

Burned-Out Biblicalist?—Thoughts about Bart D. Ehrman

[A PRE-SCRIPT.

God willing, Marie and I will be travelling to Augsburg, Germany, this coming Monday (3.23) for a week-long conference sponsored by the Lutheran World Federation. Its theme is “Theology in the Life of Lutheran Churches: Transformative Perspectives and Practices Today.”

My contribution—you’ve heard it before—is titled: “LUTHERANISM’S CRYING NEED: A MISSION THEOLOGY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY. Luther’s Own Mission Theology—Contemporary Lutheranism’s Best-Kept Secret.”

Should you wish to see the current version of that proposal, it’s available on the conference website. http://lutheranworld.org/What_We_Do/DTS/TLC_Augsburg/Papers.html#SemII

Click on “Seminar II.”

Scroll down to that title.

I didn’t make the cut to present to the plenary. But one former student of mine did! Among the 100 participants—from 30-plus countries—listed, there are also half a dozen others like that. So not to worry.

From Sunday evening (3.21) till Saturday morning (4.4) don’t expect to find us home.

For the two ThTh postings while we’re gone, Phil Kuehnert, pastor at Zion Lutheran Church in Fairbanks, Alaska, will be the Thursday Theologian, with two contributions from his “permafrost” parish up there on the tundra. They’re already in

the pipeline(!) and they are potent.]

Colleagues,

It seems as though every time Bart Ehrman writes another book about the New Testament – ten by my count, the last one just this month–Terry Gross interviews him on her National Public Radio program “Fresh Air.” This time, according to the NPR web site, it was 38 minutes and 19 seconds on March 4, 2009 for his just-published “Jesus Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (And Why We Don’t Know About Them).” Since Terry Gross is one of the superstars on NPR and attracts zillions of listeners, Ehrman gets an audience that his publisher’s own PR staff would die for. They don’t have to. Terry does it for them. But . . .

But every time Terry gives Bart a “fresh” airing on Fresh Air, it’s nothing fresh anymore. He always confesses that he’s a former “genuine” fundamentalist (formed in his youthful faith by Moody Bible Institute and Wheaton College) and has now become an agnostic. So book after book—to use the classical phrase—is his “apologia pro vita sua,” his defense for why he’s now an agnostic. And it borders on boredom. But he gives his new books new (and teasing) titles, like the longish one above, so Terry has him back once more. But it’s the same message over and over again: “what you Christians believe about Jesus is built on sand. You should all become agnostics like me.” Some sample titles are “God’s Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question” and “Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why.”

My hunch is that Terry gets some Schadenfreude from his repeated demolition efforts. It sometimes surfaces in her interviews—and possibly ditto for Bart. And Terry is not averse to giving

evidence in interviews of her own Jewish heritage (or is hers a Jewish agnosticism?)

Back to Bart. After Moody and Wheaton he went then to Princeton Seminary for graduate study, ready to lance the liberals he knew he'd find there. But lo and behold, they "splained" to him the good sense of using historical critical scholarship for reading the NT. Even more, they convinced him. And with that his former faith—a literalist faith in the historical inerrancy of every word in the Bible—collapsed. And since he didn't find "faith in Christ's promise"—the REAL faith offered in the NT—to supplant his "other" faith in Biblicism's "other" Gospel, he abandoned the entire Christian enterprise. He even went back to his former congregation and told the SRO audience why he was now an agnostic. Faith must be built on historical facts—and he now has them. All other ground is sinking sand.

Bart D. Ehrman has a very "bully pulpit" for proclaiming his agnostic faith. He is the James A. Gray Distinguished Professor and Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His books make him a regular on the New York Times bestseller list. But "new" it is no longer. It's the old line of burned-out fundamentalists. And it's also not "fresh air" any longer, Terry, but tired and stale repetition: "Each Gospel writer has a different message. Besides that, the original manuscripts (none of which still exist) have been 'changed' by partisan copyists and interpreters already back in ancient days. So which one can you trust? None of them." And with that, according to his lights, the Christian faith goes poof.

Chris Repp's posting of two weeks ago [TT559] did indeed give us a "fresh" way to cope with the broad variety we encounter in the NT texts. But Chris heard Good News coming from those texts—even with names and places and nuances varied and diverse. Ehrman's

youthful fundamentalist faith—if true to form—was looking “just for the facts,” the right stuff to believe as he read the Bible. When Princeton led him to see that the facts were hard to verify—yes, sometimes impossible to verify—his faith collapsed. No wonder, his Biblicist faith was itself what Jesus calls “a house built on sand.”

Had he heard Christ’s own words speaking to HIM in those texts he’s studying (for example, in Matt. 9) “You’ll be glad to hear this, Bart, your sins are forgiven,” he might have found a rock, THE rock, on which to build his house of faith. But from his unending stream of “Don’t you believe it” books it is clear that his house of unfaith hasn’t yet found the rock.

Agnostic “faith” (an “I don’t know” faith) admits at the very outset that it’s working with sand. “I don’t know anything solid to build a faith on.” From Terry’s interview with Bart earlier this month about his latest book, we see that he’s still in the sandbox there in North Carolina, despite his academic and popular renown and royalty checks. This newest book is another sandcastle, marvelous in structure and design. Terry enjoys having him give her a tour around the castle. But it’s all made of sand. You’ll never survive any stormy weather—surely not the “Sturm und Drang” now afflicting our entire world—if you take up residence in Ehrman’s edifice.

Even more important is this, I think. The fact that he elicits such a huge fan club—NYT bestseller, guaranteed(?) “Fresh Air” interviews, etc.—to join him in playing (or agonizing) in his sandbox is another signal that the USA is a mission field. A wide one. In this case mission to a specific sector of our people. How to articulate the Good News of Christ’s Promise as something Good and something New for burned-out Biblicists, who apparently never heard it yet. And their number is not limited to Moody or Wheaton graduates like Ehrman. They’re also members

in all the mainline churches—if, like Ehrman, they haven't already left.

Should any of you on this listserve have resources for this specific mission field, let me know and we can pass them around.

And to Terry Gross (if this should ever get to her): Give us a break. So Ehrman has a one-string banjo. So do many of us. Me too. But you've given us his melody many times. We non-agnostics can now hum his tune ourselves. Enough already! How about this? Lori Cornell is the Bible Study guru for our Crossings website. She's moved beyond Biblicism and hasn't burned out into agnosticism. She's gotchutzpah not unlike your own. Why not interview her for a change? You would enjoy it. It's called fairness. Justice. Equal time. That even-hand which we regularly enjoy when listening to you on Fresh Air—with the possible exception of Bart Ehrman interviews. Fair is fair.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder