

**“Misquoting Jesus”**

Rev Holly Baylies

**READING****Chapter One**

Rev. Baylies

The reading this morning from Bart E Misquoting " ,s book'r hman  
:he writes "Jesus

“The only way to copy a book in the ancient world was to do it by painstaking ,It was a slow .one word at a time ,letter by letter ,hand  
Accustomed as we are today .alternative process but there was no  
to seeing multiple copies of books appear on the shelves of major  
,book chains around the country just days after they are published  
will be *The Da Vinci Code* ,say ,we simply accept that one copy of  
it will-None of the words will ever vary .other copy exactly like any  
Not so in .be exactly the same book no matter which copy we read  
Just as books could not easily be distributed en .the ancient world  
they could not be ,(no trucks or planes or railroads)masse  
,(no printing presses)en masse produced  
,slowly ,one at a time ,And since they had to be copied by hand  
.most books were not mass produced ,painstakingly

Those few that were produced in multiple copies were not all  
ably made alterationsfor the scribes who copied texts inevit ,alike  
in those texts changing the words they copied either by accident  
when the) design via a slip of the pen or other carelessness or by  
e reading aAnyon .scribe intentionally altered the words he copied  
mpletely sure that he or shebook in antiquity could never be co  
The words could have .was reading what the author had written  
.if only just a little ,they probably had been ,In fact .been altered”

“Be wary of the truth you hold, for it’s flaws have been known to curse the  
good and silence the path to justice.” hcb

**MISQUOTING JESUS**

( Disclaimer! This is not my usual style, however my congregation in  
Wakefield is made up of a number of enthusiastic young folks, many who  
have come from other faiths. Some have left their churches in anger or  
disappointment. They have made it very clear they want nothing to do with  
ritual, the bible, talk of god or any other religious language. I asked then,  
“why are you here, why call yourselves a church rather than a social club?”  
This conversation led to the most well attended workshop I offered, A UU  
perspective on the Bible. Thus this sermon was intended to launch a  
preview of the historical beliefs inherent in our own faith and led me to  
understand why Unitarian Universalism is so critical to the modern age.)

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Most of us as children enjoyed a game called telegraph or “gossip.” One

would whisper a phrase into the ear of the person sitting next to him or her and the phrase would be passed on down the line. The last person would announce what he or she heard. It was a source of much entertainment and laughter when the original phrase was so altered in the way it came out that it didn't even remotely resemble the original phrase. For example I remember one game passed along child to child in school. The original phrase was "the teacher has big teeth!" The end result was "the creature eats fig leaves!" I remembered this one in particular because my spontaneous guffaw landed me in the corner for several hours!

It is quite amazing that one phrase passed between a few children in such a short period of time, could be so lost in translation. Back then it was a simple children's game, but when one compares it to the story of how the Bible came to be translated into so many languages with differing texts and understandings, a simple game of "gossip" becomes more than just an analogy.

Many UU's have a tendency to stray away from using bible quotations in our services and we do this because we know that there are serious discrepancies within the translations, so historically we avoided using Biblical resources as factual statements of belief. Even though much is known about the differences in the hundreds of variations in translation, the fact remains that during the era that Jesus lived, there is no existing original transcript to shed light on his words, his activities or the nature of his very existence.

The stories and parables that have come to us today in the hundreds of translations of the modern Bible, came from legends passed along by word of mouth from generation to generation. However, the only existing written documents available to us for translation are dated 75 to 100 years after the death of Jesus.

One of the oldest existing pieces of the New Testament dated 130 AD, is a tiny fragment of John 18, which is housed in The John Rylands library in Manchester England. So what is actually known about the life of Jesus, and agreed upon by Biblical Scholars and historians, according to the ancient historian Josephus, is simply that Jesus lived, he was a Jew and he was crucified. It is also known that in Jesus time, storytelling was the primary way of passing on native customs, religious beliefs and general information.

The problems with a factual account of what really happened began with the long time span of story telling. Decades went by before anything was actually written down. One can imagine that as the stories were told they were elaborated upon and enhanced as the years went by. Secondly, Jesus spoke Aramaic, an ancient Semitic language, a dialect closely akin to Hebrew, which still survives in remote communities in Syria, Iraq, Turkey and Iran.

Aramaic is a language of symbols some of which cannot be simply translated into a word, but more likely a concept or a phrase. For example, The Aramaic symbol for the profession of "carpenter" can also mean "magician." The first translators went from Aramaic to Hebrew to Greek to Syriac, Coptic and Latin before the first English translation by John Wycliffe in 1847. Today, there are at least 5700 known Greek manuscripts

dating from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> century alone. Scholars have estimated that the variations in the scriptures number between 200,000 and 400,000 or more.

Certainly one might wonder how all those variations got there in the first place? Well this summer I had the pleasure of reading Bart Erman's book, "Misquoting Jesus The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why." From his teens into adulthood, Erman was a committed and devoted born again Christian who attended Moody Bible College in order to absorb more thoroughly the literal word of God as told in the bible.

