Bart D. Ehrman, chair of the department of religious studies at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill is a brilliant scholar who has worked for many years studying and teaching the New Testament; especially being involved in it’s textual criticism. In *Misquoting Jesus*, Dr. Ehrman begins by sharing a little bit about his journey of faith which undoubtedly contributed to the book’s content. He gives his testimony thereby divulging the philosophical presuppositions which underlie his current understanding of the New Testament.

As a young man, Ehrman admits to having had a “born again” Christian experience which led him to attend Moody Bible Institute (a highly conservative/fundamentalist Christian college) and then to attend Wheaton College. His testimony indicates that as he dove further into the world of the text of the new Testament, while working on his doctorate at Princeton, he came to realize that his evangelical understanding of the Bible as the inspired, infallible, and inerrant word of God was false. He asks: “How does it help us to say that the Bible is the inerrant word of God if in fact we don’t have the words that God inerrantly inspired, but only the words copied by scribes...incorrectly! What good is it to say that the autographs were inspired? We don’t have the originals!”¹ These kinds of questions nagged him in his search for an accurate understanding of inspiration. His studies eventually led him to deny the idea that God inspired the New Testament. He writes:
That it would have been no more difficult for God to preserve the words of scripture than it would have been for him to inspire them in the first place. If he wanted his people to have his words, surely he would have given them to them. The fact that we don’t have the words surely must show...that he did not preserve them for us. And if he didn’t perform that miracle, there seemed to be no reason to think that he performed the earlier miracle of inspiring those words.²

Ehrman’s study of the biblical texts has (in part) led him to deny the orthodox Christian doctrine of Scripture. Not only has his view of scripture changed from believing the inspiration of the Bible to denying it, but his beliefs about God have also changed. Bart admits to having become an agnostic and has completely rejected orthodox Christian faith. Dr. Ehrman began to see the Bible as a merely human book that does not provide us with an infallible guide for faith and practice. This realization did not immediately cause him to lose his faith in Christ. He admits that though his understanding of the nature of Scripture had changed, he maintained faith in Christ until eventually he left Christianity altogether. His ultimate reason for rejecting Christ, however, was not his new understanding of scripture, but his own inability to reconcile the existence of pain and suffering in the world with the existence of God. It was not essentially a biblical problem but a philosophical dilemma.

The book *Misquoting Jesus*, like any other book, has an agenda. Is Ehrman’s agenda simply to encourage the layman’s growth in the area of textual criticism; or is it to debunk the orthodox doctrine of scripture? Or both? The tone of the book suggests that he probably intended both. Though intriguing at times, this book should not be used as a primer for the discipline of textual criticism. Why? Dr. Ehrman does not offer a full explication and overview of the issues and philosophies involved in studying the biblical
manuscripts. He raises several problems then answers them according to his own naturalistic worldview.

Ehrman’s views are not representative of all scholars within the discipline. In fact, the well known textual critic, Michael Horton, a professor at Bethel College in St. Paul, MN significantly disagrees with his conclusions. Ehrman also regularly commits the logical fallacy of appealing to authority without even giving names when he uses phrases such as “most scholars” or “the majority of scholars agree.” He apparently expects his readers to assume that if “scholars agree” with his conclusions, therefore, they must be correct. However, anybody who is truly seeking truth knows that there is always another explanation. Yet Ehrman fails to provide the “other side” of this age old debate. It is not that he lies or is deceptive in his attempt to refute the Christian faith. Rather, he simply fails to paint the whole picture. In the end he admits that his view of the text ultimately stems not from his text critical work, but from philosophical dilemmas he has not reconciled.

The questions Ehrman raises are good ones. They are challenging and thought provoking. But, a most important question remains- are his conclusion true? He denies the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible and believes that textual criticism gives him the intellectual justification for this denial. However, does textual criticism necessitate his conclusion that the Bible is merely a human book? Can it even make this evaluation? Does it logically follow that the existence of errors in the manuscripts means that God did not inspire them? The following will not give a full apologetic for the inspiration of the Bible but will discuss what seems to be Ehrman’s primary concern- the claim by Christians that the original autographs of the New Testament are inspired and inerrant.
Hopefully the following will paint a more complete picture of the nature of the New Testament.

