

RESPONDING TO RECENT CRITICISMS OF THE GOSPELS

The most current attacks on the reliability of the New Testament have come almost entirely from one person, renowned New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman. Ehrman has argued against the reliability of the New Testament from just about every angle in a series of recent books. The next two chapters will be devoted to engaging his most significant claims.

Contradictions in the Gospels?

Numerous liberal scholars throughout the history of biblical interpretation have sought to identify contradictions within the Bible. Many of these attempts can be regarded as popular-level propaganda pumped out by atheist and skeptic organizations, and most of them do not deserve serious consideration.

Recently, however, Bart Ehrman has been responsible for several New York Times bestsellers and so is worthy of a lengthy response here. Unlike many critics who find conspiracies involving the Bible and who do not warrant much attention due to their lack of credentials and poor research (such as Dan Brown), Bart Ehrman is a fine historian who is widely respected within his field of biblical scholarship. While other interpreters may propose similar kinds of things, Ehrman has been the most influential, consistent, and thorough in these allegations so we will engage the form of the arguments found in his works.

In one of his most recent books, *Jesus, Interrupted* (2009), Ehrman insists that contradictions and discrepancies fill the New Testament, appearing in virtually all of the parallel stories and teachings of Jesus recorded in the Gospels. In this chapter, we will address several of these alleged tensions. Ehrman delineates these examples in the second and third chapters from *Jesus Interrupted*: “A World of Contradictions” and “A Mass of Variant Views.” In assessing the instances of discrepancies that Ehrman provides, it will be helpful to address them within the following categories: 1) *additional details*; 2) *differing accounts*; 3) *contradicting accounts*; and 4) *historically inaccurate accounts*.

Under point 1, we consider various additions of details that occur in one Gospel but not another. Point 2 involves those instances which seem to not involve additional material, but material that seems mildly in conflict, according to Ehrman—we might refer to these as proposed discrepancies, but not direct contradictions. Point 3 involves pieces of data shared between the Gospels, which are, according to Ehrman, in direct conflict with one another. Finally, point 4 posits contradictions, not between the Gospels themselves, but between the Gospels and secular history.

These classifications remain very important in weaving through the maze of supposed inconsistencies that Ehrman attempts to present to his readers. Each of these discrepancy types necessitates a different kind of response—and really, only categories 3 and 4 should raise much concern. This will become clearer as we proceed, as will especially the weakness of Ehrman's cumulative case, which remains built mainly upon categories 1 and 2. But for now, we may note that the force of this point—that really only categories 3 and 4 are at all worrisome for the reliability of the New Testament—rests on what biblical scholars often refer to as literary criticism, a field with which Ehrman is well familiar. Most of his readers, however, are not.

This is important because Ehrman knows good and well that scholars commonly acknowledge differing literary agendas among the Gospel writers; these agendas constrain their choices of certain data over others. For example, Ehrman makes a big deal out of Luke's mentioning Caesar in his birth account while Matthew focuses on Herod, excluding any reference to Caesar. Such an issue is easily resolved when an interpreter takes into consideration the narrative purposes of the Gospel authors. Luke writes to a Roman official, Theophilus, quite probably to help acquit Paul as he stood on trial in Rome. Matthew apparently wrote with a more Jewish audience in view and naturally takes more interest in Herod.

Ehrman's insistence that such differences create a serious obstacle to the credibility of the Gospels remains shocking. The above examples should provide the reader a certain grasp of these categories by illustrating their importance as we move forward in our assessment. Note also that not all of these four discrepancy types will occur in every example.

1. Additional Details

Missing Birth Accounts

Ehrman begins by noting that only Matthew and Luke contain birth narratives. He is right about this. However, the force of this point weakens drastically when we consider the respective authors' literary purposes. Mark's style is one of immediacy. His account is intentionally condensed, and the narrative has a rapid pace. What's more, if the second-century AD historian Papias is correct and Mark's Gospel is really only a narrative collection of Peter's sermons in Rome, then perhaps Mark's source (Peter's sermons) simply did not include the birth story. Maybe this just was not a topic Peter preached on with any frequency. If we expect Mark to be faithful to his source, we should not expect him to include such details. John intentionally focuses on the deity of Jesus, excluding elements that do not serve this theological purpose directly. Therefore, he moves directly from the incarnation (God becoming flesh in Jesus) to Jesus' divine calling and baptism.

The fact that these Gospels exclude mention of Jesus' birth, therefore, hardly causes significant trouble for the veracity of the birth accounts of Jesus. Matthew and Luke include it because it fits their historical purposes. Mark and John fail to mention the birth because it does not serve their broader aims in writing. The same point answers Ehrman's objection that none of the other New Testament writers mention the birth either. Most of these documents are letters, addressed to specific issues in churches. Why should we require that they include a discourse on Jesus' birth in response to questions on spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians) or eschatology (2 Thessalonians)? We shouldn't.

Ehrman's complaint is found wanting at this juncture. Moreover, logic informs us that contradictions are present only when two statements are pitted against each other as mutually exclusive. In this case, the absence of a birth narrative in Mark and John is not a statement at all, and therefore, cannot be said to contradict Matthew and Luke. This is a fallacious argument from silence.

