

## THESE ARE WRITTEN

Bart Ehrman is James A. Gray Distinguished Professor of Religious Studies at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Ehrman is also what he calls an agnostic atheist. This was not, however, always his position. In his youth, he was a Christian. Ehrman told the Freedom from Religion Foundation how he came to be agnostic:

I started out as an evangelical Christian. I got interested in biblical studies because I was actually a fundamentalist as a late teenager. That got me interested in the bible. But as I developed my scholarship through graduate school, I realized that my beliefs about the bible were completely wrong, that the bible's not some kind of inherent revelation from God. And so for years I'd become a liberal Christian. I still went to church, I still believed in God, but I didn't believe the bible was the inspired word of God. But after many years of being a liberal Christian, I finally became an agnostic for reasons unrelated to my scholarship, reasons having to do with why there is suffering in the world, if there is a God who is in control? I, for years, had thought about it, had read what the biblical authors said, what theologians, philosophers said. I got to the point where I just didn't believe it anymore.

Ehrman has written a number of books in which he argues that the Christian faith is false. He has taught a course, *Why I am not a Christian: How Leaving the Faith Led to a Life of More Meaning and Purpose*. Concerning Jesus's view of ultimate reality and true meaning, Ehrman has stated:

The apocalyptic Jesus realized that ultimate reality and true meaning do not reside in this world. Following Jesus means to realize that ultimate reality resides outside this world, in a higher world, above this mundane existence that we live in the here and now... My personal view is just the opposite. My view is that there is no realm above or outside of this one that provides meaning to life in our world. In my view this world is all there is. Yes, I know there are aspects of physical reality that are extremely odd and completely inaccessible to me. But I don't think there is anything outside our material existence. Meaning comes from what we can value, cherish, prize, aspire to, hopeful, achieve, attain, and ... love in this world. There is no transcendent truth that can make sense of our reality. Our reality is the only reality. It can either be (very) good for us or (very) bad for us. But however we experience it, it's all there is.

Ehrman disagrees with Jesus on ultimate reality and true meaning, but he, unlike some other atheists, does believe that Jesus existed, and he argued the point in his essay, "Did Jesus Exist?" (Huffington Post, March 20, 2012) Ehrman ended the essay with these words: "Whether we like it or not, Jesus certainly existed." Ehrman pretends that his rejection of the Christian faith is because of historical evidence, but it is actually because He does not like the way God works. The fact is historical evidence supports, not only the existence of Jesus, but also His resurrection, and this is so whether skeptics like it or not.

According to the ancient tradition of the church, the apostle John wrote the fourth gospel of the Bible. In the Year of Our Lord One-Hundred Seventy, Irenaeus became bishop of Lyon. He heard the preaching of Polycarp, whom John ordained bishop of Smyrna. Irenaeus, in his book, *Against Heresies*, identified John as the author of the gospel. The Muratorian Fragment, dated around the Year of Our Lord One-hundred Seventy, also

identifies John as the author. The author of the gospel does not identify himself by name, but he does identify himself as a companion of Peter, and the disciple whom Jesus loved. (John 20:2) John, in his gospel, recorded that Jesus taught that He is the Son of God, that He came into the world to die for the sins of men, and that He would rise from the dead.

In the beginning of Jesus's earthly ministry, Jesus cleansed the temple of the Jews in Jerusalem by driving out of it the merchants, the money-changers, and the animals. To those that sold doves, He said, "Take these things hence; make not my Father's house an house of merchandise." (John 2:16) With this, Jesus called God His Father, making Himself the Son of God. The Jews demanded of Him some sign, proving that He was who he claimed to be, and He answered, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." (John 2:19) The Jews scoffed at this, and said, "Forty and six years was this temple in building, and wilt thou rear it up in three days?" (John 2:20) Saint John recorded this comment: "But he spake of the temple of his body. When therefore he was risen from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this unto them; and they believed the scripture, and the word which Jesus had said." (John 2:21, 22) The Jews took Jesus to mean that, although it took forty-six years to build the temple, he was able to build it in three days. They were mistaken. Jesus was not referring to the temple of the Jews, but to the temple of His body. He meant that, if the Jews killed Him, He would three days later rise from death. He was predicting His crucifixion and resurrection. After Jesus did rise from the dead, His disciples remembered that He had said this, and they believed in Him.