**Inerrancy of the Originals**

A primary difficulty for Ehrman is the Christian claim that the Bible is inspired and error free (inerrant). He thinks this claim is absurd in light of the many scribal errors that have crept into the text. Of course, no one who holds to the orthodox doctrine of inerrancy and inspiration of the Bible believes that the copies, manuscripts, or modern translations are free from corruption and error. This book in questioning the orthodox doctrine of scripture is really not offering any innovation. For many centuries, skeptical critics have attempted to refute the Christian view of the New Testament as God’s Word. However, their discovery of errors in the manuscripts in no way requires that the original autographs also had errors. In fact, orthodox doctrine requires the inspiration and inerrancy of the original autographs despite the existence of transcriptional error.

Many people ridicule (as Ehrman does) this claim that only the originals were inspired by God. They think that restricting the inspiration to the originals is intellectually dishonest especially since the originals are no longer available for evaluation. Critics have condemned this restriction to the originals as “desperate weaseling” and an “apologetic artifice” arising from embarrassment. However, this scoffing is unwarranted. Even inerrancy critic Stephen Davis recognizes that restriction of inerrancy to the autographa is not superfluous. Why? Because textual criticism has, for the most part, firmly established the biblical text. B.B Warfield, the late Princeton scholar, argues that restricting inspiration to the originals is not unjustified because “the autographic text of
the New Testament is distinctly within reach of criticism in so immensely the greater part of the volume, that we cannot despair of restoring...His book, word for word, as He gave it by inspiration to men.”

Christians have never contended for the precise infallibility of the transmitted text, but have always been committed to the inspiration of the original. If God did in fact inspire the biblical authors to write His revelation, then the original revelation must have been wholly true and without error. According to Warfield, “everybody knows that no book was ever printed, much less hand-copied, into which some errors did not intrude in the process; and as we do not hold the author responsible for these in an ordinary book, neither ought we hold God responsible for them in this extraordinary book which we call the Bible.” Christians maintain that the original writings as they first appeared were inspired by God despite the fact that errors crept in over time.

It is true that the original manuscripts are lost and so the question arises as to whether this is not a trifling discussion because they are no longer available. One critical scholar writes that “since the original documents are inaccessible and apparently irrecoverable, the ascription of inerrancy to these documents is...practically irrelevant.” The discussion may be inconsequential on one hand if it remains at the level of the text—especially from the viewpoint of naturalistic scholars. But on the other hand when the text is analyzed from a theistic perspective the issue is very intriguing and of major import. Indeed, even if there never existed a text to study, that would not change the reality that if God did choose to reveal Himself through human language, that revelation would be flawless and true. We can therefore establish a priori that God’s revelation is error free, based upon the character of God. Bahnsen argues that restricting inerrancy
to the autographa enables the Christian to consistently confess the truthfulness of God. “Only with an inerrant autograph can we avoid attributing error to the God of truth.”

As is hinted in the previous paragraph, the dilemma is really one of worldview. Christians presuppose a truth telling God. Therefore, it is assumed that if the Bible is God’s revelation, then by necessity it must be free from all error. If one presupposes a naturalistic worldview on the other hand, as does Ehrman, then talk of inspiration is devoid of meaning and both transcriptional errors as well as autographic errors are to be expected. Ehrman is trying to deflate the Christian worldview and its recognition of divinely inspired scripture on the basis of transcriptional errors and the lack of original manuscripts. He argues that if the Bible has errors now then it is a matter of small consequence whether the New Testament was originally perfect. Again, this conclusion stems from a worldview difference. Author James Gray in an article written in 1917 concerning the inspiration of the Bible shares how naturalistic scholars consider talk of the perfect original to be a matter of small consequence. He writes:

A liberal theologian…remarked that it was a matter of small consequence whether a pair of trousers were originally perfect if they were now rent. To which [someone] replied that it might be a matter of small consequence to the wearer of the trousers, but the tailor who made them would prefer to have it understood that they did not leave his shop that way…If the Most High must train among knights of the shears He might at least be regarded as the best of the guild, and One who drops no stitches and sends out no imperfect work.