Mark Lacks the Genealogy

Although John does not have the genealogy in the same sense as Matthew and Luke, he does trace Jesus' origins—they go back to the pre-existent Father Himself (John 1:1). What about Mark? What must be kept in mind specifically is that Mark presents Jesus as a servant (Mark 10:45); it was not typical in the ancient world to provide genealogies for servants. Mark wrote his Gospel for the Romans. They had no interest in where this servant came from, but in what this servant could accomplish on their behalf (for example, notice the repeated phrase "immediately" throughout the Gospel).

In contrast, Matthew's Jewish audience looked for the Messiah, the King, unlike Mark's Roman audience, which appears to have had different literary expectations based on the servant characterization of Jesus by Mark. Accordingly, Matthew follows Jesus back to His Jewish roots as Davidic King in the line of Israel's royal ancestry (Matthew 1:1). And Luke presents Christ as a man, Jesus of Nazareth, full of the Holy Spirit. Hence, in Luke Christ's ancestry is traced back to the first man, Adam (Luke 3:38). And again, since John portrays Christ as the Son of God, he traces Christ back to His eternal source and glory (John 17:1-5) with the Father.

Where Was Jesus the Day After His Baptism?

Ehrman notes that the Gospels display differences regarding where Jesus was after His baptism. Mark says He went immediately into the wilderness to be tempted, whereas John does not mention the temptation but has Jesus encountering John the Baptist again the next day; John declares Jesus to be the Lamb of God.

The problem here is clearly not very acute. John's Gospel was the last of the New Testament Gospels to be written, and John seems to document things about Jesus' life that had not been said in previous accounts. So it is no surprise that he leaves out an event included in all three of the synoptics (Matthew, Mark, Luke). John simply does not document the event so there is no way to show a conflict between John and Mark's chronology.

Ehrman's reasoning here also misunderstands Mark's use of "immediately." He clearly does not literally mean the very next moment in Jesus' life since Matthew and

Luke include much in the gaps between the various stories about Jesus that Mark chronicles. Instead, it is a narrative device indicating the urgency of Jesus' message and ministry. This again shows why additional details between narratives really cannot be posed as significant contradictions.

Jesus' Conversation with Pilate

Ehrman mentions several differences between Mark's and John's account of Jesus' dialogue with Pilate. He claims that while there are several differences, he desires to only focus upon three. The first he mentions is simply that Jesus' conversation with Pilate in John is much longer. But the way historians recorded speeches in the ancient world allowed for summarization, condensation, and shortening to fit their narrative purposes; thus, additional material in John hardly counts as a discrepancy.

Second, Ehrman calls attention to the apparent difference between John and the synoptics (Matthew, Mark, Luke) involving the time of Christ's flogging. John seems to place it during the proceedings, whereas the synoptics seem to place it after. Again, Ehrman shows no cognizance of well-reasoned solutions to this so-called discrepancy. The Oxford historian A.N. Sherwin-White suggested the likely possibility here that there were two beatings.¹ The first was a mild beating called a *fustigatio*, intended to warn Jesus, commonly used in such proceedings for this purpose. This warning is the one that Luke records Pilate threatening Jesus with, and John records Pilate making good on that threat. Pilate clearly hoped that this would change Jesus' mind. Unfortunately, from Pilate's perspective, it did not. This resulted in Jesus receiving a second beating after the sentence was issued, the far more severe *verberatio*, from which many did not escape with their life. The account is not contradictory. Two different scourgings with two different purposes are in view.

Third, Ehrman insists that John's thrice-mentioned declaration by Pilate of Jesus' innocence creates problems for creating a unified history with Mark's account, which never has Pilate admitting Jesus' innocence. So what? Again, this entails no direct or even indirect contradiction. It was completely within the ancient historian's rights to choose which details to include and leave out. Clearly, in this case, Mark and John made different choices.

Two Accounts of Judas's Death

Another point of discrepancy that Ehrman insists upon involves what seems to us to be complementary rather than contradictory accounts. In Matthew (27:5), Judas hangs himself. In Acts (1:18), his body falls and his intestines gush out. There is no reason these accounts cannot reinforce one another. The account in Acts merely adds an additional detail regarding what happened after Judas died. In fact, it makes perfect sense since he hung himself from a tree over a cliff and seems to have fallen (either by being cut down or from the sheer weight on the rope or tree) on sharp rocks below, causing his disembowelment.

2. Differing Accounts

Differing Formulas

Other details Ehrman points to are simply incidental, such as the use of differing citation formulas. For example, he faults the Gospel tradition by noting that only Matthew has the phrase “to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet” (Matthew 1:22; 2:5,17,23). Luke, according to Ehrman, lacks a prophetic focus and instead prefers to talk about “the Law of the Lord,” especially in his nativity scene.

On these observations, it seems highly arbitrary to require authors to use the same phraseology in describing the theological significance of the events they record. One has to allow for stylistic latitude. It seems absurd to require the use of the exact same wording on such occasions since it would obfuscate the very stylistic identity of the authors themselves. This does not seem to be a very thoughtful criticism on the part of Ehrman. Of course the Gospel authors must be allowed to shape their narratives in language that frames their stories of Jesus in ways appropriate to their own literary style. Just the opposite of Ehrman’s position could be argued—namely, the fact the authors are divergent in their choice of words is a mark of historicity and not collusion or plagiarism.

Details Lacking in Luke and Matthew

Ehrman sees it as problematic that Matthew includes the following details that Luke does not: 1) Joseph’s dreams, 2) wise men, 3) the slaughter of children by Herod, 4) the flight to Egypt, and 5) the holy family bypassing Judah. What are we to make of these missing details? It seems odd on the face of it to make much of them at all, as Ehrman clearly does. Luke also includes material that Matthew does not: 1) John the Baptist’s birth, 2) Caesar’s census, 3) the Bethlehem trip, 4) the inn and the manger, 5) the shepherds, 6) Jesus’ circumcision, and 7) the presentation of Jesus within the temple.

These differences in details have long been explained by interpreters as reflecting a difference in sources and purposes. According to the traditional view of the early church, Matthew was an eyewitness to the events he describes (an assumption Ehrman will not grant, but which has good historical grounds). Luke was not an eyewitness. He likely had to piece together his account through various interviews with eyewitnesses. Thus the traditions handed down to Luke on the one hand and the ones Matthew draws from his eyewitness account seem simply to reflect differing dimensions of the Jesus story.

This should not come as a surprise given different approaches taken by the authors in gathering material for their Gospels. Luke may not have had access to the pieces of tradition Matthew chooses to emphasize, and clearly Luke did not use Matthew in this case, so it seems strange to require Luke to match Matthew’s account of Jesus’ birth. And even if Luke did have some of these same traditions available to him, again, they may not always have suited his literary goals in writing and so he chose not to include them. Authors must be given the discretion to adopt only the material most relevant to their purposes in writing. The fundamentals of basic literary composition demand this much.

Jesus' Baptism by John

The first recorded event in Jesus' adult life was His baptism by John, accompanied by the testimony of His Father and the Spirit. Ehrman claims that the reporting of the history remains riddled with difficulty due to conflicting accounts. By this, he means variations in the wording that the Father utters in response to Jesus' baptism. For example, Matthew's account has "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (3:17 NKJV), whereas Luke's account probably (depending on the manuscript decision one makes) cites Psalm 2:7: "You are My Son, today I have begotten You" (NKJV).

A problem surfaces here in Ehrman's analysis that we find especially acute elsewhere as well. To begin with, it reveals lack of knowledge of the common practice in ancient history of just offering a paraphrase of what was said. Thucydides, Herodotus, Josephus, Xenophon, and the writer of 1 Maccabees all did this, and apparently so did the Gospel writers. We do not suppose Ehrman would want to say that the history these authors record—even when in parallel material there remain slight differences, such as in the comparisons of Josephus and 1 Maccabees—is to be dismissed because of such subtle differences. This kind of approach would result in a type of agnosticism toward ancient history, as we have emphasized before.

It also confuses the issue to enforce the kind of modernistic standard upon the Gospels that Ehrman does, claiming that the accounts must have the exact words that were spoken. This cannot be true at a theoretical level since most of these dialogues likely took place in Aramaic, and so the Gospel authors would have had to translate them into Greek. Further, practices of *mimesis* (imitation of others on the same historical topic) in many contexts demanded unique transmission of historical material—so a different translation from the Aramaic or (perhaps in Luke's case) a transmission of a different piece of oral tradition would have been preferred.

Ehrman also requires too much of the text. He assumes without argument that unless the text is what scholars call *ipsissima verba* (in the exact words of Jesus), then it can be neither without error nor historical. However, many scholars, both liberal and conservative, hold to the idea that the Gospels merely convey *ipsissima vox* (with the same meaning or voice) of Jesus or, in this case, the voice from heaven. The text can inerrantly communicate the *voice* (that is, the basic meaning) of the Father's statement without being forced to give the exact wording of the statement in all four accounts. Inerrancy requires only the former, not the latter. Ehrman knows that this is a reasonable explanation offered by scholars for assessing these problems, but he writes as though no solution has ever been proposed. This is problematic, and it leaves readers with the impression that inerrancy or even accuracy requires the unduly stringent *ipsissima verba* interpretation of the Scriptures. This—to say the least—severely misrepresents the discussion.

The Length of Jesus' Ministry

Another discrepancy that Ehrman mentions from the life of Jesus, even Ehrman himself acknowledges should not be considered a discrepancy.² He focuses here on Mark's use of immediacy language and then compares this to the chronology that we find in John. Based on the occurrence of Passover celebrations, this chronology has

led most scholars to conclude a two-to-three-year time length for Jesus' public ministry. But we must agree with Ehrman when he acknowledges that this does not count as a discrepancy since his point is based on a highly tenuous interpretation of the immediacy language in John's Gospel. Mark's immediacy language, as widely acknowledged within scholarship, functions as a literary device and is not intended to specify short time frames. Ehrman knows this, but most of his readers do not.

