

Answering a Listener Regarding *Autopiston*
Dr. Joel R. Grassi, Pastor

Today we are answering some listeners' comments that have come in, and we are so thankful for the listeners and viewers we have and for their comments & questions.

“Have not I written to thee excellent things in counsels and knowledge, That I might make thee know the certainty of the words of truth; that thou mightest answer the words of truth to them that send unto thee?” Proverbs 22:20-21 KJV

Let me say that these two questions / comments that have come in were each in regard to two separate talks that I have given respectively speaking. The first comment / question was in response to a paper I gave at the Reformation Bible Society Annual meeting in Grand Rapids Michigan concerning Bart Ehrman’s apocalypse. The second question was in response to a message I gave both at our church and then gave a shorter version of on our radio program on the topic of the Destroying of the Destroyers. And I’m thankful for these comments / questions and am glad to try to answer them. We appreciate anyone who gives their time to listen to the Word of God and consider it and even to wrestle with as it were.

Let me also preface my responses by saying that I am answering these comments / questions on a radio message and eventually an article which will be posted to our website, and I’m not answering them in another comment, because I feel that if someone takes the time to write in, they ought to get a worthy response. I think in a perfect world, if I give a paper and someone has an objection, then they should respond with a paper. Likewise with a sermon, a sermon should be given in response. I understand that we live in a world of comments and commenters, and that’s not going to change. I found out pretty quickly that very little edification, illumination, education or consecration takes place in the comments. So please forgive me if you were expecting a comment back to your comment. I believe it’s more honoring to God and more honoring to you the listener or reader to handle it with a message or an article, since the comments are public to begin with. (We will put a note in the comments section pointing commenters to these messages and articles).

Last year you might remember I gave my critique of Bart Ehrman’s Apocalypse at the RBS in Grand Rapids. That was a shorter version of a 20 plus page response that I gave to Ehrman's recent work on the book of Revelation. The version given at the RBS was recorded and posted to YouTube on their channel.

Most of the comments were commendations and positive remarks, and there was one by “SE” which seemed to take issue with one sentence that I had said during my paper presentation. The sentence at hand was an affirmation of the Scripture being self-authenticating, that is, *autopiston*.

Here is SE’s comment and then we’ll go back and listen to portion of the paper in question:

When you say "Scripture is self authenticating" I'm hearing "my interpretation of these ancient texts authenticates my starting assumptions about these ancient texts." Your conclusion is only coherent within the framework of assumptions/beliefs you start with. So is Bart's. Compare and contrast your starting assumptions with his.

In the context I was rebuffing Ehrman’s theory that the book of Revelation could be non-canonical. This is the portion of my paper under question:

Ehrman opens up with a topic that he will come back to several times, that of the alleged resistance by some to receiving Revelation into the NT canon. He says, “Many early Christians

opposed the book of Revelation and argued it should not be included in the New Testament.” (p. xvii). These sort of statements look quite impressive at the outset, but upon deeper consideration they are not really proving anything. “Many” is certainly not all, and it is not even most, and it might not be all that “many.” It would just happen to be whatever historical accounts have been preserved for us, assuming they are relatively accurate. The word “Christians” had a broad application in ancient times just as it does now, and the term has never been restricted just to the Lord’s NT churches which were His candlesticks, the pillar and ground of the truth and the body of Christ on earth with the Lord Jesus as the head, having been given His promise to be guided into all truth. The multitudes who stopped following Jesus during His ministry would have been considered “Christians” by observers, so these sort of arguments really don’t help us understand Revelation any better. Again, these alleged claims do nothing to undermine the fact that the Lord’s NT churches, the pillar and ground of the truth (I Timothy 3:15), have received Revelation as the canonical word of God as led by the Holy Spirit in accordance with Christ’s promises (cf. John 14-16).¹

Ehrman declares, “For centuries it was not widely read... even scribes were not particularly interested in copying it” (p. 23). That seems to be an especially questionable statement for Ehrman to make since he has been telling people for years that they cannot even know what the Bible really says even though we have well over 5,000 Greek manuscripts of the NT. We have exactly how many written ancient documents saying, “for centuries Revelation was not widely read”? In other words there is no certainty about what the Bible says, but there is great certainty that ancient scribes did not want to copy it (?). And Ehrman’s conjecture seems to be based on what he says next: “We have far fewer manuscripts of Revelation than for any other book of comparable size in the New Testament.” (pp.23-24). But that does not prove at all Ehrman’s theory that scribes were neither reading nor copying Revelation. It could just as easily mean that because of its importance copies of it were targeted for destruction by the Roman government and the Roman state church. It could mean that copies were read and destroyed. Furthermore, we have more Greek manuscripts containing all or part of Revelation (over 300) than we do of many of the ancient historical records Ehrman is fond of quoting (some of which only exist in one or two manuscripts, etc.).²

After I had read that portion during my paper I made the statement that “Scripture is self-authenticating” and I used the word *autopiston*.

Let’s look again at SE’s comment:

When you say "Scripture is self authenticating" I'm hearing "my interpretation of these ancient texts authenticates my starting assumptions about these ancient texts." Your conclusion is only coherent within the framework of assumptions/beliefs you start with. So is Bart's. Compare and contrast your starting assumptions with his.

