

# OpenTheo

## #149 Can we trust the Christmas story? Responding to Bart Ehrman

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### Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom Wright talks to Justin about Christmas and the birth narratives, and answers listener questions on the reliability of the gospels, Bart Ehrman on textual transmission, the dating of the gospels, and whether The Ascension happened as described. Replay of a show first broadcast December 2018

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## Transcript

The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast Hello and welcome back to the show and a very happy Christmas to you. I'm Justin Briley from Premier Unbelievable and bringing you today Tom's answers to questions on whether we can trust the Christmas story, plus his reflections on other questions about whether we can trust the gospels in general. This is from a show first broadcast in December 2018.

Hope you enjoy it. Thanks by the way to the quirks who left this review of the show. This is such a fabulous podcast for anyone who wants to think about their grasp of theology and living a Christian life.

I found challenges to many of the things I grew up believing and I found Tom's views to make a much more coherent picture than I previously had. His comments on creation and the temple have particularly been helped me. I'm really glad we've been helpful and if you leave us a rating and review, wherever you get your podcasts, it will help others to discover the show as well.

As we approach the end of the year, you're probably aware that The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast is just one of a number of resources from Premier Unbelievable, all aimed at helping to bring thinking faith to people all over the world, sceptic seekers and believers alike. If you do appreciate the work of the show and you'd like to give to our end of year appeal, I would really value that. We can only do these shows because people like you support it.

We have a link with today's podcast where you can give tax efficiently if you're giving from the states or whatever you are in the world. The one link will take you to the correct place to do that. So thank you for your support if you're able to help us as we approach the end of the year.

We would be most grateful. Let's go to the link with today's podcast to get involved. But now on to your questions.

We're not far out from Christmas now and it did make me wonder, are there any particular highlights of Christmas that you always look forward to? I'm not talking specifically about the church services but generally the whole atmosphere. Christmas has always been a rich family time and for me, both the family I grew up in and then having my own family. It's a wonderful time and I think it's a cliché but it remains the case that the wonder of Christmas on the faces of little children is absolutely amazing and now that I have grandchildren.

It's a really exciting thing. And of course one of the nice things about getting old is to have layer upon layer upon layer of memory which are then easily evoked by one line from a Christmas hymn or one line from the Christmas story and one of my favorite things as I love all kinds of music but Bach's Christmas oratorio, the opening of the Christmas oratorio is one of the most amazing explosive moments in all classical music and just says something is happening as a result of which everything is different and you can feel it in the music and feel Bach's excitement and so a translate from the look of excitement and joy and surprise on my two-year-old grandson's face through to Bach saying bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, bum, it's wonderful stuff. I love it.

It seemed appropriate with Christmas approaching to talk about the historical Jesus and

the Gospels. We've had a lot of questions in on this, something you've obviously done a great deal of work on yourself and sticking with the Christmas theme. One thing I've often been asked by skeptics who aren't convinced about the Gospels, historical reliability is how we should treat the birth narratives particularly in Matthew and Luke, and Shepherds, wise men and so on.

A lot of people claim that they were essentially invented after the fact as a sort of way of giving Jesus a sort of royal arrival on the scene as it were. What's your view on those kind of criticisms? Yeah, let me just tell you a little story about that to show where our culture is sitting on that. About 15 or 20 years ago I was phoned up shortly before Christmas by a television station saying they were putting together a program which was going to talk about the birth narratives and they wanted a New Testament specialist to come on and say, actually, probably that stuff never actually happened.

This was just a researcher on the phone. I said, "Sposing I was to come on and say, actually, there's quite a reasonable chance that it might have done." There was a pause and then she said, "I don't think that's what my producer was looking for." So I said, "Thank you. Goodbye." But that's how our culture is slanted right now.

They don't want to hear that actually I'm an ancient historian. I study texts in which most of the incidents that we know about in the ancient world are described once and once only. That's how you get from Tacitus or Suetonius or any of the other great writers.

And even Josephus, the great Jewish historian, who tells the same story in the antiquities that then he does the small version in the Jewish war and a bit of it as well in his autobiography. Quite often, he's talking about things only once. That doesn't mean it didn't happen.

And he is, of course, writing it all 20, 30 years later. Some cases even more than that. But historians have to say, "Well, that's a bit of evidence.

How do we weigh that? What's the probability? What's the likelihood? Etc." And so the danger then is that some Christians say, "Well, because the Bible is inspired, we must believe that it all happened exactly as so." And I want to say, "Well, yes, I am happy to say that the Bible is the book that God has given us, and I live with that. But if I am making an argument to a fellow ancient historian who isn't a believer, I think I will say, "Well, you know perfectly well. There's lots of things that happened that you would write into your books, which are only in one story and may well have been written up a hundred years later." So when we're talking about shepherds, well, yes, that's in principle probable possible, depending on what you think about angels.