Not long after Jesus cleansed the temple, Nicodemus, a Pharisee, came to Him and confessed that He is a teacher that came from God. Jesus said to Nicodemus:

And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. (John 3:13–15)

Here Jesus alludes to the words of Agur in the Book of Proverbs, which words read:

Who hath ascended up into heaven, or descended? who hath gathered the wind in his fists? who hath bound the waters in a garment? who hath established all the ends of the earth? what is his name, and what is his son's name, if thou canst tell?" (Proverbs 30:4)

Jesus answers Agur's question: He is the only man to ascend to heaven, because He is the incarnate Son of God who came from heaven. Just as Moses lifted up on a stake the bronze serpent, so that those who looked at it were healed of the deadly serpent bites, so Jesus would be lifted up on a cross, so that all those who will look to Him for salvation will be saved. (Numbers 21:4–9)

Then Jesus said:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. (John 3:16–18)

God is love, and He loved the world by doing what was good for it. He gave His only begotten Son a sacrifice, so that, if anyone believes in Him, then he has eternal life. God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but so that through His Son the world might be saved. If a man believes in Jesus, then God does not condemn Him; but, if a man does not believe in Jesus, then he now stands condemned, and the Son of God will formally condemn him when He returns to judge the world.

Jesus, in the last week of His life, was explicit about His death. When some Greeks came to the temple to worship at the Passover feast, they sought an audience with Jesus. When Jesus's disciples told Him, He said, "The hour is come, that the Son of man should be glorified. Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit. (John 12:23, 24) When some Greeks, that is to say, some who were not Jews, desired to talk to Him, Jesus knew that the time had come for Him to die. In God's world, there is an important principle: death results in life. When a grain of wheat falls off the stalk, and onto the ground it dies, it decays. Yet, after it dies, it produces life; it brings forth a new plant. Similarly, Jesus would die, and be buried in the ground, and then spring to life. Jesus said, "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me." (John 12:32) Saint John commented, "This he said, signifying what death he should die." (John 12:33) To be lifted up from the earth meant to be lifted up on a cross, to be crucified. Jesus would be crucified for the sins of men, not for Jews only, but also for Greeks, and He would draw both kinds of men to Himself to be saved from their sins.

Shortly after this, the chief priests and Pharisees arrested Jesus and brought Him before the council of the Jews, which condemned Him to die. So, they sent Jesus to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, for execution. Pilate Himself tried Jesus, and found Him not guilty of any crime. He would release Jesus, but, at the insistence of the Jews, He had Him crucified. Saint John was at the place of crucifixion, and witnessed the fulfillment of several prophecies. He wrote:

The Jews therefore, because it was the preparation, that the bodies should not remain upon the cross on the sabbath day, (for that sabbath day was an high day,) besought Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away. Then came the soldiers, and brake the legs of the first, and of the other which was crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus, and saw that he was dead already, they brake not his legs: But one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side, and forthwith came there out blood and water. And he that saw it bare record, and his record is true: and he knoweth that he saith true, that ye might believe. For these things were done, that the scripture should be fulfilled, A bone of him shall not be broken. And again another scripture saith, They shall look on him whom they pierced. (John 19:31–37)

The law of Moses forbade leaving the corpse of an executed person on the tree, and required that he be buried on the day he died. (Deuteronomy 21:23) So, the Jews asked Pilate to break the legs of Jesus and the two men crucified with Him, so that they could not support themselves on the cross, and so continue to breathe. The soldiers broke the legs of the two thieves, but, seeing that Jesus was already dead, they left Him alone. A soldier pierced His side with a spear to make certain that He was dead. This was to fulfill the words of David in the book of Psalms, which He wrote of the righteous man, "He keepeth all his bones: not one of them is broken." (Psalm 34:20) Moreover, Jesus's bones could not be broken because He Jesus is the Passover lamb sacrificed for the sins of the people, and, concerning the Passover lamb, that law of Moses states, "Do not break any of the bones." (Exodus 12:46) It was also to fulfill the prophecy of Zechariah, which states, "They shall look upon me whom they have pierced." (Zechariah 12:10) Saint John in his gospel bears witness to the world that he saw the

crucifixion of Jesus, and that Jesus fulfilled Scripture. The theological import is that, as John the Baptist said, Jesus is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. (John 1:29)

Jesus was buried, but, on the third day He rose from the dead, just as He said He would. On the first day of the week, the day He rose, Mary Magdalene, when it was still dark, went to the tomb, and she saw the stone that covered the entrance moved away. She ran to tell Peter and John that some party had taken Jesus's body from the tomb. The two disciples ran to the tomb to see for themselves. John arrived first, and, looking in from the outside, he saw Jesus's linen clothing. When Peter arrived, he entered the tomb, and saw the linen clothes, and the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus's head. John entered, and when he saw that Jesus was not there, he believed. Yet, they did not yet understand that the Scripture taught that Jesus had to rise from the dead. Peter and John left to return home. As Mary lingered at the tomb, Jesus appeared to her, and afterward she told the disciples.