¹ Lenski rightly notes, “The factor that placed Revelation into the canon and has made its canonical position impregnable is inherent in the book itself.” Lenski, p. 14. Libraries could be filled as to the canon and authorship of Revelation. Barnes notes, “Polycarp was, as there is every reason to suppose, the personal friend of John, and Irenaeus was the personal friend of Polycarp (Lardner, 11. 94-96). Now Irenaeus, as we shall see, on all occasions, and in the most positive manner, gives clear testimony that the Apocalypse was written by the apostle John.” Barnes Notes on the Holy Bible, Vol. 14, pp. Xxx-xxxi.

² We could illustrate this in light of Mr. Tyndale’s NT of which we have zero extant copies of his 1525 edition and only 3 or 4 of his 1526 edition. Does that indicate a lack of interest of English speaking people in the Bible?

I don't mean this to sound short, but it seems as though this has been pulled out of thin air. When we speak of *autopiston* we are talking about Matthew confirming Moses, and Peter confirming David, etc. The NT confirms the OT. The OT is Christ concealed, the NT is Christ revealed. The uniqueness of the Holy Bible against any other book in the history of books. It is such the book that when we say "the book" everyone knows exactly what we are talking about.

John Owen refers to the self-authenticating nature of Scripture as its intrinsic excellencies and he names a few: consistency, majesty, spiritual efficacy, and harmony, as well as its internal witness in the heart of believers. This is one of the reasons why people who are against God always seek to find some kind of disharmony in the Bible. And this is also why so many of the people who allege to leave the Christian faith almost never can let the Bible go. Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice," and I believe that those who claim to be former sheep nevertheless in some sense are still hearing the voice of the shepherd and can't let it go.

This commenter SE seems like he is familiar with Bart Ehrman, possibly / probably a fan or disciple of his. And interestingly it was at Dr. Ehrman's final lecture at UNC Chapel Hill that he made the case that the most significant discovery in the history of biblical studies is that the Bible is not one book but many books. Now Ehrman and Bible critics will use that for their purposes to argue for mistakes or contradictions in the Bible, (all of which can be answered), but that argument actually cuts two ways and bolsters what I'm talking about when I bring up "Scripture is self-authenticating." We know that the Bible had some 40 different human authors and that it was completed over a period of some 1600 years. And yet it tells one story, about one Redeemer and one act of redemption, with prophecies fulfilled jot and tittle hundreds and hundreds of years after they were made.

I agree with this commenter that Bart Ehrman starts with assumptions within himself, not with Scripture or history or evidence. I would encourage the commenter to go back and read my full critique of Ehrman's book because the answer to his question is in there too. The two testaments and the 66 books confirm one another, irrespective of anyone's interpretation. My statement in the paper presentation was in regards to a footnote about Lenski's saying that the NT churches received NT words. That's history for you if that's your focus. Bart denies the history, as this commenter says, because of his assumptions. This is why we care about his soul. And we care about your soul SE. Thanks for driving by and feel free to contact me through our church website if you'd like to have a non-anonymous conversation.

Bart Ehrman is approaching the Bible as a quote unquote "former Christian" who says he left the faith, not because of alleged contradictions in the Bible or in the evidence, but because he says he could not reconcile an all powerful / all loving God with the suffering in the world. That is a classic dilemma that we call the problem of suffering. And I always point people away from focusing firstly on the suffering of men and women, boys and girls, animals and creation, and to focus firstly on the reality that Christ suffered and was the lamb slain from the foundation of the world. That is truly the greater dilemma. As Spurgeon said, the challenge is not that God hated Esau. The challenge is that He loved Jacob.

So again, the Bible continually proves itself true. We're not even talking about all of the archaeology that backs it up, or external evidence, or the testimony of changed lives or things like that. We are saying that the NT confirms the OT. The Gospels prove the Law. The epistles prove the prophets. Revelation proves Genesis, etc. etc. etc. The Bible continually reveals itself to be the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ:

"Search the Scriptures: for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me." John 5:39 KJV

“The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple.” Psalms 119:130 KJV

“Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life?” John 6:68 KJV

I’m reminded of a man named Timothy who I met on the subway years ago. He sat down next to me and saw that I was reading Hebrew, and he asked me if I was Jewish. I told him I was Christian and he seemed disappointed. He said something along the lines of, “I used to be a Christian, I don’t know how anyone can still be a Christian.” I told him it was very easy to be a Christian because Jesus was such an awesome Savior and Friend. He began to tell me that his issue was with the Bible, and wondered how I could believe the Bible. I told him it was very easy to believe the Bible because it so clearly is the Word of God. He asked me how I knew. I told him there were many, many reasons, and when he asked for one I told him, “fulfilled prophecy.” He asked me to give him an example. I brought up how Zechariah prophesied that the Messiah would be betrayed for 30 pieces of silver, and how Matthew records that when the Lord Jesus was betrayed it was for exactly 30 pieces of silver. Zechariah’s prophecy was made hundreds of years before the life of Christ and was fulfilled exactly jot and tittle to how the Bible predicted it and history confirmed it. You know what this precious soul named Timothy said to me in response to that? “Give me another one.”

This true story illustrates that the heart of the matter is the matter of the heart. We all tend to make excuses until we come to true repentance.

“And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.” Luke 16:31 KJV