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# The Greatest Controversies of Early Christian History

Course Guidebook

Professor Bart D. Ehrman

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill



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**P**rofessor Bart D. Ehrman is the James A. Gray Distinguished Professor at The University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill, where he has taught since 1988. He completed his undergraduate work at Wheaton College and received his M.Div. and Ph.D. from Princeton Theological Seminary. Before taking his position at UNC, Professor Ehrman taught at Rutgers University.

Professor Ehrman has published dozens of book reviews and scholarly articles for academic journals. He has written or edited 27 books, including 4 best sellers on *The New York Times* list: *Misquoting Jesus: The Story behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*; *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer*; *Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (and Why We Don't Know about Them)*; and *Forged: Writing in the Name of God—Why the Bible's Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are*. Professor Ehrman also has served as president of the Society of Biblical Literature, Southeastern Region; book review editor of the *Journal of Biblical Literature*; editor of the Scholars' Press monograph series *The New Testament in the Greek Fathers*; and coeditor in chief for the journal *Vigiliae Christianae*.

Professor Ehrman has received several teaching awards, including the John William Pope Center Spirit of Inquiry Award, the UNC Students' Undergraduate Teaching Award, the Phillip and Ruth Hettleman Prize for Artistic and Scholarly Achievement by Young Faculty, and the Bowman and Gordon Gray Professorship (awarded for excellence in undergraduate teaching).

For The Great Courses, Professor Ehrman has taught *The New Testament*; *History of the Bible: The Making of the New Testament Canon*; *Lost*

*Christianities: Christian Scriptures and the Battles over Authentication; From Jesus to Constantine: A History of Early Christianity; The Historical Jesus; and After the New Testament: The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers.* ■

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# The Greatest Controversies of Early Christian History

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## Scope:

Even though early Christianity is one of the most studied fields in the entire discipline of religious studies, numerous controversies continue to puzzle both scholars and laypeople. This course examines 24 of these controversies to show why they have fascinated students of the Christian religion and to attempt to resolve them with academic rigor. In terms of its chronological scope, the course spans the time from the historical Jesus—beginning with his birth around 4 B.C.E.—up to the time of the emperor Constantine in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, when Christianity was turned into a legal and much favored religion in the Roman Empire.

The course begins with controversies surrounding the birth and young life of Jesus, about which we have a record in two of the gospels of the New Testament (Matthew and Luke) and in later noncanonical accounts, such as the Proto-Gospel of James. Two of the most pressing issues concern “common knowledge” about Jesus that has been called into question by scholars: Was Jesus really born in Bethlehem? And was his mother really a virgin? We also ask whether he had a twin brother.

From the birth of Jesus, we turn to his life. Since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, scholars have asked whether references to Jesus can be found in the scrolls, or whether Jesus was connected with the community that produced them. Is either possibility probable? And is it true that Jesus, like the producers of the scrolls, believed that he was living at the end of time and that the world would end within his own generation?

Apart from the community of the scrolls, what can we say about Jesus’s companions? Was Mary Magdalene a particularly close disciple, with whom Jesus had a personal relationship? Is it possible, in fact, that he was married, whether to her or to someone else?

From the life of Jesus, we move to the reports surrounding his betrayal, death, and resurrection. With respect to his betrayal, if we grant that it was

Judas Iscariot who turned Jesus over to the authorities, why did he do so? And even more intriguing, what is it that Judas betrayed? When Jesus was executed, was it because of Jewish opposition? Did the Jews kill Jesus? And what about Pontius Pilate? Are the later rumors that he became a follower of Jesus plausible?

Arguably the greatest controversy of Jesus's life has to do with its aftermath, when his disciples claimed that he had been raised from the dead. What is it that drove them to say so? Did they actually discover his tomb to be empty? Did they have visions of him after his death?

We move from the historical Jesus to the responses to Jesus among people after his day. The early Christians maintained that Jesus was the suffering messiah who had been predicted by scripture, but non-Christian Jews insisted that the Hebrew Bible never spoke of a future messiah who would suffer. Which of these views is correct? It was the apostle Paul more than anyone else who proclaimed the death and resurrection of Jesus as the suffering messiah who brought salvation to the world. Did Paul represent the same religious views as Jesus himself? Given the way Christianity developed theologically, does it make better sense to say that Paul, rather than Jesus, was the "founder" of Christianity?

What can we say about the authors of the New Testament? Were the gospels actually written by the apostles, or are their authors unknown? And what about the other books of the New Testament? Scholars have long argued that some of them were not written by the authors whose names are attached to them, that, for example, some of the letters allegedly by Paul and Peter were not actually written by Paul and Peter. Could there be forgeries in the New Testament?

The most intriguing book of the New Testament is the Apocalypse of John. Does it predict what will happen in our own future, or is that a misreading of the book?

The early Christian movement was remarkably diverse. Is it possible that the early Christian Gnostics actually represent the earliest form of the religion? And do the Gnostic gospels give us an accurate vision of who Jesus really was? In later times, a number of legends sprang up about the apostles of

Jesus, for example, that Thomas was the missionary to India and that Peter was crucified upside down. Is there any historical value in these legends? When these apostles were engaged in their missionary activities, they faced opposition from both pagans and Jews. Why were the early Christians persecuted? Was Christianity illegal in the Roman Empire?

We then turn to the question of whether the Old Testament should be considered a Christian book, and if so, in what sense is it Christian? We also look at the most important theological question in traditional Christianity: Where did the idea of the Trinity come from? Did the earliest Christians believe that there were three persons in the Godhead yet only one God?

The books that eventually became the New Testament were circulated in handwritten copies. Do we know what the authors originally wrote, given the fact that the thousands of surviving copies all contain mistakes—many thousands of mistakes? And how did we get the 27 books that became the New Testament? Was this a decision made by the emperor Constantine or by a church council? When was it made, and what were the grounds for making it?

The earliest years of the Christian religion witnessed enormous controversies, and the controversies have not died out even today. The course concludes by considering why Christianity, in particular, is prone to foster controversy and why it will probably do so for all time to come. ■