

Biblical Inaccuracy and John 3:16

(part 1 of 5)



For many, the Christian-Muslim debate revolves around the issue of biblical inaccuracy. I am one of many authors who have addressed this topic in everything from brief pamphlets to full-length books. For the purpose of this article, however, I would like to focus on just one scriptural example – a verse that brings to light many of the pertinent issues and arguments.

Evangelical Christians—as the keystone of their religion—showcase John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." This is the verse you see promoted on everything from Tim Tebow's eyeball to t-shirts, bumper stickers and, most famously, placards at sporting and other public events.

What is the charm of John 3:16? Well, Evangelical Christians want us to believe this verse promises humankind an effortless salvation, based solely upon Christian belief – what they call redemption by faith. But as we all know, the beauty or appeal of a proposition does not make it true. I can propose a lot of wonderful ideas, but a person would be foolish to believe them without verifying their validity.

So, let's do just that with John 3:16 – let's take a close look and see if we should believe it. If it is true, the cheap salvation it offers would be the deal of a lifetime. On the other hand, if nothing supports its validity, we would be crazy to risk our salvation on false "scripture."

To begin with, who is the author of this New Testament "book" or individual writing of Christian scripture called "John"? The disciple? Contrary to what we might expect, no. Bart D. Ehrman tells us, "Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John did not write the Gospels."^[1] Furthermore, "Of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, only eight almost certainly go back to the author

whose name they bear: the seven undisputed letters of Paul (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon) and the Revelation of John (although we aren't sure who this John was)."^[2]

The famous biblical scholar, Graham Stanton, agrees: "The gospels, unlike most Graeco-Roman writings, are anonymous. The familiar headings which give the name of an author ('The Gospel according to . . .') were not part of the original manuscripts, for they were added only early in the second century."^[3] Added by whom? "By unknown figures in the early church. In most cases, the names are guesses or perhaps the result of pious wishes."^[4] Which is hardly the level of scholastic accuracy expected of a book of revelation.

The fact that "The gospel according to John" was not written by John, the disciple, is not common knowledge among laity. Nonetheless, Ehrman tells us, "Most scholars today have abandoned these identifications, and recognize that the books were written by otherwise unknown but relatively well-educated Greek-speaking (and writing) Christians during the second half of the first century."^[5]

Multiple sources acknowledge there is no evidence, other than questionable testimonies of second-century authors, to suggest that the disciple John was the author of the Gospel of "John."^{[6],[7]} In addition, Acts 4:13 tells us that John was "unlettered." In other words, he was illiterate.

Stanton poses this compelling question: "Was the eventual decision to accept Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John correct? Today it is generally agreed that neither Matthew nor John was written by an apostle. And Mark and Luke may not have been associates of the apostles."^[8]

Professor Ehrman is more blunt: "Critical scholars are fairly unified today in thinking that Matthew did not write the First Gospel or John the Fourth, that Peter did not write 2 Peter and possibly not 1 Peter. No other book of the New Testament claims to be written by one of Jesus' earthly disciples."^[9] Why, then, do our Bibles label the four gospels as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John? Some scholars suggest something similar to branding—the modern advertising term for the commercial practice of soliciting celebrity endorsements to sell a product.^[10] Second-century Christians who favored these four gospels had a choice—either acknowledge the gospels' anonymous authorship or fake it. The bluff proved irresistible, and they chose to assign the gospels to apostolic authorities, thereby illegitimately "branding" the gospels as authoritative.

In the end, we have no evidence any book of the Bible, gospels included, were authored by Jesus' disciples. Furthermore, most scholars accept Paul's authorship in only half of the works attributed to him. Regardless of who authored what, corruptions and inconsistencies have resulted in more manuscript variants than words in the New Testament! Lastly, even scholars of textual criticism fail to agree.^[11] Why? Because "considerations depend, it will be seen, upon probabilities, and sometimes the textual critic must weigh

one set of probabilities against another."^[12] Furthermore, with regard to the more complex textual problems, "the probabilities are much more evenly divided and the critic must sometimes be content with choosing the least unsatisfactory reading or even admitting that there is no clear basis for choice at all."^[13]

Expanding on this thought, "Occasionally, none of the variant readings will commend itself as original, and one [i.e., a textual critic] will be compelled either to choose the reading that is judged to be the least unsatisfactory or to indulge in conjectural emendation."^[14] Hmm. Conjectural emendation, conjectural emendation—isn't that scholar-talk for "educated guess"?

So perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that, just as Jeremiah bemoaned the "false pens" of the Old Testament scribes, the third-century church father, Origen, bemoaned the "false pens" of New Testament scribes: "The differences among the manuscripts have become great, either through the negligence of some copyists or through the perverse audacity of others; they either neglect to check over what they have transcribed, or, in the process of checking, they make additions or deletions as they please."^[15] Now, that was the voice of a third-century church father, commenting on just the first couple hundred years of Christianity. We have to wonder how much worse the situation has degenerated since then. And that will be the subject of the next article in this series.

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Footnotes:

^[1] Ehrman, Bart D. 2009. *Jesus, Interrupted*. HarperOne. p. 5.

^[2] Ehrman, Bart D. *Jesus, Interrupted*. p. 112.

^[3] Stanton, Graham N. 1989. *The Gospels and Jesus*. Oxford University Press. p. 19.

^[4] Funk, Robert W., Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar. *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*. p. 20.

^[5] Ehrman, Bart D. 2005. *Lost Christianities*. Oxford University Press. p. 235.

^[6] Kee, Howard Clark (Notes and References by). 1993. *The Cambridge Annotated Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version*. Cambridge University Press. Introduction to gospel of "John."

^[7] Butler, Trent C. (General Editor). *Holman Bible Dictionary*. Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers. Under "John, the Gospel of."

^[8] Stanton, Graham N. pp. 134–135.

^[9] Ehrman, Bart D. *Lost Christianities*. p. 236.

[10] Ibid., p. 235.

[11] Metzger, Bruce M. A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament. Introduction, p. 14.

[12] Ibid., p. 11.

[13] Metzger, Bruce M. and Ehrman, Bart D. The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration. p. 316.

[14] Ibid., p. 343.

[15] Metzger, Bruce M. 1963. "Explicit References in the Works of Origen to Variant Readings in New Testament Manuscripts," in J. N. Birdsall and R. W. Thomson (ed.), Biblical And Patristic Studies In Memory Of Robert Pierce Casey. Herder: Friburg. pp. 78–79.

(part 2 of 5)

In this article we continue our examination of Biblical inaccuracy, taking as an example the famous verse, John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

Something that troubles many readers is why Bible translators use capital letters for pronouns that refer to Jesus Christ. Capitalizing a midsentence "he," "his" or "him" when it refers to Jesus Christ, but not when it refers to other people, is based on doctrinal prejudice rather than on literary convention. As the Latin proverb goes: *Corruptio optimi pessima*: The best, when corrupted, becomes the worst.

The decision to capitalize "he," "his" and "him" in reference to Jesus Christ has no basis in the foundational manuscripts. Koiné Greek, the language from which the New Testament is predominantly translated into our English versions, does not have capital letters (see *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol 13, p. 431). So the not-so-original Greek manuscripts from which the Bible is translated do not refer to Jesus Christ in capital letters. Rather, Bible translators capitalized "he" and "him" to conform to their doctrinal "makes Jesus look like God" convictions. Capitalization in Bible translation is more the result of religious conviction than of scholastic accuracy, conceived more out of doctrine than faithfulness to biblical narratives. For a blatant example, compare Matthew 21:9 with Psalm 118:26. Psalm 118:26 writes an uncapitalized "he": "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!" However, when Matthew 21:9 quotes Psalm 118:26, referring to Jesus as the "he" who "comes in the name of the LORD," Bible translators conveniently converted the lowercase "he" of Psalm 118:26 to a capitalized "He" in an effort to make Jesus appear divine. Lest a person make excuses, this is not a typographical error; Matthew 23:39 duplicates the exaggeration. This textual manipulation is blatant, clearly indicating that someone has dishonored the text.

