

Book Reviews

Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew

Bart D. Ehrman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

ISBN: 0-19518-249-9; 320 PAGES; PAPERBACK, \$19.99.

In a day when diversity is prized as a virtue, Ehrman offers a rereading of early Christian origins and literature through the metaphor of conflict from the perspectives of the “losers.” His study is marked by a suspicion for what he calls the proto-orthodox (PO hereafter) version of Christianity that came out the “winner” in its quest for “dominance” through “strategies” and “weapons” in an “arsenal.” His three goals are to examine some non-canonical writings, extract from these texts variant forms of Christianity, and consider how one early form of Christianity established “itself as dominant in religion, determining for ages to come what Christians would believe, practice, and read as sacred Scripture” (ix). If for M. Foucault, “politics is the continuation of war by other means,”¹ then for Ehrman religion is war by *any* means. “All is fair in love and war, and religious domination is nothing if not love and war” (47).

Ehrman opens his book with four vignettes of discoveries and forgeries, ancient and modern. He rightly stresses the variation in early Christian belief, so as to speak historically of *Christianities*, which produced diverse texts. The first is a discussion of the (so-called) *Gospel of Peter*, which is a passion narrative suspect of docetic tendencies. Next, he discusses various apocryphal acts, including *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, recounting the stories of the ancient cult hero who devoted her life to pursuing the model of Paul and a life of chastity; *The Acts of Thomas*, about Jesus’ twin brother preaching salvation via chastity; *The Acts of John*, betraying docetic tendencies and depicting the apostle in dramatic and amusing incidents. Chapter three covers the (in)famous *Gospel of Thomas*, for which Ehrman interprets in its Gnostic milieu, explaining some of the more difficult facets of the book. Finally, he recounts the story of *The Secret Gospel of Mark* and its discordant controversies about being a modern forgery.

The second section of the book examines various versions of Christian belief from the Ebionites to the Marcionites, the Gnostics and the defenders against heresies in the PO camp. He describes with imaginative detail the conflicts between the PO and those on the opposite polar spectrum: the Ebionites (Jewish Christians denying the virgin birth and adhering to an “adoptionist” Christology) and the Marcionites (who rejected the Jewish Scriptures and posited a dualism between the God of the Jews and the God of Jesus). Next, Ehrman examines the Gnosticisms that challenged the PO doctrines by denigrating the created world, attributing salvific efficacy to secret knowledge—*gnōsis*, and hoping for salvation *from*, not *in*, this world. Finally he examines the “broad swath” of PO Christianity, including the rise of apostolic succession, the elevation of Christian martyrs, and the anticipation of the canon. It seems as if many of the PO figures are not but “talking heads,” who are the foil of the “losers” whom Ehrman is championing the cause of their recovered voices.²

The final section of the book charts a tumultuous course of how one group established itself as dominant and virtually annihilated the memory of all other groups. Ehrman begins this section by problematizing the “classical” definitions of “orthodoxy” and “heresy.” Three questions arose in Enlightenment scholarship to disrupt the consensus: (1) Did Jesus and his disciples teach an orthodoxy that was transmitted to the churches of the second and third centuries (à la Reimarus)? (2) Does the canonical Acts provide a reliable account of the internal conflicts of the earliest Christian church (à la F.C. Bauer)? (3) Does Eusebius give a trustworthy sketch of the disputes raging in post-apostolic Christian communities (à la W. Bauer)? Ehrman zeroes in on the strategies used by each group to assault the other, including polemical treatises, personal slurs, forgeries, falsifications of sacred texts, and finally the “big guns” of the emergent canon as a formal list of Scripture. He recounts the Ebionite attack on Paul as an opponent to God’s Law and the Gnostics’ challenge to the PO views as inadequate. But the main focus is on the arsenal of the PO, who fire accusations of division, nonsense, and reprobation to the heretics. They fortify their positions with claims to unity, the Rule of Faith and the creeds, and examples of genuine faith through martyrdom. Both sides forged texts in the names of apostles to bolster their respective claims to truth. Each

side falsified sacred texts to “clarify” them in support of the group’s traditions.³ Finally, Ehrman analyzes the negotiation of the canon as the final flag staked in the PO dominance of the religious territory.