Likewise, when you're talking about wise men, depending on what you think about comets and so on. And of course, there's been a lot of work done on what star or comet it was and some quite interesting stuff. I haven't followed all the recent research on that.

But people have said you can actually pinpoint some things which might help you date when that's going on. So I want to say, from the point of view of making a case to a non-believer, I would say keep an open mind on that. Stuff happens.

Interesting. Having slagged off one particular broadcaster, the BBC some years ago did a Christmas thing. I think it was a six-part or something.

Well, there were 20-minute or half hour programs where they'd got the guy who did the script for EastEnders. And they gave him the Christmas stories and said, "Do it." It was spectacular. And it was thoroughly believable.

It made sense as a narrative. And I thought people need to see that because making sense is what history is supposed to do. Well, I know you've written books on Advent and so on.

So do go and check those out if you want some reading ahead of the Christmas season itself. But let's turn to some of the questions that have come in generally on the historical Jesus and the Gospels, Tom. Here's one.

And I'll ask you to be as brief as this person asks you to be. J.D. in Los Angeles says, "What would you say is the most straightforward, succinct way to explain the historical accuracy of the Gospels?" The answer is immerse yourself in the world of the first century Jews, understand the pressures of Greek culture, of Roman Empire, of Jewish aspirations and hopes, get used to the language in which they framed those hopes, and then your reader story of a young would-be prophet saying, "It's time for God to be king." And you say, "Yep, that's the kind of thing that would make sense in the late 20s, early 30s, under Herod, under Tiberia Caesar, etc. Now, if that makes sense, what sort of sense does it make? What sort of redefinitions are going on? Is this what other people meant by God being king?" And so on and so forth.

And there's all sorts of things in the Gospels which really do make sense. And as I said before, that's what history is supposed to do. Now, again, if you're talking within the family of the church, then it's perfectly okay to say, "God intended us to have these texts." That doesn't mean that we necessarily know how best to read them, but it's a start.

But if you're talking to people outside in the world, I want to say, "No, this is public truth." We know just as well that Jesus of Nazareth went about saying, "It's time for God to become king," and redefine that in terms of his own work. We know that just as well as we know that Julius Caesar was assassinated in 44 BC, as we know that Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 AD. And if somebody wants to be skeptical and say, "Actually, we don't know anything about anything that happened before about 1500," then, "Well, okay, you can pull the house down on top of you." The three-quet objection I hear is that these sources that you claim are just as, you know, stand up just as well against other ancient

historical sources were written by people invested in this stuff, were written by the followers.

So therefore, we can't trust them. All history is written by people who have agendas. There is no such thing as a point of view, which is nobody's point of view.

I tell the students, "There's no such thing as an epistemological Switzerland. There is no neutral ground where you can stand from which you can declare that you're seeing everything clearly." I mean, David Hume, the great skeptic in the middle of the 18th century, he had massive agendas. Edward Gibbon, who wrote the decline of all of the Roman Empire, he had a huge agenda.

Do we think that he is objective? Do we think that Josephus, the Jewish historian, is objective? No, he's got all kinds of stuff going on. That doesn't mean that nothing happened. I mean, this is what I call critical realism, which is, I use that phrase in a general sense.

And the way I define it is this, yes, fake news exists, but that doesn't mean nothing happened. On a related subject, Robin Toronto, Canada, asked you and Bart Ehrman, another well-known New Testament scholar, probably share the stage as the two most recognized names in New Testament studies. But clearly, you and he are on opposite ends of the theological spectrum.

While this may be a broad question, what's your response to Ehrman's assertion that there's very little we can say about the reliability of the New Testament in terms of knowing what the original manuscript said? As Ehrman Famix says, "All we have are copies of copies of copies, etc., which renders our ability to know what the original text says almost impossible." One of the great things about having copies of copies of copies is that we've got hundreds, thousands of manuscripts of the New Testament, almost all the other texts from the ancient world. We know only through one or two medieval manuscripts, Lucretius, the great Epicurean poet from the 1st century BC. His work was lost completely, discovered in one manuscript in 1417 by Poggio Bracolini, and that has revived Epicurean studies.

That one manuscript, excuse me, we've got all these manuscripts of the New Testament going way, way back. And the fact that we've got copies of copies of copies means that we can jolly well go back to a very solid basis, much more solid than for any other ancient text, whether it's Homer and Virgil, whether it's Caesar and Cicero, whether it's Seneca or Suetonius. Not a problem, guys.