Christians insist that God gave revelation free from error to the original writers of Scripture and that He is not responsible for transcriptional error. Therefore, the existence of errors in the biblical manuscripts (in contrast to Ehrman’s conclusions), does not refute the existence of a truth telling God whose existence and attributes can be reasonably established apart from the text itself.
Why Not Preserve the Text?

The necessity of an errorless original and the historical claim of the Christian community to call the autographa of the New Testament inspired and inerrant is essentially the problem for Ehrman. He can not understand why God would miraculously inspire a text and not miraculously preserve the originals for analysis or keep copyists from transcription error.

Why did God allow his original revelation to men to be lost and then to be corrupted in transmission? There have been various responses throughout the years to this question which is ultimately an attempt to get at the mind of God. However, according to Bahnsen, "we simply have to turn away from such questions, which presume to have an a priori idea of what to expect from God… [because] God has not chosen to share with us His motivation for allowing the text of the autographa to become slightly corrupted."\(^{10}\) He goes on to conclude that “the possession of an answer as to why God permitted this is surely not a necessary condition to holding to the restriction of inerrancy to the autographa, if the position is maintained on independently sufficient grounds.”\(^{11}\)

What's more, the loss of the originals is really not a significant problem at all. The quality of our existing biblical texts is well attested and has stood the test of time. In fact, *The original text has been transmitted to us in virtually every detail.* According to scholar Frederick Kenyon, “The Christian can take the whole Bible in his hand and say without fear or hesitation that he holds in it the true Word of God, handed down without essential loss from generation to generation, throughout the centuries.”\(^{12}\)
Ehrman, and the like, who continue to talk as though the bible is lost beyond recovery or that it is completely corrupted so that no knowledge of the originals is attainable, sustains an extreme position. Benjamin Warfield adamantly asserts that “we have the autographic text” among our copies and that the restoration of the original is not impossible. Moreover, the charge that God should have preserved the manuscripts of the originals is pointless because our copies are virtually the autographs. Again Warfield declares, “The great mass of the New Testament…has been transmitted to us with no, or next to no, variation.” In other words, “To all intents and purposes we have the autographs, and thus when we say we believe in verbal inspiration of the autographs, we are not talking of something imaginary and far off but of the texts written by those inspired men and preserved for us so carefully by faithful believers of a long past age.”

**Conclusion**

The issues raised by Ehrman are an intriguing challenge to all who call themselves believers. The book is a stimulating read that forces the person committed to the doctrine of inspiration to dust off the cob webs in his mental attic in order to wrestle with some difficult questions. Ehrman does ask good questions and his scholarly ability is apparent. However, his conclusions are nothing new to the world of New Testament studies. His ideas are sure to sell lots of books in a post-Christian culture, but they are not innovative. The central difficulties he addresses have been responded to and refuted since ages past.
Finally, the program of this critique has been to show that Ehrman’s conclusions are not true and that his textual criticism does not refute the existence of God, or the original inspiration of Scripture. Moreover, Ehrman’s denial of the orthodox understanding of Scripture derives from his naturalistic philosophical commitments that inform his text critical conclusions. This critique has not offered an exhaustive apologetic for the orthodox doctrine of inspiration and inerrancy. It has, however, communicated that the belief in Scripture’s inspiration is a completely justified point of view- from a theistic perspective. Bahnsen declares:

The doctrine of original inerrancy, then does not deprive believers today of the Word of God in an adequate form for all the purposes of God’s revelation to His people. Presupposing the providence of God in the preservation of the biblical text, and noting the outstanding result of the textual criticism of the Scriptures, we can have full assurance that we possess the Word of God necessary for our salvation and Christian walk. As a criticism of this evangelical doctrine, suggestions that the autographic text has been forever lost are groundless and futile. The Bibles in our hands are trustworthy renditions of God’s original message, adequate for all intents and purposes as copies and conveyors of God’s authoritative Word.⁶

In conclusion, may we remember the words of the Apostle Paul who writes in his second letter to Timothy that, “everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”¹⁷
End Notes

3 E.g. Smith (and Evans), *Inspiration and Inerrncy*, 63, 144; Harry R. Boer, *Above the Battle? The Bible and Its Critics* (Grand Rapids: Eardmans, 1977), 84.
16 Bahnsen, “The Inerrancy of the Autograph,” 188.