Ehrman concludes his work with surveillance of the gains and losses of the battle. It is here that Ehrman’s agenda becomes most clear. Indeed, Ehrman is no neutral chronicler of early church history, but rather demonstrates a hostile rhetoric to any institutional domination or censorship. This text is evidence that history writing is a discourse (not merely a discipline), which inscribes power relations into the signification of recovering muted voices. Ehrman offers an exciting and adventurous picture of the early history of Christianity emerging through the intense pressure of self-identification and theological expression, while informing his readers of a perspective all but forgotten until many recent discoveries. His story is an illuminating read that familiarizes non-specialists with both texts and movements that emerged in the revolutionary period of early Christian origins. His discussion is enlightening and entertaining throughout. The contemporary Christian will do well to know the stories of their heritage presented in this text, and use it as a catalyst to consult the primary texts, many of which are provided in other volumes edited by Ehrman.⁴

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Notes

1. Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault’s Thought* (ed. Paul Rabinow; London: Penguin, 1986), 64. This was a reversal of Von Clausewitz’s formula that “war is the continuation of politics by other means.” In like manner, I suppose we could say that war is (a certain type of) theology by other means.
2. I take notice, for example, the personalizing biographical information given to Marcion (104–9) versus the pithy ascriptions offered for Tertullian (“apologist,” “heresiologist,” and “moralist,” 21) and Epiphanius (“a vitriolic opponent of all things heretical,” 102; “doughty defender of orthodoxy,” 129).
3. The section on “The Falsification of Sacred Texts,” 215–27, offers a succinct and basic summary of Ehrman’s more technical work, *The Orthodox*

Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament (New York: Oxford, 1993).

4. See the companion volume, *Lost Scriptures: Books that Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); and *After the New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity* (New York: Oxford, 1999).

The God Delusion

Richard Dawkins. Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006.
ISBN: 0618918248; 406 PAGES. PAPERBACK, \$15.95.

Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* now has sold over 1.5 million copies, has been translated into over 30 languages, and recently has been re-issued in paperback. In the book's crucial fourth chapter, "Why there almost certainly is no God," Dawkins argues that the objection/question—Who designed the designer?—blocks any inference to a designer. In this brief review I will argue that this important objection is a philosophical failure.

First I will clarify the objection. Then I will set out my critique.

According to Dawkins' who-designed-the-designer objection, appealing to an intelligent designer to explain nature's complexity (a.k.a. apparent design) is to pass the explanatory buck. The intelligent designer hypothesis merely transfers the mystery of nature's complexity, which is the puzzle to be explained, to the mystery of the designer's complexity, which is a *new puzzle* to be explained.

More specifically, Dawkins argues that because the complexity of the natural world is highly improbable, and because the intelligent designer must be at least as complex as the complexity of the natural world that's being explained by the intelligent design hypothesis, it follows that the intelligent design hypothesis must be at least as improbable as the natural world (113-114). But, Dawkins argues, this is to explain one improbability by another improbability as great as, or greater than, the first improbability (114). What is worse, this also raises the question of the origin of the designer, thereby adding *yet another layer of improbability* to explain the additional complexity of

the designer's designer (120). And what about the complexity of the designer of the designer's designer? And so on, *ad infinitum* (120).

Because of this unending regress of additional improbabilities, Dawkins thinks that the God hypothesis cannot be a rational explanation for the apparent design found in nature. Thus, according to Dawkins, God is illusory. In addition, Dawkins would have us believe, we are all stuck with the logical implication that some atheistic form of evolution, Darwinian and/or other, must have created the apparent design (158).

Clearly, as Dawkins himself seems to realize (157-158), the who-designed-the-designer argument is the crucial philosophical foundation of *The God Delusion*. If the who-designed-the-designer argument fails, then so do Dawkins' hopes for an atheistic explanation. So the question arises: Is Dawkins' who-designed-the-designer argument logically sound?