3. Contradicting Accounts

The Hometown of Jesus

Was it Bethlehem or Nazareth? Matthew emphasizes Bethlehem, while Luke focuses upon Nazareth. Matthew highlights Jesus' birthplace; Luke, his hometown. To create a conflict between the accounts, Ehrman relies on some fairly serious conjecture, meaning that the differences he insists on can hardly be considered irreconcilable. He posits the following: Since Herod decreed that the soldiers must kill all children two years and younger, Jesus and his family *must have stayed* in Bethlehem longer than a month. This would create some tension with Luke's account, which has them returning after about a month.

However, Ehrman's insistence that the stories require this timeline remains highly speculative. Matthew's account does not explicitly state how long Jesus' family remained in Bethlehem, making the proposed contradictions highly tentative or even impossible to prove from the text.

Egypt or Nazareth?

In response to Herod's decree, Matthew has Jesus' family flee to Egypt. Luke informs us that they returned to Nazareth from Bethlehem. Again, it seems hard to understand the force of Ehrman's dilemma here. Although Luke has Joseph and Mary eventually arriving back in Nazareth, there appears no reason why they could not have had a tenure in Egypt prior to this, as Matthew emphasizes. Since Luke does not focus on the decree from Herod, he does not have the same narrative pressure to indicate how they escaped from Herod. Luke chose not to (or did not have materials to) move his story in that direction.

Ehrman overlooks here what biblical scholars have sometimes referred to as "narrative compression." Often, ancient historians compressed the events of the story that they recorded so as to provide just the basic timeline necessary for an intelligible account. This seems to have happened here. Although it is possible, there is no reason to assume that Luke did not have access to the traditions that Matthew discusses. Instead, he simply compresses the timeline of events to fit with the way that he hoped to tell the story. The result is a more concise and relevant narrative. Ehrman places undue pressure on these authors to be comprehensive—as though the Gospels are a type of collective history, written as a collaboration of sorts. But why should we require such a totalistic approach? As mentioned, part of the task of the historian involves choosing what details to include and what not to include. It should not surprise modern critics that the Gospels reflect precisely such a process.

The Resurrection of Jairus's Daughter

Ehrman claims there is a direct discrepancy between the accounts found in Mark 5:21-34 and Matthew 9:18-26. In Mark it says that the girl Jesus healed was almost dead, whereas in Matthew, the girl was dead. Now Ehrman assumes without argument that this is the same event. But only Mark's account specifies the name of the ruler whose daughter Jesus helped—it was Jairus's daughter. Matthew does not say this. In Mark, the event happens right after the sending of the demons into the swine. In Matthew, the event still takes place after the demonized swine event, but there is intervening narrative and teaching. So two different events could be in view—one where a leader's daughter is healed (Mark) and one involving the resurrection of a leader's daughter (Matthew).

But even if we grant that Matthew and Mark document the same event, in Matthew the Greek language actually allows for the meaning that the daughter is “dying now.” We find there an aorist (a Greek tense) that, according to recent research on the Greek verb by scholars like Stanley Porter and Rodney Decker, can have a past or present time reference based on the context. The aorist, in fact, makes no comment on the time reference. It just states that the kind of action happened without making any further comment about the details of the action. It is a simple statement of the process; in this case, dying.

In Matthew's account also appears the temporal adverb *arti*, which is glossed in the authoritative Bauer-Danker-Arndt-Gingrich Greek lexicon of the New Testament as indicating something *of the immediate moment*,³ and in many settings this adverb is translated with a present time reference. For example, in John 13:37, an aorist verb (like we have here) is used with *arti* and should be translated “now” (“Lord, why can I not follow [aorist] you right now [*arti*]”). We see then the flexibility of the language here. So a valid translation of Matthew 9:18 could be “my daughter is now dying,” showing that the account is in no necessary conflict with Mark's. Leon Morris opines further the possibility that the language could indicate that the daughter is “as good as dead,” or that Matthew is perhaps abbreviating his narrative (a common tactic in chronicles of the ancient world) by combining the opening of the story and the sending of the messengers, as he did in 8:5-13 in the story of the centurion's servant.⁴ Yet again, Ehrman, who knows the Greek language, acts as if these incidents are in direct conflict with no possibility of resolution.

Who Is For or Against Jesus?

Ehrman also points to Matthew 12:30 and Mark 9:40, which he claims contain contrary ideas. Matthew's account has Jesus saying, “Whoever is not with me is against me” (NIV). Mark says, “Whoever is not against us is for us” (NIV). This supposed contradiction is really just a result of bad exegesis. In this case, Ehrman fails to take the meaning of these statements in context.

In Matthew, Ehrman fails to cite the remainder of the verse, which states, “and whoever does not gather with me scatters” (NIV). So in this context, clearly Jesus has in mind followers who would scatter because they were not “with Him.” When we turn to Mark's account, we find in the following verse that Jesus' explanation of His statement clarifies exactly what He means: “For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose His reward” (9:41

esv). The conjunction “for” indicates a direct explanatory connection between the statement here in 9:41 and the one in 9:40 that Ehrman cites. So what Jesus says in Mark is in no way inconsistent with Matthew’s Gospel when both are considered in context.

