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Ehrman on Abiathar: Is the Bible Ever Mistaken?

by Daryl E. Witmer

Bart D. Ehrman was born in 1956. He grew up near Lawrence, KS. At the age of 15 he claimed to have been spiritually born again. In 1973 he enrolled at **Moody Bible Institute** and then went on to attend **Wheaton College** in Wheaton IL, graduating with a B.A. in 1978. His profile as a young Bible-believing evangelical thinker was nearly impeccable. But then Bart Ehrman went to Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey — and everything changed.

One day a Princeton professor by the name of Cullen Story assigned Ehrman to reconcile the apparent discrepancy between 1 Samuel 21:1-6 and Mark 2:26. The 1 Samuel text makes it clear that **Ahimelech** was the priest when David entered the Temple to acquire bread for his starving men. But in Mark 2, Jesus seems to be saying that when this incident occurred, **Abiathar** (the son of Ahimelech) was high priest. So how can both accounts be correct?

In order to resolve this seeming conflict, Ehrman wrote a detailed, complex, and somewhat convoluted argument based on the Greek text, contending that what was really meant was that this event took place in a part of Scripture that portrays **Abiathar** as a main character.

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He submitted his paper, hoping for the best. But when his work was returned he immediately spotted a single-line comment that Professor Story had made at the end of the paper. It simply read, "Maybe Mark just made a mistake."

Bart Ehrman said that this comment "went straight through me" and resulted, after much reflection, in his finally concluding, "Hmm. . .maybe Mark *did* make a mistake." He says, "Once I made that admission, the floodgates opened." It wasn't long before he began to regard the whole Bible as being full of errors. He then published his conclusions, and eventually wrote an entire book on the subject, entitled *Misquoting Jesus*.



In fact, Dr. Ehrman, a long-time professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, went on to write many other books. He has become proficient (and popular) at portraying the Bible as a flawed and failed book. *God's Problem* (©2008 Harper One), denigrates Scripture for providing no adequate response to the issues of suffering and evil.

It seems possible that Bart Ehrman's main mission in life would have been altered had he only realized that resolving the "Abiathar issue" was not so impossible, and certainly did *not* require anyone to conclude that either Mark or Jesus had made a mistake. Other intellectually credible resolutions have been proposed. Read on.

Notice that when Jesus spoke and Mark wrote of David's visit to the Temple for showbread, the text says that this visit occurred "in the time

of Abiathar . . ." That phrase does not necessarily imply that Abiathar was holding office at the time. (The truth is, he wasn't!) It simply means that David entered the Temple during the time that Abiathar (who eventually became a noted priest) was living.

For instance, if I was to say, "Log cabins were common in President Lincoln's time" — does that mean that no one ever built or saw a log cabin until Abraham Lincoln became President in March of 1861? Hardly. Lincoln grew up in a log cabin!

In somewhat the same way, Abiathar was an influential high priest in his day — even more so than his father. So it is not unusual that Jesus might have used Abiathar as a reference point even before he actually became high priest. David's visit occurred *during the time* of Abiathar, although it did not occur *during the tenure* of Abiathar as high priest.

For every *apparent* Bible discrepancy a reasonable resolution exists. The Bible, as it originally came from God to men, never contradicts itself. In the original autographs, the Bible is 100% inerrant. Why doesn't everyone see it that way? Well, a whole lot depends on how one approaches the Bible in the first place. It seems that Professor Story and then, no doubt due to his influence, Bart Ehrman, came to view the Bible skeptically. They were not, *and are not*, looking for solutions. They seem to prefer to *presume* that the Bible is in error.

In *The Big Book of Bible Difficulties*, Geisler & Howe state: "The Bible, like any other book, should be presumed to be telling us what the authors said and heard. Negative critics of the Bible begin with just the opposite presumption. Little wonder, then, that they conclude the Bible is riddled with error." And little wonder that, in this case, instead of *The Gospel According to Mark* and Jesus being wrong, it is Professor Story and Bart Ehrman who are wrong.

RECOMMENDED: *Misquoting Truth* by Timothy Paul Jones, ©2007 IVP