I think not, for two reasons.

First, intelligent designer explanations are accepted in science even if the designer is complex—e.g., in archeology (to explain cave paintings and arrowheads), in cryptography (to explain codes), and in forensic science (to explain “who dunnit”). In fact, in these sciences the designer is even *more complex* than the objects or phenomena explained, yet the designer hypothesis is scientifically legitimate. If we were to accept Dawkins' who-designed-the-designer objection, then—to be logically consistent—the aforementioned explanations would not be legitimate. But they *are* legitimate. Thus, it is false that the complexity of a designer makes a design hypothesis improbable.

Second, the issue of the complexity and origin of a designer simply has no bearing on the process of determining whether something is designed. Consider the science known as SETI (Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence). In SETI the intelligent design hypothesis is allowed to explain ET's communications (if they were to occur); moreover—and significantly—whether the alleged message is truly a message from ET depends not at all on our knowledge of ET's complexity or origin, but solely on whether the message displays design.

How do we discern design? Think about some long words in a Scrabble game, or consider some sophisticated computer software. Or imagine, say, the discovery of strange complex machinery on Mars.

Or recall the messages from outer space in the movie *Contact*. The way to discern whether something is designed is to determine whether the thing is (1) highly improbable via non-intelligent causes *and* (2) strongly analogous to things we know from empirical experience to be designed by intelligent causes.

Who designed the designer? Perhaps the designer just is (and always has been). Or not. Perhaps the designer is complex. Or not. The point here is that we need not understand the nature of a designer (i.e., whether it's complex or not) or even the origin of a designer (whether it has a designer or not) to determine that something has been designed. Therefore, as an alleged block to discerning a designer from its designed effects, the who-designed-the-designer objection is beside the point—*it is not relevant*.

To recap, Dawkins' who-designed-the-designer objection has two major flaws: it is based on a falsehood, and it is basically irrelevant. In other words, the objection that constitutes the philosophical foundation of *The God Delusion* is (to put it mildly) a philosophical blunder.

Significantly, nature's apparent design remains—and continues to suggest an Intelligent Designer.^{1,2}

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Notes

1. One might be tempted to argue that God is simple and so the God hypothesis does not fall prey to Dawkins' objection. I think that the issue of God's simplicity is an important (and difficult) philosophical issue, and should be studied for the sake of achieving greater philosophical knowledge of God. However, I think that such a project would be lost on the likes of Dawkins and so would have little apologetical value. I thus think that the point defended above should be the focus of a reply to Dawkins' objection: i.e., whether God is simple or complex is irrelevant to the question of discerning whether something is designed by God—i.e., the issue is merely whether the object or phenomenon in question displays the marks of intelligent design.
2. For further discussion of the concept of intelligent design and its discernment, see Hendrik van der Breggen, "Miracle Reports, Moral Philosophy, and

Contemporary Science” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Waterloo, 2004), pp. 214-226. See too Del Ratzsch, *Nature, Design, and Science: The Status of Design in Natural Science* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001). And, of course, see William A. Dembski’s many works, but especially *The Design Revolution: Answering the Toughest Questions about Intelligent Design* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2004). Also, see Robert B. Stewart, ed., *Intelligent Design: William A. Dembski & Michael Ruse in Dialogue* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007). For online discussions of Dawkins’ objections, see: Alvin Plantinga, “The Dawkins Confusion,” <http://www.christianitytoday.com/bc/2007/002/1.21.html> [accessed February 29, 2008]; and William Lane Craig, “What do you think of Richard Dawkins’ argument for atheism in *The God Delusion*?” <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=5493> [accessed February 29, 2008]. Finally, for a response to a recent philosophical defence of Dawkin’s who-designed-the-designer objection, see Hendrik van der Breggen, “Dawkins’ Logico-Philosophical Blunder: A Reply to a Dawkins Apologist,” *JISCA* 2 no. 1 (2009): 41-48.