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Losing Faith: Who Did and Who Didn't How Scholarship Affects Scholars

[Sidebar: How Religious Are America's Professors?](#)



THE PARTICIPANTS. Four major scholars came together at the BAS office last November to discuss how their professional work has affected their faith, with varied outcomes. They are (from left): Bart D. Ehrman, William G. Dever, James F. Strange and Lawrence H. Schiffman.

Several media stories recently reported that Bart Ehrman, a leading expert on the apocryphal gospels and one of BAS's most popular lecturers, had lost his faith as a result of his scholarly research. This raised a question for us that is not often talked about, but seemed well worth a discussion: What effect does scholarship have on faith? We asked Bart to join three other scholars to talk about this: James F. Strange, a leading archaeologist and Baptist minister; Lawrence H. Schiffman, a prominent Dead Sea Scroll scholar and Orthodox Jew; and William G. Dever, one of America's best-known and most widely quoted archaeologists, who had been an evangelical preacher, then lost his faith, then became a Reform Jew and now says he's a non-believer. The discussion took place in the offices of the Biblical Archaeology Society on November 19, 2006, and was moderated by **BAR** editor Hershel Shanks.

Hershel Shanks: Bart, how did your scholarship affect your faith?

Bart Ehrman: First, I lost my fundamentalist faith because of my scholarship. Like Bill Dever, I have a fundamentalist background. I had a very high view of Scripture as the inerrant word of God, no mistakes of any kind—geographical or historical. No contradictions. Inviolable.

My scholarship early on as a graduate student showed me that in fact these views about the Bible were wrong. I started finding contradictions and finding other discrepancies and started finding problems with the Bible. What that ended up doing for me was showing me that the basis of my faith, which at that time was the Bible, was problematic. So I shifted from being an evangelical Christian to becoming a fairly mainline liberal Protestant Christian.

What ended up making me lose my faith was kind of related to scholarship: When I was at Rutgers University, I taught a course on the problem of suffering in Biblical traditions, where I dealt with issues of theodicy throughout different Biblical books, both Hebrew Bible and the New Testament—

Shanks: What is theodicy?

Ehrman: Theodicy is the question of how God can be righteous, given the amount of suffering in the world. The issue as it's usually put today is that if God is all-powerful and is able to prevent suffering, and is all-loving so that he wants to prevent suffering, why is there suffering? This problem isn't ever expressed that way in the Bible, but Biblical authors do deal with the problem by asking: Why does the people of God suffer? In teaching this course, the thing that struck me is just how different the answers are. Depending on what part of Job you read, you get one set of answers. If you read the Prophets, you get a different set of answers. If you read apocalyptic literature, you get still a different set of answers.

This made me think more deeply about my own understanding of why there's suffering in the world. Finally, because I became dissatisfied with all the conventional answers, I decided that I couldn't believe in a God who was in any way intervening in this world, given the state of things. So that's why I ended up losing my faith.



Bart D. Ehrman

Shanks: I want to separate a couple of issues. You talked about how you, as a young person, believed in the inerrancy of the Bible, that every word was accurate and divine. I really want to separate that from what we're talking about.

Is it fair to say that no one here believes in the inerrancy of the Biblical text?

James Strange: I think so. Yeah.

Shanks: Larry?

Lawrence Schiffman: Yeah, it's fair. Inerrancy assumes a kind of literalism never adopted in Jewish tradition.

Shanks: Okay. That's a different question from what I want to discuss. I want to discuss the second issue: What your scholarship has done to your faith. Faith, I take it, is not a rational thing that we arrive at, not an argument that we win. It comes from another source, and we've just heard what his scholarship has done to Bart's faith.

Jim, you're a Baptist minister. Has your scholarship, your excavations and your archaeology deepened your faith? Or has it caused you to question it? Are you still a Baptist minister?

Strange: Yeah, I'm still a Baptist minister. I don't have a pulpit. The only thing I do every now and then is a wedding for someone—or a funeral. Maybe now it's more funerals. [Laughs] I bury more than I marry.

But to answer you more directly, I just don't see the connection. My faith is not based upon anything like a propositional argument. When I indulge myself in all this scientific research and explication, I'm not doing anything about faith.

Shanks: What is your faith based on?

Strange: My faith is based on my own experience—a good old Protestant principle.

William Dever: Very Protestant.

Schiffman: It's a form of existentialism.

Strange: Yes, it is. I love the existentialist philosophers. I love to read them, not because they're giving me any testable facts. It's because it's like reading a really good poet. It does something to you that propositional truth never does.