The Time of Jesus’ Death

Ehrman draws attention to John’s remark in his Gospel (19:14) that Jesus was still on trial around the sixth hour (12 noon Jewish time). According to Mark’s Gospel (15:25), Jesus eats the Passover and is crucified the next morning, at the third hour (9 a.m. Jewish time). Ehrman notices that this would make His crucifixion much earlier than indicated by John.

As we have seen earlier, what remains most shocking is Ehrman’s failure to engage with the often repeated response by conservative scholars to this kind of objection. They typically note the differing time systems employed by John and Mark. John uses Roman time to describe the events in his Gospel, while Mark utilizes the Jewish system. The Jewish day started in the evening at 6 p.m. and the morning of that day began at 6 a.m. In Roman time, midnight to midnight marked a day. (Today’s 24-hour day is obviously based on the Roman system.) So when Mark says that Christ was crucified at the third hour, he means around 9 a.m. John stated that Christ’s trial was about the sixth hour. This would place the trial *before* the crucifixion at around 6 a.m., and therefore, would not negate any testimony of the Gospel writers. This fits with John’s other references to time (for example, John 1:39).

That solves the time issue, but Ehrman also insists that the days are different. According to John, Jesus was crucified on the day before the Passover, while the lambs were being slaughtered (symbolically); whereas Mark and the other synoptics (Matthew, Luke) have Him eat the Passover meal (Thursday night), and they then narrate His crucifixion the next morning. John says Jesus was crucified on the day of “preparation” for the Passover rather than on the day of preparation for the Sabbath, as in the synoptic Gospels.

Ehrman makes passing reference to the possible response that a different sectarian calendar might have been used by John, but this is by no means the strongest or most frequent response to this alleged discrepancy. A much better resolution, discussed by D.A. Carson for example,⁵ involves a more careful consideration of John’s language. It must be recognized that παρασκευῆ (*paraskeuē*—“preparation”) frequently has reference to Friday—and in this case, Preparation of the Sabbath is Friday (see John 19:31,42; Matthew 27:62; Mark 15:42; Luke 23:54). Barrett famously asserted that this text must refer to the preparation for (that is, before) the Passover, yet could not furnish one reference where παρασκευῆ (*paraskeuē*) was used for a day before a feast day other than the Sabbath (Saturday), which would fall on Friday.⁶ If Carson is correct, then John has Friday in mind with his phrase “Preparation” (*paraskeuē*) Day of the Passover,⁷ and *paraskeuē* can refer to the Passover feast or even the entire Passover week. This use of the Greek word in the meaning of Passover is not infrequent at all (for example, see Luke 22:1).

So what John seems to have meant was “the Friday of Passover week,” which is perfectly consistent with the Gospels’ usage of the day of Preparation of the Sabbath. Therefore, we may conclude as Carson does “that the last supper was eaten on Thursday

evening [after 6:00 p.m.] (that is, the onset of Friday by Jewish reckoning), and was a Passover meal,” and that Jesus was crucified on Friday as John and the Synoptic Gospels agree. In addition, taking this phrase in John 19:14 to mean the Friday before Passover is supported by the fact that both the Western and Eastern Church adopted this phrase as a synonym for Friday, as is recognized in Greece today.⁸

4. Historically Inaccurate Accounts

A Star in the East

Ehrman is critical, from a historical vantage point, of the whole notion in Matthew’s nativity account that a star could have guided the wise men. Matthew portrays the star as a form of divine guidance that was used to lead the wise men to Jesus (Matthew 2:9). We find much of this kind of supernatural activity in many of the secular histories, such as Josephus and Herodotus, which Ehrman depends upon in other instances to indicate problems with the biblical record.

To reject something as nonhistorical precisely because one cannot understand the theological, physical, or supernatural mechanisms used to bring about the event moves the discussion away from history toward philosophy. This leaves great difficulty for Ehrman to object to this event on strictly historical grounds—without importing a number of metaphysical assumptions he would need to defend. After all, if God truly exists, then acts of God (miracles) are possible. The only way for Ehrman to dismiss the miraculous is to demonstrate God does not exist, something that he has not yet accomplished.

Herod’s Massacre

Ehrman also objects to Matthew’s mention of Herod’s decree to slaughter children under two. He claims that such an event cannot be historical since we have no record of it outside of the New Testament. However, this reasoning fails to convince. To begin with, the vast majority of what we know about Herod is found in only one other source, Josephus. So it is not as though we have abundant documentation of the activities of Herod’s reign.

One should note the distinctively apologetic nature of Josephus’s work. Being officially commissioned by the Roman Empire as he was, Josephus may have trod carefully on certain politically sensitive issues, of which this may have been one. This act seems pretty brutal even for the Romans and their local client rulers (such as Herod).

