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The story of Christianity and its ubiquitousness is nothing short of fascinating. Numerous scholars, historians, philosophers, and professors of academia through the centuries have tried to reconcile the evidence for Christianity with the changing world, the injustices of the world, and the various other religions that demand to be explained. A question that is often asked within academia, and that I often ask myself is, “Is Christianity true?” That is to say, do we have ample evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ? Furthermore, are the New Testament gospels accurate tellings of Christ’s life, or zealous fabrications from early Christian writers that aimed to spread a sensational story? Bart Erhman and Hugo Mendez methodically and thoughtfully dissect the evidence within their book, *The New Testament*—offering differing explanations, interpretations, and literary lenses for the texts within Christ’s day in a contemporary and digestible manner. Nevertheless, Erhman and Mendez make noteworthy claims within the textbook, some under an atheist or agnostic presupposition. In this essay, I am to refute and remonstrate against their claim that, “...early Christians were not particularly concerned that stories about Jesus were being changed...” (Erhman and Mendez 87). Rather, the early Christians, although illiterate, were concerned with the facts surrounding Jesus, as present in Paul’s letters and commitment to accuracy.

Before I state why I disagree with their claim, it is crucial to understand the full context of what Erhman and Mendez are saying. They reason such:

The notion that the Gospels contain at least some stories that were changed over the years is not pure speculation; in fact, we have hard evidence of this preserved in the Gospels themselves (we will examine some of this evidence in a moment). We also have reason to think that early Christians were not particularly concerned that stories about Jesus were being changed...Even though we as twenty-first-century persons tend to think that something cannot be true unless it happened, ancient Christians, along with a lot of other ancient people, did not think this way. For them, something could be true whether or not it had happened. What mattered more than historical fact was what we might call religious or moral truth. (Ehrmann and Mendez 87)

Erhman and Mendez go on to explain the conflicting accounts of stories within the gospels, and how each gospel has the same accounts of a certain story, but strikingly different details that may change the meaning all-together.

While there is ample evidence to support this, I disagree with them using it as an iron-clad blanket statement to dismiss the reliability of the gospels. Yes, there is evidence that Christians may have tampered with the texts and or the oral message being spread in order to fit a narrative about Christ, but there is also overwhelming evidence to support the fact that an early Christian creed was spread amongst established communities following the death of Christ—effectively creating a web of mini-churches throughout the Mediterranean and Asia-Minor that could agree on one common message. To support this claim, I want to emphasize the importance of Paul, (previously Saul before his conversion) and his research into early Christianity.

We know that one of the earliest Christian creeds was chronicled by Paul of Tarsus in his letter to the Corinthians, and it may be older than the New Testament itself. After being blinded

on the way to Damascus, Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians that he spent time in Arabia, and then returned to Damascus as early as right after the resurrection of Christ to as late as three to five years after the resurrection of Christ. Paul then spends time in Jerusalem. It was there where he relentlessly questioned eyewitness accounts of Christ's resurrection, as his aim was to obtain the facts, rather than contribute to legend. Paul, when chronicling his time in Jerusalem, uses the word (*anakrithēis*) in Greek, meaning formal inquiry or inquisition. This translation tells us that his questioning can be interpreted as formal interviews, grilling eyewitness accounts in interrogations to obtain the truth. From his inquiry, we get the first creed of early Christians documented in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, 1 Corinthians 15:3–5. It states as follows:

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. (1 Cor. 15.3–5 *New Jerusalem Bible*)

One might make the objection, say Erhman or Mendez, that this early creed is inaccurate or incomplete, and that it doesn't fully encompass the story of Jesus. Going along with the idea that 98% of Christ's followers were illiterate during the time he was alive, he spoke in many parables –the birds dwelt among the trees and the trees are like the kingdom of God, turn the other cheek, don't waste your talents, and so forth. What is important is that within the early church a simple framework was established and circulated amongst the believers, something tangible, cut and dry, and easy to pass onward. Paul henceforth received the simple creed and documented it.

I would argue what supports my claim further is that Paul, a former Pharisee of the law, had much to lose by converting to Christianity on his own accord, and interviewing various early Christians. Not only that, he most likely would have addressed the bombastic claims about Jesus

in early Christian circles, much like he did in his letters that we have in the New Testament today. While it may be easy to dismiss the oral traditions of early Christians as legend or lore regarding Jesus Christ, it is also important to lend some credibility to the early movement and their commitment to accuracy, especially Paul of Tarsus. That being said, I do have a tremendous amount of respect for Ehrman and Mendez because of their unbiased and holistic approach to the gospels, apocrypha, and the literary style of 1st century Palestine. This makes their content easily digestible and clear to comprehend. Nevertheless, while there is still much to be discovered and debated regarding the movement of early Christianity, it would be worthwhile to lend some credibility to the gospel writers and the oral tradition that was passed onward, while also observing the history through an unbiased lens.

#### Work Cited

*The New Jerusalem Bible*. Edited by Henry Wansbrough, Doubleday, 1985.

Ehrman, Bart D., and Hugo Mendez. *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to Early Christian Writings*. 8th ed., Oxford University Press, 2024.