Shanks: What do you mean by propositional truth?

Strange: Propositional truth is like: There is a loving God that intervenes upon the earth. That's a proposition. It's testable or it's not. If it's not testable, then you can't falsify it; you can't know if it's true or not. If it really is testable, then the way you test it is to start checking out a list of experiences people have—and suffering is a prime one human beings have in common. So you end up saying, I've tested the hypothesis and it is now wanting. Suffering tends to disconfirm the hypothesis.

Shanks: You say your faith is not based on this proposition?

Strange: That's correct.

Shanks: What is it based on?

Strange: Based on my own experience with God. For a lot of people, this makes me sort of a mystic in a cave or something. But I think it's eminently practical and out there. I think that there's as much reason to see the face of God in someone like William Dever.

Dever: Hold on.

[Laughter]

Shanks: Does this God of yours have any attributes?

Strange: I suppose so, but I'm not really much interested. If I'm passionately in love, I hardly ever want to discuss the attributes of the person I'm in love with. Or if I do, I wind up saying superfluous things for everybody listening. "She's wonderful." "Can you give me some more information?" "Yeah, she's *really wonderful*." [Laughs] When you're in this state, you don't utter propositions.

Shanks: Would you say that your scholarship, then, has had really no effect on your faith?

Strange: Virtually none. I mean I have a wonderful intellectual time with my scholarship. I get the same existentialist thrill out of touching the dirt when I'm excavating as I do holding my wife's hand.

Shanks: You love the earth that you're excavating really?

Strange: Yes.

Shanks: Does that have anything to do with your faith?

Strange: It has something to do with the center of my being. But I don't know how to express that like a philosopher. I have a B.A. in philosophy, which doesn't make me much of a philosopher. I grew up in east Texas, where the choices were you believed in the Bible literally or you didn't believe in the Bible literally. That was it. I didn't. So it's my own experience with God that tipped me over on the other side. My best analogy is falling in love.

Shanks: Bart, do you have any reaction to what he says?

Ehrman: Yeah, I do. It seems to me that Christianity—Christian faith—has always been grounded in certain historical claims, for example, about Jesus. One thing that scholarship did for me: It led me to question historical claims that Christians have made about Jesus.

Shanks: What historical claims?

Ehrman: For example, that he was raised from the dead. That's a historical claim. I mean either he was raised from the dead or he rotted in his grave. The kind of Christianity I was in believed in an active physical resurrection of Jesus. That was part of what it meant to be Christian. You had to believe that.



James F. Strange

Shanks: Do you believe it, Jim?

Strange: I don't believe *that*, but, yeah, I believe in something that means that Christ is alive, and our explanation of that is that there was a resurrection.

I think I'm more or less untouched by the sort of literalist interpretation [Bart is talking about]; resurrection is sort of a metaphor.

Ehrman: If Jesus hadn't been crucified, if he grew up to be an old man and died and was buried in a family plot outside of Nazareth, then for me, when I was a Christian, that would've destroyed my faith.

In other words, the faith is rooted in certain historical claims. As historical claims, they can be shown as either probable or improbable. And I got to a point where the historical claims about Jesus seemed implausible, especially the resurrection. Not the crucifixion—I think Jesus was crucified like a lot of other people were crucified, and I think that, like a lot of other people, he stayed dead. And so, for me, that had a damaging impact on my faith.

Shanks: Do you feel a necessity to subscribe to the historical claims of Christianity, Jim?

Strange: In some way I do because in the earliest Christian language there are some of these historical claims. I'm not in any position to be able to check those claims or even decide on their plausibility. I guess I just don't worry about it.

Shanks: Well, Larry, I take it that you, as an Orthodox Jew, don't believe those historical claims about Jesus.

Schiffman: No. One of the principles of the Jewish faith is not believing in Jesus. [Laughter] But, like Bart, I of course believe that he lived, preached and was crucified by the Romans.

From a Jewish point of view, these kinds of problems aren't problems. First of all, the Bible was never taken literally in Judaism. It doesn't mean that it's not historical, but it is not taken literally in the Protestant sense. It's not an issue in Judaism. Admittedly there is a literalist strain in a minority of medieval Jewish thinkers and a minority—maybe a growing minority—in modern Judaism, but it's not classical Judaism. The Talmud doesn't take the Bible literally in the Protestant sense.

Jim's approach of taking a kind of experiential approach to the whole thing is one that is much more primary in Judaism.