Some might defend the Bible on the basis of this being a very small corruption. But any group who takes the Bible for a book of guidance finds themselves painted into a corner by the biblical caution that, "he who is unjust

in what is least is unjust also in much" (Luke 16:10). How, then, does this quote apply to the Bible scribes and translators? For if they, having been unjust in what is least, means they are, according to their own scripture, "unjust also in much," how can we trust the rest of their work?

One problem is that the Bible presents such different viewpoints that people can design a myriad religions around it. And in fact, that is exactly what they have done. Different theological camps have disagreed on which books should be included in the Bible. One camp's apocrypha is another's scripture. Even among those books that have been canonized, the many variant source texts lack uniformity. This lack of uniformity is so ubiquitous that *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* states, "It is safe to say that there is not one sentence in the NT in which the MS [manuscript] tradition is wholly uniform."^[1]

The fact is that there are over 5700 Greek manuscripts of all or part of the New Testament.^[2] Furthermore, "no two of these manuscripts are exactly alike in all their particulars.... And some of these differences are significant."^[3] Factor in roughly ten thousand manuscripts of the Latin Vulgate, add the many other ancient variants (i.e., Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Georgian, Ethiopic, Nubian, Gothic, Slavonic), and we have a lot of manuscripts that fail to correspond to one another in critical places, and which even contradict one another at times. Scholars estimate the number of manuscript variants in the hundreds of thousands, some estimating as high as 400,000.^[4] In Bart D. Ehrman's now famous words, "Possibly it is easiest to put the matter in comparative terms: there are more differences in our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament."^[5]

How this happened is not important here. What *is* important is that inconsistencies in the foundational manuscripts are so prevalent and profound that religious conclusions based upon the Bible can only be viewed through the lens of healthy skepticism. Consider the fact that none of the original manuscripts have survived from the early Christian period.^[6] ^[7] The most ancient complete manuscripts (Vatican MS. No. 1209 and the Sinaitic Codex) date from the fourth century, three hundred years after Jesus' ministry. But the originals are lost. And the copies of the originals? Also lost. Our most ancient manuscripts, in other words, are copies of the copies of the copies of nobody-knows-just-how-many copies of the originals.

Which is, of course, just one reason why they differ.

In the best of hands, copying errors would be no surprise. However, by the admission of scholars of Christianity, New Testament manuscripts were *not* in the best of hands. During the period of Christian origins, scribes were untrained, unreliable, incompetent, and in some cases illiterate.^[8] Those who were visually impaired could have made errors with look-alike letters and words, while those who were hearing-impaired may have erred in recording scripture as it was read aloud. Frequently scribes were overworked, and hence inclined to the errors that accompany fatigue.

In the words of Metzger and Ehrman, "Since most, if not all, of them [the scribes] would have been amateurs in the art of copying, a relatively large number of mistakes no doubt crept into their texts as they reproduced them."^[9] Worse yet, some scribes allowed doctrinal prejudice to influence their transmission of scripture.^[10] As Ehrman states, "The scribes who copied the texts changed them."^[11] More specifically, "The number of deliberate alterations made in the interest of doctrine is difficult to assess."^[12] And even more specifically, "In the technical parlance of textual criticism—which I retain for its significant ironies—these scribes ‘corrupted’ their texts for theological reasons."^[13]

Errors were introduced in the form of additions, deletions, substitutions and modifications, most commonly of words or lines, but occasionally of entire verses.^[14] ^[15]In fact, "numerous changes and accretions came into the text,"^[16] with the result that "all known witnesses of the New Testament are to a greater or lesser extent mixed texts, and even several of the earliest manuscripts are not free from egregious errors."^[17]

In *Misquoting Jesus*, Ehrman presents persuasive evidence that the story of the woman taken in adultery (John 7:53-8:12) and the last twelve verses of Mark were not in the original gospels, but added by later scribes.^[18] Furthermore, these examples "represent just two out of thousands of places in which the manuscripts of the New Testament came to be changed by scribes."^[19]

In fact, entire books of the Bible were forged.^[20] This doesn't mean their content is necessarily wrong, but it certainly doesn't mean that it is correct, either. What we can say for certain is that these weaknesses render the Bible unreliable as preservation of divine revelation.

