

The Right Way to Debate Bart Ehrman

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Lydia McGrew reviews a recent debate with Bart Ehrman, and argues that Bible scholar Peter J Williams offers a model for dispensing common sense



The Big Conversation from Unbelievable? recently aired a debate between New Testament scholars Peter Williams and Bart Ehrman on “The Story of Jesus: Are the Gospels Historically Reliable?” Williams was taking the “yes” side of that question and Ehrman the “no” side. The skeptical Ehrman is a well-known, seasoned debater, likely to make any opponent nervous, but Williams handled him with a rare combination of nuance and boldness.

The hallmark of Williams’ responses to Ehrman was his use of common sense, both in presenting his own case and in responding to Ehrman’s objections. Williams’ case for the reliability of the Gospels in this debate is based in part upon a compendium of fascinating external confirmations, such as name statistics, measurements, and topography. *Pace* Ehrman, these small details do constitute evidence that, as Williams says in his book *Can We Trust the Gospels?*, the authors knew their stuff. The small, difficult things that the evangelists get right are all the more impressive given the major upheavals in social customs and culture in Palestine, and the dispersal of the inhabitants, after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. (See here for more on that point.)

This emphasis on details is highly relevant to Ehrman’s attempts to characterize the Gospels as unreliable because they were, he says, written at multiple removes from the events they describe and hence corrupted over time by a “telephone game” process of transmission. In making this argument Ehrman repeatedly tries to emphasize the fact that the Gospels were written down several decades after their events. Williams rightly counters by pointing out that the Gospels do not have specific dates on them and that we should look at the evidences within them of their coming from those close to the events. Even though Luke, for example, was not an eyewitness of Jesus’ ministry, it does not follow that Luke recorded stories that had been repeated many times as in the telephone game--a point Ehrman repeatedly ignores.

Williams’ interaction with Ehrman is marked by not making unnecessary concessions to Ehrman’s skepticism. For example, when Ehrman alleges contradictions in the Gospels, Williams applies a real-world imagination to show how various accounts could reasonably all be true. For some reason, Ehrman chooses to take his stand on the references to Judas’s death in Matthew 27:5 and Acts 1:18, alleging an irreconcilable contradiction. Williams sensibly points out that Acts 1:18 itself is clearly incomplete, since one’s intestines would not normally burst out merely from falling. This point

leaves open the real possibility that a rope burst and that Judas' partially decayed body fell from a height, perhaps striking some object on the way down and hence falling prone. In this sense we can regard Matthew's reference to hanging as *explaining* the reference in Acts to the unpleasant bursting of Judas's body, and the two accounts are complementary. Williams does not insist on this particular scenario but points out that the data clearly underdetermine the precise nature of the events; hence, some conjecture is inevitable if we want to make a reasonable suggestion about what happened. Though Ehrman tries to portray this as a desperate measure undertaken under the grip of religious commitment, it should be obvious to the impartial viewer that it is instead a responsible approach to historical reconstruction.

What Williams does *not* do in debating Ehrman is as noteworthy as what he does do. Unlike evangelical scholars whom I examine in my own work, Williams does not suggest that the Gospel authors engaged in creative fact-changing as (allegedly) permitted by the literary and historical standards of their time. Confronted by Ehrman's signature argument from silence against the historicity of Jesus' self-descriptions in the Gospel of John, Williams does *not* suggest that Jesus never recognizably said those things in history and that they are John's creative extrapolations based on entirely different scenes and sayings in the Synoptic Gospels. (I encourage readers interested in evaluating these other approaches to have a look at my new book, *The Mirror or the Mask: Liberating the Gospels From Literary Devices*, currently available for pre-order.) What this debate shows is that such hyper-complex theorizing is unnecessary and in fact a bad idea in responding sensibly and strongly to Ehrman's attempted challenges.