And I think Bart, actually Bart Ehrman, would have to admit, yes, the New Testament text is pretty secure. Of course, there are one or two passages where we say, not quite sure if this bit was originally part of the text or not. It may have come in, somebody may have added a glass or somebody may have accidentally missed a bit out.

All manuscripts are like that. When I write a book and somebody copy it, that happens now as well. It doesn't mean I didn't write it.

In my experience, having done a few of my unbelievable shows with Bart Ehrman as well, I was interested actually when I did sit down to debate this particular issue with him across with another Bible scholar. That actually, it turned out there were relatively few really contested issues. And even in the ones where there were, it was contested whether Jesus felt pity or was angry when he saw such and such.

Well, Bart had an opinion on which it was. He felt we could actually know. Yes, yes, yes.

So in a sense, when you actually get down to brass tacks, it doesn't quite seem as mystifying as it's sometimes said. It's not nearly as much of a problem as people sometimes. I think, I mean, I don't know about very well.

I've been on panels with him and debated with him here and there. And we wanted, I think, a podcast debate some years ago. But he comes from, as he says frequently, a very, very, very conservative Christian background, which he's original background, which he then threw over for whatever reason.

But in that very narrow restricted background, it's basically all or nothing. You either have every single syllable of the Bible is literally true or if the glass cracks, the glass cracks. And it's like, actually, some very traditional Catholics who, if the pope is wrong on one issue, he's quite possibly wrong on everything.

Now, I've never lived in that kind of sharply defined narrow world. I've never had to break out of it. I have been able to make my way as a historian, as a believer, and to look at the texts and the big picture and find my way.

To give him his due, I think, but has told me in his own journey that he sort of went on a journey, which took him out of that. And I think the thing that really took him away from faith all together was eventually the problem of evil. And that perhaps is a different issue.

Well, he and I debated that 10 years ago, actually. Right. Oh, I remember you did it on the Pathios network.

I have a feeling. Quite possibly. It was in San Francisco, which was an odd occasion.

And it was quite difficult to debate him. A debating part, you sort of make a point, and then he comes at you from a different angle. It's like kicking your football against the haystack.

It doesn't bounce back the way you expected. Well, I would be delighted to preside over any future discussions between you. Let's talk about this question.

David in Newcastle, Australia asks, skeptics of the authorship of the Gospels claim that the four Gospels were written after, sometimes well after, 8070. But if this is the case, why do the writers seem like they know nothing about the most momentous event for Jews in the late first century, the destruction of the temple in 8070? Could the four Gospels have all been written before 8070? Asks David. The answer is yes, absolutely they could, but we just don't know that.

I tell my students that the four Gospels all could be as late as the 80s or 90s. I don't think they are. They could be all as early as the 50s or 60s.

I'm not sure they are. We just don't know. Over the last two centuries or so, scholars have come up with all kinds of theories.

And usually the thing they peg them on is Mark 13, Matthew 24, Luke 21, which is the prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem. And they try to read echoes of that as though this is what in the trade we call Vaticania ex-eventu, which is a prophecy written after the event. Okay.

So this would be the view that those are there because they were in fact written after, but there was those there for telling it. Interestingly, my friend, the late Marcus Borg, who disagreed with me about a lot of things, but he argued strongly on the basis of Luke 19, which is a shorter prediction of the destruction, that actually that must be a tradition which goes back behind 8070, because when Jesus says your enemies will cast up a bank against you and leave not one stone upon another, etc, etc. That isn't actually how it happened.

We know from Josephus, if you trust Josephus, that the way the Romans attacked was not what it says in Luke 19. Therefore, he says, this couldn't be written afterwards. So it must be before.

So there's a lot of debates. Yes. I mean, where would you, I mean, Marcus generally agreed to be the first in the first possible, probably 75, 80% of scholars would say that.

Yes. Where would you sort of roughly date it if I had to do something? It's curious. I was just recently editing a volume that I and a colleague are doing introduction for students, and my colleague had written up some of this stuff.

And I was going through this. Actually, no, I'm not sure about that. Because the older I get, the more I think there are some things we really do know as ancient historians about this stuff, and some things we really don't know.

And so I would be content to say, if some new evidence turned up saying that Marcus written, say in the early 60s, and that Matthew and Luke were written in the later 60s, I would be slightly surprised, but not particularly surprised. James Crossley, interestingly, much earlier, because he sees all that stuff about the destruction of the temple relating

to what the Emperor Gaius was going to do back in the 40s. It's very early.