So which books were forged? Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, 1 and 2 Peter, and Jude—a whopping nine of the twenty-seven New Testament books and epistles—are to one degree or another suspect.^[21] Many of the remaining books were authored anonymously. Incredibly enough, even the gospel authors are unknown.^[22]

Now, the list goes on, and those interested in exploring this topic can do so in any of the many books that focus upon this subject, including my own.

About the author:

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Footnotes:

- [1] Buttrick, George Arthur (Ed.). 1962 (1996 Print). *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. Volume 4. Nashville: Abingdon Press. pp. 594-595 (Under Text, NT).
- [2] Ehrman, Bart D. 2005. *Misquoting Jesus*. HarperCollins. P. 88.
- [3] Ehrman, Bart D. 2003. *Lost Christianities*. Oxford University Press. P. 78.
- [4] Ehrman, Bart D. *Misquoting Jesus*. P. 89.
- [5] Ehrman, Bart D. *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*. 2004. Oxford University Press. P. 12.
- [6] Ehrman, Bart D. *Lost Christianities*. P. 49.
- [7] Metzger, Bruce M. 2005. *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*. Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, D—Stuttgart. Introduction, p. 1.
- [8] Ehrman, Bart D. *Lost Christianities and Misquoting Jesus*.
- [9] Metzger, Bruce M. and Ehrman, Bart D. *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*. P. 275.
- [10] Ehrman, Bart D. *Lost Christianities*. P. 49, 217, 219-220.
- [11] Ehrman, Bart D. *Lost Christianities*. P. 219.
- [12] Metzger, Bruce M. and Ehrman, Bart D. *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*. P. 265. See also Ehrman, *Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*.
- [13] Ehrman, Bart D. 1993. *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*. Oxford University Press. P. xii.
- [14] Ehrman, Bart D. *Lost Christianities*. P. 220.
- [15] Metzger, Bruce M. *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*. Introduction, p. 3
- [16] Metzger, Bruce M. *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*. Introduction, p. 10.
- [17] Metzger, Bruce M. and Ehrman, Bart D. *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*. P. 343.
- [18] Ehrman, Bart D. *Misquoting Jesus*. P. 62-69.
- [19] Ehrman, Bart D. *Misquoting Jesus*. P. 68.
- [20] Ehrman, Bart D. *Lost Christianities*. Pp. 9-11, 30, 235-6.
- [21] Ehrman, Bart D. *Lost Christianities*. P. 235.
- [22] Ehrman, Bart D. *Lost Christianities*. P. 3, 235. Also, see Ehrman, Bart D. *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*. P. 49.

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The following is a summary of what we have covered to date in this series of articles:

- 1) Episode 1: The gospel known as 'John' almost certainly was not written by the disciple John;
- 2) Episode 2: Bible translators illegitimately capitalized 'him' in John 3:16 ("For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life") to make Jesus look like God;

3) Also in Episode 2: The Bible does not stand up to the basic requirements of reliability, and hence does not satisfy the standards of sacred scripture.

The last item in this list – number three – is critical. In order to give credence to the claims of John 3:16, the Bible itself has to stand up to critical analysis. It is that analysis that I continue here. The previous article was more scholastic; what follows is more common sense.

Let's start with the obvious. If the Bible is the word of God, then what should we make of verses that tell us they are *not* the word of God? Paradoxically, this is precisely what we find in 1 Corinthians 7:12: "But to the rest I, not the Lord, say . . ."—indicating that what follows was from the author (in this case, Paul), and not from God. So if nothing else, this section of the Bible, by Paul's own admission, is not the word of God. 1 Corinthians 1:16 points out that Paul could not remember if he baptized anybody other than Crispus, Gaius, and the household of Stephanas: "Besides, I do not know whether I baptized any other." Now, does this sound like God talking? Would God say, "Paul baptized Crispus, Gaius, and the household of Stephanas, and there may have been others. But that was a long time ago, and, well, you know, so much has happened since then. It's all kind of fuzzy to Me right now"?