John wrote:

Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you. And when he had so said, he shewed unto them his hands and his side. Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the Lord. Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you. And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost: Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained. (John 20:19–23)

In the evening of the day of resurrection, the disciples hid themselves for fear of what the Jews might do to them. Then Jesus appeared before them, and told them to be at peace. He showed them his hands, where the soldiers had hammered the nails, and his side, where the soldier had pierced with a spear. Jesus once again told them to be at peace, and He told them that, as His Father in Heaven had sent Him into the world to bear witness of the Father, so Jesus would send them into the world to bear witness of the Son. Just as God breathed into the first man the breath of life, so the Son of God breathed into these men the Spirit of life, to empower them for the task He assigned them. That task was to bear witness to Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, and to declare that those who repent of their sins and believe in Jesus, are forgiven, and those who do not are condemned.

Saint John records further:

But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples therefore said unto him, We have seen the Lord. But he said unto them, Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe. And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them: then came Jesus, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, Peace be unto you. Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing. And Thomas answered and said unto him, My Lord and my God. Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed. (John 20:24–29)

When Jesus appeared to the disciples, Thomas was not with them, and when Thomas later joined them they told him that they had seen the Lord. He did not believe them, however, and said that he would not believe Jesus had

risen unless he himself saw Jesus. Jesus appeared to them, and told Thomas to touch His hands and His side, and not to doubt, but to believe. Then Thomas, having seen for himself the risen Christ, confessed Jesus as his Lord, and his God. Jesus indulged Thomas in his doubt, but he scolded him for it. Thomas believed in the risen Christ because he saw him, but he ought to have believed in Him on the testimony of Jesus's disciples who had seen Him.

Saint John concluded his gospel with these words:

And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name. (John 20:30, 31)

Saint John's gospel is a record of the life of Christ from the beginning of His earthly ministry to the end. He recorded a number of signs that He is the Christ, from His changing water into wine to His resurrection from the dead. Yet, John recorded only some of those signs. He recorded those signs, not so that the reader might be entertained, not so that the reader might be amazed. He recorded them so that the reader might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing in Him they might have eternal life through Him.

The same John who wrote the gospel also wrote three epistles, and some of the first epistle is quite similar to the gospel. John begins the letter with these words:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; (For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;) That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full. (John 1:1-4)

The Son of God was always with His Father, from before the beginning of time. For the sake of mankind, He was manifested to them. The apostles heard Him with their ears, saw Him with their eyes, touched Him with their hands. These apostles bore witness to Jesus, that He is eternal life, and they declared this to mankind so that mankind might join the fellowship of the apostles, and so join fellowship with God the Father, and His only begotten Son Jesus Christ. The apostles recorded these things so that men might believe in Jesus, and, believing in Him, have complete joy.

Saint John continued:

This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. (1 John 1:5-10)

The message that the apostles relate to men, is the message that Jesus related to them, namely that God is light and in His no darkness. Men are in the darkness of sin and ignorance, but the Son of God came to enlighten men, and to forgive their sins. If any man says that He has fellowship with God, that he is friends with God, but lives in sin and ignorance, then that man is a liar. If a man holds to the truth about Jesus, who is truth, and obeys Jesus, then that man has fellowship with others who do the same, and the blood of Jesus cleanses him from all sin. If a man denies that he sins, then he lies to himself. If he confesses his sins, however, then God is faithful to forgive his sins. If a man denies that He has sinned, he is not only himself a liar, but he would make a liar out of God who says that he has sinned. That man does not believe the word of God.

John wrote:

My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 2:1, 2)

As Jesus called His apostles His little children, so Saint John calls his readers. John is their father in the faith. John wrote of the Christian's obligation to God not to sin. Yet, he also wrote of God's promise to the Christian that, if he should sin, then Jesus Christ, who is perfectly righteous, will act as the Christian's advocate before the Father. Jesus Christ can advocate for the Christian because His death is the propitiation of the Christian's sins. His death assuages God's wrath toward the Christian, and disposes God to be gracious to him. He is the propitiation, not only for those who, in Saint John's time and place, believe, but for those who, in all times and in all places, believe, the death of Christ is the propitiation of sin. As John the Baptist testified when he saw Jesus, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." (John 1:29)

Let us believe the testimony of the apostles of Jesus. Let us believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

Blessing, and honor, and glory, and power, be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb, for ever and ever. Amen.