And there are many details about Herod in Josephus’s account that find no testimony elsewhere, but few of them are often called into question. One of Ehrman’s strategies involves pitting the New Testament against Josephus in cases where only a New Testament author and Josephus record an event. This procedure endorses a method that Ehrman tacitly denies here. It’s simply special pleading.

Moreover, our knowledge of the ancient world remains highly fragmentary and so it just won’t do to dismiss data simply because it is not corroborated by ancient extra-biblical sources. Of course, we can have greater certainty about events that do bear multiple attestation. But the reverse principle—that events without multiple attestation

are historically unlikely—hardly holds water when dealing with ancient history more broadly. This raises the question of why Ehrman believes an extrabiblical source has superior confirming power over the New Testament—which is itself an archaeological ancient source, with the highest bibliographical support of any work from the ancient world.

Caesar's Census

Likewise, Ehrman complains about the lack of external attestation for the census by Augustus Caesar that Luke records. Our historical sources for Caesar are quite a bit better than the ones we have for Herod. Still, we may return to the principle that events found in only a single source cannot be dismissed *prima facie* on this criterion alone. And while a number of interpreters used to side with Ehrman in making this point about the census, several scholars now widely accept that there was in fact an earlier registration, as Luke records. Ehrman knows this—or at least he should, given his background. Several factors have led to this shift in consensus, which Ehrman fails to acknowledge.

To begin with, when the people of a subordinate land were asked to take an oath of allegiance to the emperor, it was not unusual to require an imperial census as an expression of this allegiance and as a means of enlisting men for military service; or, as was probably true in this case, in preparation to levy taxes. Due to the tensions between Herod and Augustus, which we know about from Josephus, it does not seem at all far-fetched that Augustus would begin to treat Herod's domain as a subject land, which would require him to order a census so that he could continue to control Herod and his people.

Additionally, a census was a sizable project that likely took several years to complete. In Gaul, for example, a census for the purpose of taxation was begun in 10 or 9 BC and took 40 years to complete. It seems probable that the decree to begin the census in the Judean region was issued in 8 or 7 BC, and thus may not have actually begun until sometime later. Difficulties with organizing and preparing the census may have also led to delaying the execution of the census till 5 BC or even later.

Another consideration is the fact that there were periodic registrations of this sort every 14 years. Some of the documents that report such censuses indicate that one was in fact taken around 8 or 7 BC. Because of this regular pattern of census-taking, any such action would naturally be regarded as a result of the general policy of Augustus, even though a local census might have been initiated by a local governor. This is likely why Luke recognizes the census as stemming from the decree of Augustus.

Finally, we must remember that it was a common practice for a census to require people to return to the place of their origin, or to the place where they owned land. For example, one of Caius Vibius Maximus's decrees (AD 104) ordered all who resided in lands outside of their hometowns to return to their hometowns so an accurate census could be undertaken. Moreover, given the Jews' annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem, it would in no way be uncommon for them to be involved in this kind of travel. These considerations have left little room for skepticism regarding the census at the time of Jesus' birth in much modern scholarship.

Ehrman knows that things are a lot more complex than the picture he portrays and

so his assertions on this score can be misleading at best. Luke's account fits nicely with the regular pattern of census-taking in the ancient world, and its date is hardly unreasonable as Ehrman contends. The possibility that this may have simply been a local census, taken as a result of the general policy of Augustus, cannot be excluded. So when Ehrman mocks the very logistics of such an event—Luke's report of travelers returning to their hometown—he reveals even more his own lack of awareness regarding practices in the first century AD. The census could have and did happen. Luke simply provides us with a reliable historical record of an event that was, although not uncommon, not otherwise recorded. So while this event does not find external corroboration outside of the New Testament, methodologically, this in itself does not militate against the authenticity and historical reliability of the Gospels.

Quirinius's Reign

Ehrman also draws attention to the fact that Luke records that Jesus' birth occurred during Quirinius's reign over Syria, while Matthew documents it as occurring during Herod's reign. However, Tacitus and Josephus have Quirinius beginning his reign in Syria in 6 AD, ten years after Herod's death. A number of considerations should be weighed in response to Ehrman on this point.

As an initial consideration, the governor of Syria from about 7 BC to about 4 BC was Quintilius Varus. Varus turned out not to be the most reliable leader, something that later became abundantly apparent in AD 9 when he suffered the loss of several thousand soldiers in Germany at the battle of the Teutoburger Forest. By contrast, Quirinius was a superb military leader, who was able to settle the rebellion of the Homonadensians in Asia Minor. Augustus entrusted Quirinius with the delicate political situation in Israel, a highly volatile region, effectively superseding the authority and governorship of Varus by appointing Quirinius to a place of special authority in this matter when it came time to begin the census, in about 8 or 7 BC.

A number of further considerations should be weighed as well. First, a not unlikely translation of Luke 2:2 could read, "This census took place before Quirinius was governing Syria." In this understanding of the Greek word translated "first" (*prōtos*), it is translated as a comparative, "before." Because of the awkward construction of the sentence, this is not an unlikely reading. The probability that Quirinius was governor of Syria on two different occasions also cannot be ignored—once while prosecuting the military action against the Homonadensians between 12 and 2 BC, and then a second time beginning about AD 6. This proposal is actually corroborated by a Latin inscription discovered in 1764 that has been interpreted to refer to Quirinius as having served as governor of Syria on two occasions. Regardless of the solution one accepts, Ehrman's insistence that Luke must be in error here is hardly necessary as he argues.