1 Corinthians 7:25–26 records Paul as having written, "Now concerning virgins: I have no commandment from the Lord; yet I give judgment as one whom the Lord in His mercy has made trustworthy. *I suppose* therefore that this is good because of the present distress . . ." (*italics mine*). 2 Corinthians 11:17 reads, "What I speak, I speak not according to the Lord, but as it were, foolishly . . ." Again, does anybody believe that God talks like this? Paul admitted that he answered without guidance from God and without divine authority, and that he personally believed himself to be divinely trustworthy in one case but speaking foolishly in the other. Paul justified his presumption of authority with the words, "according to my judgment—and I think I also have the Spirit of God" (1 Corinthians 7:40). The problem is that a whole lot of people have claimed the "Spirit of God," while all the time doing some very strange and ungodly things. So should Paul's confidence be admired or condemned? However we answer this question, the point is that whereas human confidence wavers at times, such is not the case with the all-knowing, all-powerful Creator. God would never say, "I suppose . . ." as Paul does.

In essence, the Bible is its own worst critic.

If we view the Bible as revelation, including telling the story of Jesus Christ, then we have to wonder why it is so inconsistent. For example, when celebrities die, their final words are frequently immortalized. And yet, the Bible gives us two different accounts of Jesus' last words – Luke 23:46 states: "And when Jesus had cried out with a loud voice, he said, 'Father, *into Your hands I commit my spirit.*' Having said this, he breathed his last." But John

19:30 says something completely different: "So when Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, '*It is finished!*' And bowing his head, he gave up his spirit."

This is a bold and undeniable contradiction.

Jesus' most famous and respected teaching is probably the "Lord's Prayer," which Matthew 6:9–13 records as: "Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us **this day** our daily bread. And forgive us our **debts, as we forgive our debtors**. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. **For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**" But Luke 11:2–5 records the same prayer with some very crucial differences: "Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as *it is* in heaven. Give us **day by day** our daily bread. And forgive us our **sins, for we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us**. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one."

Hmm. Jesus Christ's most famous prayer, and the two Gospel writings that tell the tale disagree. The discrepancy is so great that The Jesus Seminar, a body of prominent biblical scholars, announced the only word of the Lord's Prayer that can be directly attributed to Jesus is "Father" (*Newsweek*, October 31, 1988, p. 80). This conclusion is startling, for it not only shakes one of the most accepted trees in the forest of Christian faith, but it questions that very tree's legitimacy.

Regarding the law, "Rabbi" Jesus taught Old Testament law. Furthermore, he taught the law would endure (till heaven and earth pass away): "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot [Greek *Iota*—the ninth letter of the Greek alphabet] or one tittle [a stroke or dot] will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled" (Matthew 5:17–18). Add to that: "But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments" (Matthew 19:17). So *that* is what Jesus taught. Now, what did Paul teach? Answer: justification by faith – the vain concept that belief in Jesus Christ cancels a person's sins. Paul didn't change just a jot or a tittle. No, he cancelled the entire law: "And by him [Jesus Christ] everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses" (Acts 13:39). A more permissive blanket statement would be hard to conceive. We can easily imagine the voice of the collective public screaming, "Please, let's have more of that!" And here it is: "But now we have been delivered from the law, having died [i.e., suffered] to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter" (Romans 7:6). Or, if I may freely paraphrase: "But now I tell you to forget this old law, the inconveniences of which we have lived with for too long, and live by the religion of our desires, rather than by the old, uncomfortable mandates of revelation." According to Paul, God's law was good enough for Moses and Jesus, but not for the rest of humankind.

Punch the 'skip' button. Nowhere in the Bible did Jesus teach the Trinity. In fact, he taught *tawhid* (divine unity). Read Mark 12:30, Matthew 22:37 and Luke 10:27: "The first of all the commandments is: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.'" But presto, change-o, Pauline theologians adopted the Trinity.