History vs. 'history'

I was glad to see Williams emphasizing that what is admitted to be true by history departments is often skewed by criteria that tend towards false negatives--judgements that something is not historical or authentic when it really is. Williams shrewdly points out that this skeptical bent in the discipline tends to punish false negatives lightly while punishing false positives heavily, and he even pointed out that this is true in areas other than Gospels scholarship. Hence, the reputation of a scholar who hastily judged the Dead Sea Scrolls to be inauthentic suffered very little, though a scholar who incorrectly accepted the Hitler diaries as authentic suffered much more heavily.

Here I would use some slightly different terminology from Williams'. Williams identifies history as what history departments do and hence says that he is not "doing history." At the same time, he rejects the insinuation that he is relying on arational considerations. Instead, he argues that he is trying to discover what is *rational* to believe. I would word this point slightly differently. I would say that good history is rational history. Hence, Williams is doing the kind of thing that history departments *should* be doing even if they don't do it, and in that sense he is doing history.

Williams also points out that the biases in historical Jesus scholarship are subtle but consistent. It is not, he emphasizes, so much a blatant anti-supernatural bias but rather a set of preferences and faulty standards that tend toward skepticism. This is an important point, since Ehrman and others will often imply that only a clear bias against the supernatural can be called a bias at all. I have said for some time that historical Jesus scholarship has baked in a set of anti-standards, including a preference for complex redactive or literary theories over commonsense theories. These biases also include the prejudicial treatment of harmonization as a religious practice--a characteristic Ehrman shares in full. Countering these faulty standards means doing better history.



Ehrman's 'overcalls'

Ehrman has a tendency in debate to overcall the blow, and that is on display here in at least two places. First, he makes the following astonishingly incorrect statement: “We know what happens in oral traditions, and what happens is you save the little details that you get right, but you can get the entire story wrong.” Notice that Ehrman is not only claiming that in oral tradition the big story is sometimes significantly warped. He’s implying that it is *common* to find in oral tradition that small, difficult details are *correctly retained* while the big-picture story is *wrong*. Set aside for the moment the fact that Ehrman is ignoring a point Williams made frequently--that the Gospels may well not represent “oral tradition” in the sense that their stories are at many removes from the events. Ehrman’s claim here is unsupportable even on its own terms.

It is certainly contrary to common sense that difficult, small details of a setting would be preserved correctly by oral repetition while the central story is quite wrong. It is also contrary to Ehrman’s own practice in this debate and to his statements elsewhere. For example, in this debate he fully admits that Judas did betray Jesus and “came to an untimely end” connected with the field in Jerusalem. In other words, he believes that the authors did not get the whole story wrong while getting small details right. In *Jesus Before the Gospels*, p. 185, Ehrman also agrees that repeated oral tradition is *more* likely to retain a larger “gist” than smaller details. This is also consonant with research cited by, e.g., Richard Bauckham (*Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 2nd edition, p. 333).

While Ehrman and his preferred sources are likely to be more pessimistic about whether or not memory and repeated tradition will sometimes get the big picture wrong, what Ehrman himself has never cited any support for is a claim that it is common for smaller details *rather than* the big picture to be retained correctly. That improbable assertion in this debate also seems to assume a feedback loop whereby tellers know which little details to save (“save the little details that you get right”). But elsewhere in this same debate Ehrman states that, in oral cultures, there’s “no way to check it because there’s no writing.” And if one did (improbably) have a way to know which details were right and to save them, why would one warp the main story instead?



The unsupported claim that details are *more* likely than the big picture to be preserved looks like an opportunistic overcall on Ehrman's part to try to deflect Williams' argument about the accuracy of small details in the Gospels. But as the saying goes, that which can be asserted without evidence (and in this case, contrary to evidence) can be summarily dismissed. In fact, as Williams implies, if the Gospels are accurate on small matters of weights and measures, social customs, name statistics (which would be difficult to get right deliberately), and more, they are all the more likely to be right about larger aspects of their stories.