Matthew's and Luke's Genealogies Contradict Each Other

Ehrman also insists that the genealogies contained in Matthew and Luke are outright contradictory. However, there is good reason to believe the genealogies are different and complementary, not contradictory. They detail two different types of ancestral lines. Luke gives an *official genealogy*, whereas Matthew provides the *official line*, since

he addresses Jewish concerns for the Jewish Messiah's credentials, which required that the Messiah come from the seed of Abraham and the line of David (see Matthew 1:1). Luke, with a broader Greek audience in view, addresses himself to their interest in Jesus as the Perfect Man (which was the quest of Greek thought). Thus, he traces Jesus back to the first man, Adam (Luke 3:38).

While, on the one hand, Matthew provides the genealogy of Jesus in terms of His father Joseph's line, Luke focuses more upon the maternal (Mary's) genealogy. A number of considerations demonstrate the legitimacy of this basic comparison. To begin with, although each genealogy delineates the line of descent from Christ to David, they do so through a different son of David. Matthew traces the line of Joseph (Jesus' legal father) back to Solomon, David's son, the one by whom it is shown that Jesus is a rightful heir to David's throne (see 2 Samuel 7:12ff).

Luke's intention, by contrast, is to demonstrate the humanity of Christ. He can be traced back to a lesser known son of David, Nathan. How? Through His mother Mary. So he traces Christ to David's son, Nathan, through His actual mother, Mary. Yes, this means Mary is also a descendant of David, thus providing the genetic pedigree that was necessary for Christ to sit on the throne of David. The curse placed upon King Jeconiah's seed prohibited any of his descendants (which included Joseph) from occupying the throne. Meaning that, though Joseph provided the *legal* right for Jesus to sit on the throne of David (the king had to descend from Solomon's line), Mary provides Jesus the *genetic* right to the throne. This fits well within Luke's overall portrait of Jesus of Nazareth as a human prophet who came to redeem humanity. Luke writes to a Gentile audience, and so it is important to his narrative to connect Jesus to humanity more broadly, rather than portraying Him as the heir to the Jewish king's throne, which fits with Matthew's narrower narrative strategy.

As a further consideration, it is an unfair assumption that simply because the two genealogies have some names in common (such as Shealtiel and Zerubbabel; see Matthew 1:12 and Luke 3:27), they are, therefore, the same genealogy. For starters, these were very common names in the ancient world; by comparison, even within the same genealogy (Luke's) we find a repetition of the names Joseph and Judah (3:26,30).

Ehrman misses this point. He considers the possibility of explaining divergent accounts on the basis that Luke provides his genealogy through Mary, but dismisses this option as unattractive due to his exegesis of Luke 3:23. He takes this verse as an aligning of the genealogy with Joseph's rather than Mary's line. The reader must keep a few things in mind here, however. First, Luke does not indicate that he makes Joseph the base point for his genealogy of Jesus. A more careful reading of the pericope (section) and the wider context reveals, even in Luke's own words, that Jesus was "as was supposed" (Luke 3:23) the son of Joseph, when in reality he was the son of Mary as a wider reading of the narrative shows. The Greek here for "as was supposed" (ἐνομίζετο, *enomizeto*) indicates that it was a thought, a belief at that time, but not entirely true. It was true in the sense that Mary was Jesus' biological mother; according to Luke's narrative, but Joseph was not His biological father. This provides immediate justification for Luke's tracing His genealogy through Mary rather than Joseph—so this statement should be read not as an acknowledgment of Luke's using Joseph as the base point of his genealogy, but probably a hint that he did precisely the opposite.

And this fits perfectly with what we know elsewhere about Luke—that he was a doctor, and in the ancient world doctors show interest in mothers and birth. In fact, due to Luke’s emphasis on women within his narrative, Luke’s Gospel has often been called “the Gospel for Women.” Coupled with the fact that he never claims to chronicle Jesus’ lineage from the perspective of Joseph, these lines of evidence seem to point overwhelmingly toward the genealogy being traced through Mary rather than Joseph. And once it is seen that the genealogy could have been written from this perspective, Ehrman’s so-called irreconcilable difficulties evaporate.

If it is granted that it is at least possible that Luke documented the genealogy from the maternal standpoint, Ehrman’s case becomes substantially weakened. He presents only a possibility that the two accounts contradict, and—all things being equal—we should give these ancient historical records the benefit of the doubt (as we do with other accounts from the ancient world). Historians tend to operate with the innocent-until-proven-guilty principle in dealing with nonbiblical data from the ancient world, and so should those approaching the history of the earliest Christians and their leader, Jesus.