So Jesus' most important teachings – his last words, his prayer, the oneness of God, and our Creator's law for mankind – are all cancelled elsewhere in the Bible by Paul, or by Pauline theologians who followed in his wake. Which of Jesus' teachings, precisely, are *not* contradicted in the Bible?

Unreliability is such a common problem, the unindoctrinated audience doesn't know what to believe: II Samuel 24:1 reads, "Again the anger of the *LORD* was aroused against Israel, and He moved David against them to say, 'Go, number Israel and Judah.'" However, I Chronicles 21:1 states, "Now *Satan* stood up against Israel, and moved David to number Israel." Well, which was it? The Lord, or Satan? Both verses describe the same event in history, but one speaks of God and the other of Satan. There is a slight (like, total) difference. If a book of 'scripture' can't differentiate between God and Satan, the only thing we know for sure is that it's not pure, unadulterated revelation.

There are so many contradictions in the New Testament that authors have devoted books to this subject. For example, Matthew 2:14 and Luke 2:39 differ over whether Jesus' family fled to Egypt or to Nazareth (in Palestine). Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4 differ over the wording of the "Lord's Prayer." Matthew 11:13-14, 17:11-13 and John 1:21 disagree over whether John the Baptist was Elijah.

Things get worse when we enter the arena of the alleged crucifixion: Who carried the cross—Simon (Luke 23:26, Matthew 27:32, Mark 15:21) or Jesus (John 19:17)? Was Jesus dressed in a scarlet robe (Matthew 27:28) or a purple robe (John 19:2)? Did the Roman soldiers put gall (Matthew 27:34) or myrrh (Mark 15:23) in his wine? Was Jesus crucified before the third hour (Mark 15:25) or after the sixth hour (John 19:14-15)? Did Jesus ascend the first day (Luke 23:43) or not (John 20:17)?

These are only a few of a long list of scriptural inconsistencies, but they underscore the difficulty in trusting the New Testament as scripture. And if we can't trust the Bible as a whole, how can we trust any particular part of it, like, say . . . John 3:16, upon which Christians base their salvation?

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The lynchpin of John 3:16 and, for that matter, of the entire Christian concept of redemption by faith, is the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. John 3:16 tells us: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." On the other hand, a huge number of Religious Scholars tell us this isn't true. So who should we believe – the Bible, or Them? To begin with, we know who The Scholars are, whereas we have no idea who authored any of the gospels (as discussed in Part 1 of this series). Secondly, the Bible translators illegitimately capitalized 'him' in John 3:16 to make Jesus look like God (as discussed in Part 2 of this series). If you're paying attention, you noticed I did the same thing above, capitalizing 'Religious Scholars,' 'Them,' and 'The Scholars.' It makes these scholars look special, doesn't it? But that's just one way in which Bible translators deceive their audience. I admit, I did it as a ploy; they don't.

Lastly, what I have presented so far conforms both to reason and to common sense, unlike the Bible, which is internally inconsistent and factually unreliable (Parts 2 & 3 of this series).

In *this* episode I address the concepts of sacrifice and atonement, and the effortless salvation people seek through the Christian concept of redemption by faith.

The foundation of this concept rests upon the validity of Original Sin—the church's doctrine that children are born with the guilt of Adam's first sin, which we know is false, because Jesus taught the exact opposite: "Let the little children come to me, and do not forbid them, for of such is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:14). Now, how can "of such" be "the kingdom of heaven" if the un-baptized are hell-bound? Children are either born with original sin or are bound for the kingdom of heaven. The church can't have it both ways. Ezekiel 18:20 records, "The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself," and Deuteronomy 24:16 repeats the point. This is Old Testament, but it's not older than Adam! If original sin dated from the beginning with Adam and Eve, we wouldn't find the concept disavowed in *any* scripture of *any* later age!