It's very early, but in a sense, why not? Is there anything in the Gospels which forces us to say? No. And part of the problem here is the great tradition which has seen the Gospels as a more developed tradition, and particularly John as this wonderful high Christology. So, oh, that must be much later.

To which the answer is no, sorry, John's Christology is no higher than Paul's. And Paul has already got it sussed by the late 40s. There was tantalizing evidence we thought of possibly a manuscript that might be dated to within the first century, and I think it was then it was decided against in the end.

I can't remember the specifics. Yeah, this was about 10 or 15 years ago. But does it make much difference, kind of exactly how early the fragments are that we have on the manuscript? No, I mean, it is important because, as I said in the answer to the previous question, if you're a classical scholar, you're often working with medieval manuscripts and maybe one or two or three if you're lucky.

If instead we've got lots and lots and lots of fragments from the second and even more from the third and even more from the fourth century, all converging on this explosive event that's happened, then this doesn't happen by accident. I'm going to take a quick pause here to remind you that the Ask Empty Right Anything podcast is brought to you by Premier in partnership with SBCK and NT Right Online. SBCK is Tom's UK publisher.

And in honor of Tom Wright's 70th birthday, they've launched a special book specifically dedicated to him, which has contributions from other significant people in different fields. It's called One God, One People, One Future, essays in honor of NT Right, and it's available now. In fact, the manuscript of this "Festrieff Dev essays" was presented to Tom by colleagues in a surprise ceremony at the Society for Biblical Literature's annual meeting last month in Denver, Colorado.

I know that Tom was very humbled to have received this honor. It is available now. You can check it out along with Tom's other books at sBCK Publishing dot co dot UK slash Tom hyphen right if you want to get taken straight to the page.

Let's talk about the way the gospel writers put things across sometimes. How about this one from Josh in San Antonio, Texas? How do you account for the different stories of the calling of Peter to Ministry in the gospels? Is it true that Jewish writers would change the details of stories they wrote down in order to make a bigger point? A scholar told me this and it's been bothering me for some time. If this is true, how do we know what "true" in a western sense each and every detail and what's "true" in a Jewish sense? The broader meaning of the story.

Perhaps you could just begin by outlining what the differences are in the stories of the



calling of Peter. Well, in Luke, you have Jesus doing this extraordinary thing telling Peter to go and catch some fish and Peter says, "Look, we worked all night. Hasn't done anything." And then he says, "Depart from me because I'm a sinner and Jesus is actually from now on, you'll be catching people." But then elsewhere, Jesus is walking by the lake and simply calls them.

James and John and Peter and so on. That's right. But then, of course, in John 21, when, again, Peter has gone fishing, then it's the risen Jesus who says, "Come and have breakfast." And then Simon, son of John, do you love me? And I have no problem saying that actually in real life, things may well happen in different sequences.

What strikes me about the question is this touchingly almost naive view, sorry to the question, I don't want to be rude, but that we in the west believe in unvarnished facts and that other cultures select and arrange them. And as everyone knows, who's ever seen anything in the newspaper that they actually know something about, that details are wrong. And likewise, I have taken part in various television news programs and I've been working in public life.

And to watch how the editors will very carefully present a particular angle and very carefully screen out something else that might just tell a different story. I'm sorry, if we think that we know about unvarnished facts, then this is a modern bit of positivism that we have to repent of. This has come to me more forcefully, having had the experience of writing a book myself, which I presented some episodes conversations and dialogues I had with people, but I presented them for the sake of the way I wanted to make the point someone to make.

And I realised as I was doing that, as I cut out some individuals who were present in the conversations and so on, these are probably what the gospel writers were doing at various points. They had their own reasons for John says at the end, Jesus did many other things, and if you were to write them all down, the world would explain, it wouldn't be enough room. And this is one of the most basic points to get across to people, because people, speakers, if the gospels are the kind of transcript that you'd get, if you'd had a video camera with the camera rolling, the tape recorder going, and then every single thing gets written down.

Well, sorry, no. Jesus spends a lot of time with the disciples, and most of the time, I think he was not telling them parables. He'd probably say, "Oh, is it time for supper yet?" Or, "You look a bit sick.

What can we do about that?" There's a thousand different conversations which are not reported. And here's the thing. All of us all the time select and arrange.

When I go home after this trip, I will sit down for supper with my wife, and I will tell her something of what I've been doing. But I've been away for more than a week. If I were to

tell her every single thing I'd done, she would be crushingly bored, say, "For goodness sake, get to the point." So I'd have to select and arrange, not in order to tell lies, but because that's what we all have to do.