I get into debates about these historical types of issues all the time, especially within the Orthodox community. I don't want to say they aren't important—they are important. We sit around and debate these kinds of questions all day.

I heard a recent lecture by a rabbi who is becoming a medical doctor. He talked about the problem of creation. And he said, well, evolution is obviously true. What do I do about it if evolution is obviously true? He said that we learn from Nachmanides that nothing in the Bible about creation is intended literally. What's important to me is that I have the experience of God as the creator.

Let's take the problem of evil. Somehow or another, Jews have learned throughout their history the bad news that we can't explain it. We talk about it all the time. We talk about the debate in Job and the various approaches explored there. We see the continuation of these debates in Midrash. But we know that we can't explain evil, especially after the Holocaust. Any person who says that he can give an explanation for the Holocaust is crazy. So the bottom line is that we all go along living with the fact that this horrible thing happened and we can't explain it. Judaism doesn't claim that the individual will get all the answers to everything.

In one of Bill's books, he discusses the historicity of the Exodus, and he throws up his hands. From the Jewish viewpoint

everyone says it happened; it's part of our past, part of our history. Somehow or other, it happened. I happen to believe there was some kind of Exodus. But the point I'm making is that the framing of the question, from the Jewish point of view, is very different.



Lawrence H. Schiffman

Dever: Which is why I feel comfortable in Judaism. That's where I've arrived—by a long and tortuous path.

Shanks: Tell us a little about your long and tortuous path, Bill.

Dever: Well, my father was a fire-breathing fundamentalist. I grew up hearing him preach in tent meetings in the hills of eastern Kentucky and Tennessee. He had a bigger voice than I do. I was ordained a minister at 17, put myself through undergraduate school and on through divinity school, through Harvard, then a congregation. I have 13 years' experience as a parish minister and two theological degrees. For me, it was this typical Protestant conundrum: It's all true or none of it is true. My sainted mother once said to me, If I can't believe that the whale swallowed Jonah, I can't believe any of it.

When I was writing a master's thesis on the revival of Old Testament theology, I got all excited because at last modern critical scholarship was going to prove the Bible true after all. I discovered the works of George Ernest Wright [a professor at Harvard] and his little book *God Who Acts*¹, a classic of the neo-orthodox movement. I still remember to this day the quotation that sort of turned my life around. "In Biblical faith," Ernest said, "everything depends upon whether the original events actually happened." And I thought they had, so I went to Harvard to study Old Testament theology with Ernest. I got disabused of that in the first semester, so I shifted to archaeology. The rest is history.

Then, of course, a nice Christian boy like me graduates, and the day after graduation he goes to Israel for a day and stays 12 years. I became the director of archaeology at the Jerusalem branch of Hebrew Union College, a Reform Jewish seminary. I worked on Sunday, my staff was all Jewish; I more or less forgot my Christian background, but I never forgot Ernest's statement.

Then, about 15 years ago, in my archaeological work I began to write about ancient Israel. Originally I wrote to frustrate the Biblical minimalists; then I became one of them, more or less. The call of Abraham, the Promise of the Land, the migration to Canaan, the descent into Egypt, the Exodus, Moses and monotheism, the Law at Sinai, divine kingship—archaeology throws all of these into great doubt. My long experience in Israel and my growing uncertainty about the historicity of the Bible meant that was the end for me.

Shanks: Well, then your scholarship did destroy your faith?

Dever: Absolutely. Next year will be the 50th anniversary of my first trip to Israel. I worked there for 49 years and let me tell you something: Seeing Judaism and Christianity and, God help us, Islam up close and personal does not help.

Living in the Holy Land, I became extremely cynical about religion. I began to think, more or less, maybe like all of you, that I had no talent for religion, that faith might be a matter of temperament as well as training. I never had a pious bone in my body. And I realized I was never really a believer, but it just took me 40 years to figure out that it was no longer meaningful. That's when I converted to Judaism. [Laughs] I did it precisely because you don't have to be religious to be a Jew. And I'm perfectly comfortable where I am.

Shanks: How do you respond to that, Larry? "You don't have to be religious to be a Jew"?

Dever: That's true of most Israelis.

Schiffman: Yes, that's a fact. A Jew remains part of the Jewish people whatever he or she believes or practices. But in order to be a Jew, you have to have some concept that you believe in Judaism. You have a received tradition from other people—at least *they* believed they received the revelation.

Dever: Absolutely.