Moving on to the concept of belief in Jesus' self-sacrifice as being sufficient for salvation, Jesus reportedly refutes this claim as follows: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Matthew 7:21) and "But if you want to enter into life (eternal life, that is—i.e., salvation) keep the commandments" (Matthew 19:17). 'James' was at odds with Paul over this doctrine, and reportedly taught the importance of righteous works: "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also" (James 2:26).

But where in the New Testament did Jesus counsel his followers that they could relax, for in a few days he would pay the price and they could all go to heaven on nothing more than belief? Nowhere. For that matter, when Jesus was allegedly resurrected why didn't he declare the atonement? Why didn't he announce that he had paid for the sins of the world, past, present and future? But he didn't, and we should wonder why. Could it be the atonement isn't true? Could it be that someone scribbled wishful thoughts into the margins of scripture?

It wouldn't be the first time.

So where did the 'Atonement' come from in the first place? And would anyone be surprised to hear the name, "Paul"? Another questionable doctrine coming from the same questionable source? So it would seem. Acts 17:18 reads, "Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him [Paul]. And some said, 'What does this babbler want to say?' Others said, 'He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods,' because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection."

Paul directly claims to have conceived the doctrine of resurrection as follows: "Remember that Jesus Christ, of the seed of David, was raised from the dead according to my gospel" (2 Timothy 2:8). Sure enough, the concept of Jesus Christ dying for the sins of humankind is found in the epistles of Paul (e.g., Romans 5:8–11 and 6:8–9), and nowhere else. Nowhere else? Not from Jesus? Not from the disciples? Is it possible that *they* neglected the critical details upon which Christian faith rests? Not likely.

So in one corner we have the true prophets, Jesus Christ included, teaching salvation through adhering to God's laws as conveyed through revelation—that is, salvation through faith and works. In the other corner we have the challenger, Paul, promising an effortless salvation following a life unrestricted by commandments—in other words, salvation through faith alone.

What can we imagine Jesus will say, upon his return, when he finds a group of his "followers" preferring Pauline theology to his own teachings? Perhaps Jesus will quote Jeremiah 23:32—"Behold, I am against those who prophesy false dreams," says the Lord, 'and tell them, and cause My people to err by their lies and by their recklessness. Yet I did not send them or command them; therefore they shall not profit this people at all,' says the Lord."

When Jesus *does* return, one thing we can be sure he is *not* going to do is congratulate his "followers" for throwing away everything he taught and doing the exact opposite, on the authority of Paul.

In the next episode, we will question why Christians believe John 3:16 in the face of so much evidence against it.

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To recap, in the last four episodes of this series we discussed the following regarding John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life":

- 1) The Gospel book of Christian scripture known as 'John' almost certainly was not written by Jesus' disciple John;
- 2) In John 3:16, as with elsewhere in the Bible, translators illegitimately capitalized 'him' to make Jesus look like God;
- 3) Because the Bible is internally inconsistent and factually unreliable, it does not fulfill the basic requirements expected of sacred scripture;
- 4) The foundational ideology (the alleged Crucifixion, Resurrection and Atoning sacrifice) is so flawed we cannot reasonably rely upon John 3:16 (or, for that matter, upon the Bible as a whole) for salvation.

Which brings us to a discussion of why anybody believes John 3:16 to be true, when so much evidence is stacked against it. The simple fact of the matter is that John 3:16 appeals to Christians, whether true or not. In the previous episode in this series, I discussed just a few of the fallacies of the concept of Jesus' atoning sacrifice. I saved the best for last, and it is this: According to the Bible, God doesn't even *want* a sacrifice. Now, let's leave aside the common-sense arguments (that forgiveness doesn't have a price; that one person cannot atone for another; that if God had wanted, He would have forgiven mankind on that basis alone; etc.) and dwell solely upon the fact that the Bible tells us God doesn't want sacrifice in the first place: Hosea 6:6 reads, "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice." Sure, this is Old Testament, but Matthew 9:13 and 12:7 both reference this verse, so it applies to the New Testament as well. So, what is the argument again? That God needed a sacrifice that He doesn't even want? This concept is problematic, at best.

