort of *linguistic context disorder*. For example, his lucid opening to the body of the book (Part One, p. 9) proclaims: 'Almost all of the "lost" Scriptures of the early Christians were forgeries'. That he capitalizes 'Scripture' begs the question raised seventeen centuries ago, when Eusebius distinguished between genuine, questionable and spurious documents. Just one small capitalization early on in Ehrman's book is quite telling, for he continues (p. 9): 'That Christians in the early centuries would forge such books should come as no surprise. Scholars have long recognized that even some of the books accepted into the canon are probably forgeries.' Shortly thereafter, he asks: 'How could forgeries make it into the New Testament? Probably it is better to reverse the question: Why shouldn't forgeries have made it into the New Testament?' For, given the couple of centuries of canonical process, 'How would someone hundreds of years later know who had written these books?' Since (as many scholars

have claimed) even the early Church was uncertain about the authorship of certain New Testament books (such as Second Peter), Ehrman moves to apply the term pseudepigrapha (which normally applies only to non-canonicals) to selected New Testament books, under the term ‘Christian apocrypha’ (p. 11). Yet he ignores the opinions (admittedly, opinions which could have been mistaken) of Christians throughout the early centuries who collectively rendered judgments on authorship. By labeling something with a term, a concept now becomes established, even if it has not been substantiated.

Fifthly, Ehrman’s question of what truly constitutes Christianity—a *religious context* issue which brings us back to a philosophical or conceptual question. The question will not be solved to everyone’s satisfaction, but in a book whose title assumes multiple Christianities, one should at least raise the question of definition. It would seem that the reason this question was never raised is due to the fact that presuppositions had never been clarified in this book either. Author David McKay, in his study of theology entitled *The Bond of Love*, elucidates what Ehrman does not raise:

Even a limited acquaintance with modern biblical studies will show that there are almost as many portraits of Jesus as there are scholars producing them. A recent survey of ‘quests for the historical Jesus’ includes views of Jesus which portray him as, for example, itinerant cynic philosopher, a ‘man of the Spirit’, an eschatological prophet, a prophet of social change, a sage, a marginal Jew and a Jewish Messiah... There would seem to be no limit to the views of Jesus that can be suggested. Much of this diversity is symptomatic of the pluralism which increasingly has come to characterize Western culture.³

All religious positions stand on a presuppositional ground, and it is an act of forthright integrity for an author to be clear about it, rather than presume it, especially when one’s audience is diverse. Ehrman operates from a position of relativism but without directly addressing it, and thereby positions himself to undercut those who, in the early Church, worked from a different presuppositional basis.

It is worth asking what truly might constitute different versions of Christianity or, if preferred, *Christianities*. Most would agree with some of Ehrman’s own examples: we, too, could consider New England Presbyterians side-by-side with Greek Orthodoxy. But most would draw

3. D. McKay, *The Bond of Love: Covenant Theology and the Contemporary World* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2001), p. 112.

lines somewhere, if not between Orthodoxy and followers of David Koresh, then with those who believe in two gods, thirty gods or 365 gods (to cite Ehrman's examples, pp. 1-2). We would not care what such groups labeled themselves; we simply would refuse to consider them 'alternatives' to our own religion, taking a step of cautious exclusivity for the sake of accuracy. Yet this is a step which Ehrman himself declines to take.

This problem is further evident, for example, in Ehrman's discussion of early Christian interpretation, even of the canonicals. He notes, appropriately, that there are perennial differences in interpretive traditions, but he tendentiously overstates their impact and understates historical Christian consensus when he states: 'In the ancient world there was no more unanimity about how to interpret a text than there is today' (p. 195). But how could the early church produce ecumenical councils, or how could modern Christians consider a core of historic confession, if the lack of unanimity were the final rule of the day? Yet when a significant consensus on the canon emerges between the second and fourth centuries (as noted in Chapter Eleven), he finds fault with the process since 'the canon of the New Testament was ratified by widespread consensus rather than by official proclamation...by the beginning of the fifth century, most churches in the Christian world agreed on its contours' (p. 231)—not a bad result for the alleged lack of consensus he claimed previously.

Contrasts with Similar Current Literature

Although Ehrman's *Lost Christianities* is one swell amidst a wave of like literature, some of its weaknesses are nevertheless unique. Compare, for example, Elaine Pagels's *Beyond Belief*,⁴ a study of gnosticism in the second-century *Gospel of Thomas*. These books share the same publication year and the authors cite each other's works. Pagels shares Ehrman's reluctance to admit the objective value of truth, whether it is couched in biblical or secondary creedal forms. Yet she is more forthcoming about her orientation and clarifies her presuppositional orientation by writing: '[W]hat matters in religious experience involves much more than what we believe (or what we do not believe)'.⁵ She adds that

4. E. Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House, 2003).

5. Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, p. 6.

her research in patristic-era literature ‘helped clarify what I cannot love: the tendency to identify Christianity with a single, authorized set of beliefs...coupled with the conviction that Christian belief alone offers access to God’.⁶ In other words, Pagels has specified what Ehrman only implies.

Despite the different levels of clarity (in my opinion), Ehrman and Pagels both seem to discount the earliest of patristic developments, especially with regard to books that were commonly accepted. For example, she writes with negative allusions to the Nicene and later confessional formularies, to the effect that Christianity had flourished ‘*before* Christians formulated what they believed into creeds’ (emphasis hers),⁷ apparently ignoring the early formulaic or creedal intimations of 1 Tim. 3.16, 1 Cor. 11.23-26, parts of the *Didache*, or the mid-second century ‘Symbol of Faith’ that originated in Rome. In fairness to the pre-Constantinian status of a church in its early survival-and-extension mode, that more elaborate and specific formularies had not yet been developed is hardly surprising given the exigencies of the time. Yet this does not justify a historian’s *denial* of their existence altogether.

Subsequent to earlier preparations for this paper, I discovered his assessments being affirmed by Philip Jenkins, who writes:

Despite the claims of their advocates, the problems with taking the hidden gospels as historical documents are, or should be, self-evident. The idea that these documents have opened a window on the earliest days of Christianity stands or falls on whether they were written at a primitive stage in that story, and much depends on determining the dates at which these texts were written. The scholarly literature offers a very broad range of datings for these texts, but the consensus is that most of the works found at Nag Hammadi belong to the late second and third centuries. This is much later than the canonical gospels, on which the Gnostic works can often be clearly shown to depend. While the Gnostic texts are ancient, their value as independent sources of information is questionable, so that the canonical gospels really are both more ancient and authoritative than virtually all their rivals.⁸

As Jenkins elsewhere argues, such ‘modern scholars show little awareness of the very active debate about alternative Christianities which

6. Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, p. 29.

7. Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, p. 5.

8. P. Jenkins, *Hidden Gospels: How the Search for Jesus Lost its Way* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 12.

flourished in bygone decades, so that we have a misleading impression that all the worthwhile scholarship has been produced in the last thirty years' (p. 13).⁹ Why? The driving spirit is a presuppositional leaning towards 'liberal and feminist scholars whose most cherished issues so often involve conflict with contemporary religious conservatism.... Post-modern thought holds that no text should be privileged or authoritative, as each reflects the theological stance of a particular hegemonic group' (p. 19).¹⁰

A similar critique is offered by C. Scott Shidemantle in an unpublished paper entitled, 'A Christian Response to *The DaVinci Code*'. Shidemantle notes (p. 19) the irony observed centuries ago by Irenaeus that a group led by the Gnostic Valentinus should entitle one of its works *The Gospel of Truth*, since its contents were *neither*—neither consistent with the early gospels nor representative of divine truth. Later, fraudulent, non-standard materials cannot be regarded on the same foothold as earlier, widely-accepted ones. This same concept which is fundamental to objective historical research was articulated three decades ago by Edwin Yamauchi, in his 1973 volume *Pre-Christian Gnosticism*.¹¹ He argues that one must establish a 'developmental timeline' that will allow for objective comparison of early Christianity with *any* of the materials that claim to represent it. He shows that 'orthodox Christianity' cannot possibly have emerged from, or alongside with, Gnostic forms. Rather, the latter is an offshoot of the former.

These foregoing summary observations lead us to a *sixth problem of context* which now shall be listed, namely, that of intended audience. It is customary for scholars to place a significantly novel theory in the hands of fellow scholars in order for those familiar with the tools of the trade to examine and assess it. This step of allowing the 'guild' to examine a matter before it is distributed for popular consumption is sometimes bypassed. Students of the history of the canon will know that Ehrman's statement (p. 3) that the 'first instance we have of any Christian author urging that our current twenty-seven books, and only these twenty-seven, should be accepted as Scripture occurred in the year 367 CE', is a vast oversimplification of a circuitous and convoluted development. The fragment from *The Boston Globe* review which has been printed on the

9. Jenkins, *Hidden Gospels*, p. 13.

10. Jenkins, *Hidden Gospels*, p. 19.

11. E. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidence* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973).

front cover of *Lost Scriptures* inadvertently reveals this very problem by stating that this book ‘Will shock more than a few *lay* readers’ (my emphasis). This is precisely the problem: lay readers may not have the context of awareness which students of this history can draw upon in order to assess the weaknesses and presuppositions that animate this work.

There seems to be a blending of literary genres in Ehrman’s books: history is starting to look more like murder-mystery fiction and is being packaged for otherwise uninformed readers who (it is presumed) will respond with indignant shock at the cruel hoax that seems to have been foisted upon them by ancient ecclesiastic authorities. An ironic observation by Jenkins (pp. 19-20) is fitting at this point, as he states:

Radical critics seek to dethrone the canonical authority of the New Testament, yet in a way which substitutes an alternative range of scriptural authorities. Though these new texts are more acceptable to current tastes, they are still treated with the same kind of veneration once reserved for the Bible...we find what can only be described as a kind of inverted fundamentalism, a loving consecration of the noncanonical.¹²

Or, to frame the issue along the lines of this paper: Each context should abide by its founding canons.

12. Jenkins, *Hidden Gospels*, pp. 19-20.