When viewing Luke then from the maternal perspective and Matthew from the paternal line, the two genealogies can be summarized as follows:

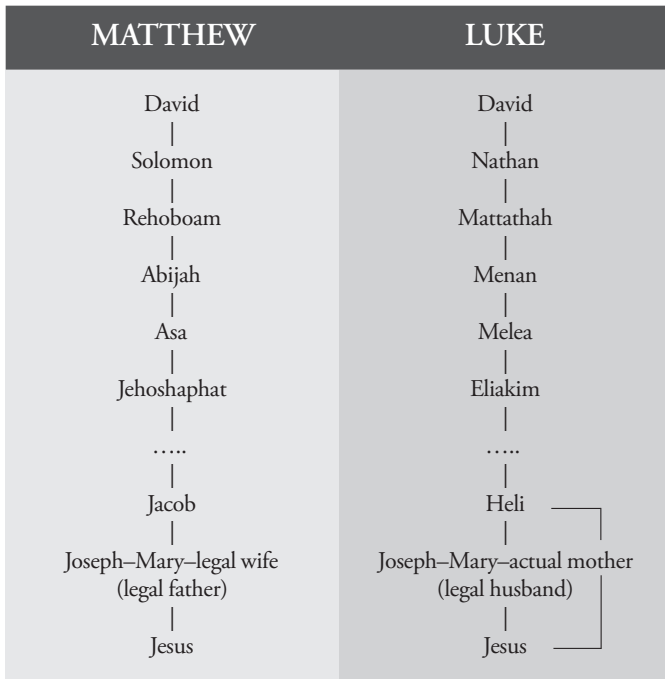


Chart from Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968, 1986). Used by permission of Moody Press.

As readers can see from the above chart, the addition and omission of names can be easily reconciled when considering what the text already seems to imply—that Luke traces Mary’s line rather than Joseph’s.

Matthew’s Genealogy Contradicts the Old Testament

Ehrman also raises the problem with names that are present in Matthew’s Gospel, but are missing in the Chronicles genealogy, which is assumed to be Matthew’s source. He presents these problems to his audience as though no one has ever worked through or dealt with the issues before. In particular, he draws attention to the “missing” generations in Matthew’s genealogy from Joram and Uzziah:

Matthew 1:8	1 Chronicles 3:11-12
Jehoram	Jehoram
_____	Ahaziah
_____	Joash
_____	Amaziah
Uzziah	Azariah (more commonly Uzziah)

Chart from Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968, 1986). Used by permission of Moody Press.

Ehrman objects that Jehoram is not in fact Uzziah’s father, but rather his grandfather. Ehrman claims that Matthew has twisted the facts in order to keep his numerology tidy and secure (there is an emphasis on 14 generations within the lineage, Matthew 1:17). However, this contention misunderstands the Greek in this instance. To begin with, the Greek in Matthew at many places in the genealogy does not use the word *father* but a prepositional phrase meaning “out of,” an idiom for conveying family relationships in such contexts.

In the place of contention—Matthew 1:8—the Greek word γεννάω (*gennaō*, “to bear,” “to father”) is used, but it entirely misunderstands the Greek idiom to force this word to refer only to a direct biological father. Jesus, for example, is called the “son of David,” but there are 31 generations intervening between them. When the text says the “father of,” in Jewish idiom this means an “ancestor of.” The same kind of idiom is employed here in Matthew 1:8. Ehrman knows better. It is on the verge of downright misleading to say that the text says “father” but that this is an error because a grandfather is in view—these were one and the same in the ancient world. It actually, we believe, shows the strength of the reliability of the New Testament—if Ehrman has to resort to these kinds of details to find errors, the problems must not be as glaring as he insists. So he here is either sloppy in his research or simply smuggling in ideas he knows

do not hold the weight demanded of them, but which will nonetheless stir up controversy and sell books.

Ehrman's objection on this point also assumes without argument that genealogies in the ancient world and in the Bible were "closed" genealogies (no gaps). In fact, the evidence supports the existence of "open" genealogies (where generations are skipped), of which Matthew would clearly be one. These open genealogies allowed authors the freedom to highlight the points in the genealogy significant to their narrative purposes without the constraint of having to delineate every person in a family over several thousand years of history. In Matthew's case, yes, it allows the freedom to pursue a numerological pattern, but when one understands the way Jewish genealogies worked in the ancient world, this in no way compromises the integrity of Matthew's. Similar gaps occur in other genealogies, demonstrating a wider biblical pattern with which Matthew aligns. For example, the genealogies in 1 Chronicles 6:6-14 and Ezra 7:3-4, when a comparison is made, show that Ezra omits six generations between Zerariah and Azariah that the 1 Chronicles account includes:

1 Chronicles 6:6-14	Ezra 7:3-4
Zerariah	Zerariah
Meraioth	Meraioth
Amariah	_____
Ahitub	_____
Zadok	_____
Ahimaaz	_____
Azariah	_____
Johanan	_____
Azariah	Azariah
Amariah	Amariah

Chart from Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968, 1986). Used by permission of Moody Press.

Does this indicate that there is error in the text? No. It just shows a literary pattern in which it was acceptable to record a family's lineage without having to show every single link in the line of descent.