There are plenty of other reasons why we shouldn't believe John 3:16, and one of the best is not that we can't believe John 3:16, but that we can't be sure about *anything* in the 'Gospel according to John.' Despite the fact that nobody even knows who authored 'John,' the Jesus Seminar analyzed the words attributed to Jesus in the Gospel of John and "were unable to find a single saying they could with certainty trace back to the historical Jesus. . . . The words attributed to Jesus in the Fourth Gospel are the creation of the evangelist for the most part."^[1] Now, why would 'the evangelist' do such a thing? We are told the reason is as follows: "Jesus' followers were inclined to adopt and adapt his words to their own needs. This led them to invent narrative contexts based

on their own experience, into which they imported Jesus as the authority figure."^[2] The Jesus Seminar documents hundreds of examples in the Gospel books, including cases where "the followers of Jesus borrowed freely from common wisdom and coined their own sayings and parables, which they then attributed to Jesus."^[3]

This does not discredit just John 3:16, but in fact it discredits *all* of 'John'. By extension, if the Bible is filled with contradictions, how can we know what is true and what isn't – *anywhere* in the Bible?

As the old saying goes, the whistle does not pull the train. Christians might like how John 3:16 sounds, but that does not make it true. In fact, the more we examine the verse, the more reasons we find to discredit it.

Another old saying is that the bait hides the hook. John 3:16 is the bait, through which evangelists hope to hook and reel people into their smug, and entirely illegitimate, conclusions. They tell us God gave His "only begotten Son," without critically analyzing this concept. If Jesus is the "only begotten Son of God," why does Psalms 2:7 say this about David: "The LORD has said to me, 'You are My Son, Today I have begotten you.'" Jesus the "only begotten son of God," with David a "son," "begotten" by God a scant forty generations earlier? The Bible can have one "only" of something, but not two "only"s of the same thing!

The Bible describes many people, Israel and Adam included, as "sons of God." Both 2 Samuel 7:13–14 and 1 Chronicles 22:10 read, "He (Solomon) shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his Father, and he shall be My son."

In the Bible, "only begotten" is translated from the ancient Greek *monogenes*.^[4] And yet, "Isaac is *monogenes* in Heb. 11:17."^[5] Ishmael was born fourteen years before Isaac, and both were alive when their father, Abraham, passed on. At no time was Isaac ever Abraham's "only begotten" son. So is "only begotten" a mistranslation of *monogenes*, or is Heb. 11:17 a mistake? If it's a mistranslation, then John 3:16 must be mistranslated as well. If it's a mistake, we can't trust the Bible as a whole (a repeating refrain in these discussions).

George Pettie once amended the old proverb, "To err is human, to forgive is divine . . ." by adding, "and to persist in error, beastly." The self-righteous, "I've got the Holy Spirit inside me and can do no wrong" attitude of the John 3:16'ers is offensive for as many reasons as it is wrong. For one thing, it sounds too much like the lawyer's maxim to argue facts and law when they serve the purpose, and holler when they don't.

If I am permitted to echo Voltaire's conclusion: Doubt is not a pleasant condition, but certainty in the face of contrary evidence is an absolutely absurd one.

Despite the strength of the evidence against John 3:16, most Christians refuse to acknowledge the illegitimacy of the verse. And maybe non-Christians should accept that.

Matthew 5:9 reports Jesus as having said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God." So perhaps we should forget about trying to win this argument, and make peace over it. If we can't unite on creeds, let's at least unite on kind and charitable deeds. Let's become "blessed peacemakers" who are called "sons of God." Then, let's point out that this is just one more biblical verse that contradicts John 3:16's exclusive "Son of God" concept. Nothing says we can't make peace, and continue to politely press our point at the same time. But that, to me, is an important element to any religious dialogue: Keep it light and polite, but maintain focus.

About the author:

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Footnotes:

[1] Funk, Robert W., Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar. *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*. p. 10.

[2] Funk, Robert W., p. 21.

[3] Funk, Robert W., p. 22.

[4] Kittel, Gerhard and Gerhard Friedrich (editors). 1985. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Paternoster Press Ltd. p. 607.

[5] Ibid