Ehrman also overcalls when he makes a developmental claim. Though he often emphasizes the fact that Jesus makes more explicit claims to deity in John than the Synoptics record, and though he is very fond of a (poor) argument from silence based on that fact, in this debate he also goes farther. He claims that Jesus in the Synoptics is focused on warning about the kingdom of God and the danger of destruction *rather than* on his own identity. On this reading, Jesus in the Synoptics is a second version of John the Baptist, warning people to flee from the wrath to come and enter the kingdom but telling us little about who he is, while Jesus in John is entirely self-absorbed.

I sometimes worry that claims about high Christology in the Synoptics are exaggerated. In some scholars (though not in Williams) this is intended to be a substitute for defending John's accuracy. The idea for those scholars is that we can ignore Johannine Christology, since it is controversial with someone like Ehrman, and get everything we want about Jesus' deity out of the Synoptics--a strategy I strongly disagree with. But here, Ehrman makes a wider variety of evidence relevant by his own overstatement. Williams answers this with a number of relevant points, including Jesus' claim to the authority to forgive sins, his presenting himself as the Good Shepherd, and his inducing others to ask who he is, all in the Synoptics.

I would not agree with every single one of Williams' instances; for example, I am inclined to think that when Jesus says, "It is I" in Mark 6:50 he is merely trying to calm the disciples' fears, not to make an "I am" claim to deity. But on the other hand, there are even more Synoptic passages that support Williams' overall point about Jesus' exalted self-concept: Among others, Jesus' focus on his own identity in Mark 8:27-30, the so-called Johannine Thunderbolt (Matt. 11:25-27), where he says that no one knows the Father except through himself, and his self-portrayal as the king who determines people's final destinies based on their treatment of his followers (Matt. 25:31-46). Contra Ehrman, in all four Gospels Jesus is strongly focused on his own identity. This developmental claim, like others, turns out to be based upon cherry-picked data.



Ehrman's probabilistic switch

At one point in the debate, Ehrman brings up a hypothetical scenario in which an investigator 2,000 years from now comes upon a story about two men, Bart Ehrman and Peter Williams, who travel through London to a debate that never happens. Archaeology confirms the existence of specific train lines and minor locations mentioned in the account. (The existence of London is hardly relevant. Williams is not claiming to confirm the Gospels by a big, easy fact like the mere existence of Jerusalem.) In the scenario, the story continues falsely by claiming that a gas leak caused an explosion that destroyed Westminster, preventing the debate. It's unclear what point this hypothetical is supposed to make. If it is supposed to show merely that it is *possible* for there to be a false big-picture story attached to correct small details, no one disputes that. But for a story that presents itself as historical, as the Gospels certainly do, that is not the best way to bet. Would the later researcher be rational to think that the gas leak explosion took place? He very well might be. And we are trying to be rational.

The ironic thing is that, while Ehrman himself brings up bare possibilities to justify skepticism, he thinks that that is what others are doing. When, for example, Williams suggests that perhaps Judas's body fell prone from a height and burst open, Ehrman calls this an "implausible scenario that never happened." But why think that? A hanging body would never fall forward on its face? A body could never be found in such a position that others would say that it fell "headlong"? (Acts does not say or imply that Judas literally flipped upside down and landed right on the top of his head.) The implausible scenario is the one in which a hoaxer, for unknown reasons, makes up a story of a massive gas explosion, complete with perfect details about the train line and bridge from Wimbledon to Vauxhall, to the confounding of historians 2,000 years later. Someone here is trying to save a theory by suggesting scenarios that would probably never happen, but it isn't Williams.

Ehrman is a formidable debate opponent for many reasons, not least the aggressive rudeness that causes him to interrupt Williams not once but *three times* during Williams' designated time for closing remarks. But those who confront him should not be afraid to push back with reason and common sense. Peter Williams' fact-based method gives us an example of the right way to debate Bart Ehrman.

Watch The Big Conversation between Bart Ehrman & Peter J Williams - <https://www.thebigconversation.show/episode-3-the-story-of-jesus>

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