As his education progressed and he became more absorbed by the teachings of his faith, he became proficient in both Hebrew and Greek in order to delve deeper into the texts of the original documents. Erman was shocked to discover that not only are there no original documents in existence, but the written texts of what does exist are so varied and scanty that he began to question how one could be so sure that the bible actually contained God's word? As his search for the oldest documents ensued, his faith began to change into that of a more critical thinker. He no longer believed that the Bible was filled with God words, rather with human error and alterations in transcription. Even more determined to get to the source, he sought to understand and ultimately to explain this twist in information to those of us who are open to knowing the facts behind the true authorship of the contents of the New Testament of the Bible.

As I eluded to in the reading, one of the major difficulties arose in the mere act of copying texts, particularly the Greek texts which contain all of the earliest Christian writings from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, including those of the New Testament. The first obstacle which faced later translators was the fact that when they were copied there was no designation between upper and lower case letters, no punctuation and even more frustrating, there were no spaces between words. For example, such as the word(s) **GODISNOWHERE.** Let me show you...What does it say?..... God is now here? Or does it say, "God is nowhere?" You can see right off that even the most sophisticated of translators had their work cut out for them. Once a phrase was deciphered, the next problem was that of interpretation. Secondly most early scribes were not professionals, some were literate and hired by priests to transcribe from existing texts. It was tedious work and many mistakes were made by accident, however some alterations were made deliberately. In some of the oldest of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century Greek copies, copious notes in the margins reflect changes made by church authorities, by scribes trying to clarify a concept, or by both adding their own interpretations of scripture.

So alterations could be accidental, through the sheer boredom of repetition; from transcription errors of a careless scribe then re copied by another; a flick of the pen, or simply because there was no punctuation, words that looked alike could be mistaken for another. To name one of the many difficulties, Erman uses the example "*that in I Cor. 5:8, Paul tells his readers that they should partake of Christ, the Passover lamb, and should not eat the "old leaven, the leaven of wickedness and evil." The final word, evil, is spelled PONERAS in Greek, which, it turns out, looks a lot like the*

word for "sexual immorality," PORNEIAS. The difference in meaning may not be overwhelming, but it is striking that in a couple of surviving manuscripts, Paul explicitly warns not against evil in general, but against sexual vice in particular."

Gee I wonder which interpretation the radical right chose?

Some scribes also used abbreviations that could be misinterpreted, if the succeeding scribe was not familiar with his notations.

Erman explains, *Paul points out that everyone in ,12:13 .Cor 1 in "drunk of" and they have all "baptized into one body" Christ has been* *ted in would have been abbrevia (PNEUMA) The word Spirit ".one Spirit -and was-which understandably could be ,PMA most manuscripts as and so ;(POMA) "drink" misread by some scribes as the Greek word for drunk of one" in these witnesses Paul is said to indicate that all have ".drink*

*manuscripts occurred when two One common type of mistake in Greek " lines of the text being copied ended with the same letters or the same and then when his eye ,A scribe might copy the first line of text .words ,it might pick up on the same words on the next line ,went back to the page ing from he would continue copy ;ad of the line he had just copied in ste ".or lines/leave out the intervening words and ,as a result ,there and* It is easy to see that transcription errors were common and numerous.

The second category of inaccuracy falls into the realm of Deliberate errors, which occurred when a scribe was instructed to change text according to the wishes of his boss who was paying him. Some scribes even put forth their own interpretations when they could not comprehend the meaning so they altered the text to clarify the word or phrase to their satisfaction. The next scribe to copy the text would pick up those changes and possibly make more errors or add new commentary and so it went, kind of like a written and lengthy game of gossip, until the original meaning was altered.

Scribal errors are only the tip of the ecclesiastical iceberg. Starting with having no authentic originals to refer to, and the erroneous means by which 2<sup>nd</sup> century documents were recorded by hand either accidentally or deliberately, leads to the even larger issue of disagreements between the early church fathers in deciding which of the hundreds of versions of the origin, the life, teachings and death of Jesus should be included in the canon or final sacred texts of the New Testament. That in itself is a saga of magnanimous proportions, a long and painful conflict, in the wielding of power and wills and dominance over the adherents this new religion called Christianity. That in itself is another sermon.

Bart Erman opened a Pandora's box of information that has been known for a long time. We might ask why is it that the early theologians who pointed out these errors were labeled heretics and were imprisoned, maligned or burned at the stake?

Why is it that so many pastors, ministers and priests still cling to the bible as "The literal word of God," and refuse to share what is known with their congregations? Could it be that the truth would shatter mainline religion as we know it and would ultimately serve to sweep away the boundaries that divide us, eliminating the idea that God works in only one way, for one faith.

There is, however much beauty to be found in the bible, when one looks beyond the divisiveness it has created...

I would like to close with these words from The Rev. John Buehren's book Understanding the Bible He writes:

*“Massive injustice has been and continues to be done in the name of the Bible. But the problem is not simply with or within religion. The problem is that all of us allow the powers and principalities of both secular and spiritual oppression to usurp the spirit of the Bible and use it to legitimize such clear sins as economic and environmental exploitation, racism, sexism, homophobia, and more. Meanwhile the Bible is also about the beauty and goodness of creation itself; about the ancient human struggle for freedom and liberation; about frustration with violence and injustice throughout the generations; and about experiences of exultation, expectation, and inspiration that can sustain the human quest for wisdom, justice, and peace”*

I conclude with these words, found in the Gospel of John Chapter 8 vs. 32; is a quote which often adorned the chancels of our early Unitarian and Universalist churches...” Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free...”

So be it

Amen

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