And if you ever meet somebody who doesn't select and arrange a young child just blabbing along, or somebody who's stoned out of their mind and just rambling, that's very tedious. So, for instance, the critic who says, "Ah, but the Bible can't be true," because in this particular gospel, you have Jesus in the temple doing his thing now, and later on, it's somewhere else. They're treating it long.

If anyone's bothered about this, I would say, go to the gospels and look at the story of Peter denying Jesus and the cock, or the rooster, as the Americans call it, crowing. How often does that happen? And what is the precise sequence? Get hold of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and try and line it up. And as many people have shown, the only way you can make all those stories fit in the way they're told is by having the rooster or cock crowing nine times, which is what none of the narratives say.

So in order to prove they're all true, you have to prove that they're all false. And this is a way of saying lighten up, guys. We'll delve into this in another podcast because I have got questions on your view on inerrancy, and that's interesting.

So we'll come to that another time, but we'll put a pin in that for the moment. Okay, how about one last question as we draw to the end of today's podcast, Thomas in Washington State, a number of questions from North America on today's show. How do you visualize the ascension? Do you think Jesus actually floated up into the sky? That's a good question.

And obviously this occurs at the end of Luke and the beginning of Acts. And for Paul and the others, they are taking very often Psalm 110, the Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand till I make your enemies your footstool. And they're taking Psalm 8, the Son of Man is now crowned with glory and honor with all things put in subjection under his feet.

And I think they know perfectly well that these are earthly words about a heavenly reality, but more complicated about a heaven plus earth reality. That's the first thing I think to say about the ascension is that for us, because we are innate Epicureans, that is to say we live in a worldview where heaven is a long way away, we imagine that if Jesus goes to heaven, he is not relating to us anymore. He's gone away and left us by ourselves.

And the answer is no, in the biblical worldview, heaven and earth are meant to join together. And where heaven and earth join together is the temple. And to say that Jesus is now in heaven is to make a statement about the true temple being now Jesus own human body.

John says that. He spoke of the temple of his body. Then we say, well, okay, how does that work granted that heaven and earth are not fully joined together as they will one day be? And then we find that there are some passages in the New Testament which talk in a sort of upstairs downstairs language and some which talk in a secret and hidden but to be revealed language so that for instance in 1 John 3, he says, when Jesus appears, we will be like him for we will see him as he is when he appears.

And that appearing is as though he is present but behind a curtain and one day the curtain will be drawn back. And we will realize he's been just there all along. And Paul says the same in Colossians 3, if you're raised with Christ, we are seated with him in the heavenly places.

But when Christ who is our life appears and it's as though for Paul the heavenly places are not miles upstairs. So I think that the main thing is that we have to realize the last 300 years in Western culture, we have had an upstairs downstairs heaven and earth vision of how stuff works. So then back to the question and naturally I do not know but it seems to me the idea of a cloud receiving him is rather like the transfiguration whether it was a cloud and a voice from the cloud.

This is like the cloud and the fire in the wilderness. This is the living presence of God saying this really is my son, he is now with me. And if that means that there is some vertical movement then I've no problem with that.

The danger is precisely because of our culture we think oh so Jesus is some kind of weird space man. And then of course that plays into the wrong view of the second coming as well that Jesus is going to be floating downwards on a cloud. And I just think we have to lighten up about that.

Including all those wonderful stained glass windows which have a cloud with two feet sticking down. No I don't think that's how it was. Okay.

Thank you so much. If this book you would recommend people to dig into of your own or another person if they want to look a bit more into the historical case. Well a few years ago I wrote a book called Simply Jesus which is kind of medium length and relatively easy I think but sends you back of course to my big one, Jesus is the victory of God.

But simply Jesus is the recent one where I've tried to explore this. Great stuff. Thank you so much for being with us on today's podcast Tom.

I wish you a very happy Christmas as well. Thank you. And I look forward to hearing from you if you've been listening and you'd like to give us a thought, a comment or a question do make sure to get in touch with the show.

You can do that the usual way of our webpage [askentiright.com](http://askentiright.com) do make sure to register there for the newsletter and register so that you can ask your question or send us your

comment. And we'll be back with you for another edition of the show next time. Hey thank you for listening this week and next time we're back with more content from the recent re-imagining global mission conference that took place in Oxford where Tom was the keynote speaker.

Again if you enjoy this show and our mission to help non-Christians explore faith and Christians to understand defend and share their faith with confidence then please do consider giving to our end of year appeal. There's a link with today's podcast where you can do that. For now I hope you have a very peaceful and joy-filled Christmas.

See you next time.

[buzzing]