Schiffman: You've got to decide: Do I believe there is a God? Do I believe that God communicated some kind of way of life to someone that became Judaism?

Dever: I think Judaism is about practices rather than a correct theology.

Strange: I think precisely that [about Judaism]. Christian tradition, on the other hand, made a mistake because we intellectualized it so much that Christian experience got submerged. Theology was bereft of any kind of experience.

Schiffman: Judaism is different because much of the act of being a traditional Jew is intellectualizing. Study becomes a form of worship.

Strange: Yes, it does precisely.

Schiffman: Study is worship. So a person who claims not to be a believer may be doing worship in some form. You could

study the whole Talmud and say, I don't believe anything.

But I think modern Judaism goes too far with the notion that you don't have to believe anything to be Jewish. You don't in the sense that you're part of the community even if you don't believe. But the question is, doesn't Judaism really have in mind that a person will have certain types of faith commitments that are then acted out in certain ways?

Shanks: Larry, do you believe in God?

Schiffman: Yes.

Shanks: What's the God you believe in?

Schiffman: I believe in a personal God, but I'm conditioned by the philosophical approach of Maimonides. Does that personal God interfere in the individual's life or not? How would I get close to that personal God? Can I have a mystical experience? These are all debates that Jews have carried on for millennia. So I don't have to have the answer to everyone's questions. I can say there's a lot that I don't know.

An Orthodox Jew can believe whatever he wants and be part of the community, but Orthodox Judaism assumes that a person does believe that there really is a God. There is a force that cannot physically be accounted for. There is a force, even if we don't know how to present what it is in words. Somehow or other God reveals himself or his will to humanity. This revelation and its experience constitute in some mystical way, if not in a physical way, the Torah, the Prophets, the Writings. Otherwise, you could be a Jew, no question, but let's face it, an Orthodox Jew, some way or another, believes that. How you account for that, with the many philosophical issues, theological issues, and scholarly issues and your own perceived experience, I think that's what Jewish theology and philosophy are all about. Obviously, I don't have all the answers.



William G. Dever

Shanks: How do you react to that, Bart?

Ehrman: It's very interesting, because two of us have remained within our religious traditions and two of us have left our religious traditions. Bill and I have both left our original traditions. But there's a difference between Bill and me. Bill adopted another tradition. It seems to me that, as somebody who has left his tradition, I have to decide if I'm going to believe something and what it is I'm going to believe. And even if that isn't expressed propositionally, there still have to be reasons. Once one leaves one's tradition, it isn't an automatic move for me to go from Christianity to Judaism. There are hundreds of religions in the world. Why would I choose one over the other?

Dever: Well, I lived and worked so long in Israel, all my friends were Jews, I was remarrying a Jewish woman; it was obvious to me that's where I should go. I ended up feeling very comfortable.

I will never forget the reaction of Avraham Biran, who was my successor at HUC [Hebrew Union College], when he got the news that I converted. He said "No-o-o, Dever, I was born a Jew; I didn't have a choice. But you had a choice!" [Laughter]

But I want to make it very clear. I'm not an atheist. I'm an agnostic. I don't know but I'm willing to learn. Right now the Christian tradition does nothing for me and the Orthodox Jewish tradition does little for me. In my own experience, I find this God so distant that it doesn't make any practical difference. And, for me, I guess the final straw probably was the death of my son five years ago. If I had believed in God, I would have been very angry, but I didn't and I survived.

As the Yiddish expression says: "If God lived on earth, people would break his windows." That's been my experience.

Strange: When my eldest daughter was born with a heart defect, I got mad as hell at God. And I told him so. But I didn't say, Okay from now on I'm not going to believe in you.

Shanks: Let me ask the two believers: Is one religion truer than another? Is your religion truer than another?

Strange: We'll never know that.

Schiffman: I don't believe in pluralism. I believe in toleration and mutual respect. But I do believe that certain things are ultimately true or untrue. I believe that my religion is more correct than some other people's religion. But I'm the first to admit that many other people's religions make them better people and that many things taught in their religions are things that I agree with. We share a lot in common.

A guy came to interview me recently for some TV program about Adam and Eve. So I said that the story of Adam and Eve is like a microcosm of human relations between a man and a woman, about people and God, and about good and evil. After about five minutes, the guy turns off the recorder and says "I don't understand. Everybody else I interviewed is talking about—Where is Eden? Was there really one human being in the beginning?" I said that is not what this is about. There are major challenges to the Bible if you take it literally, but that is not what matters. That isn't what it means to be a believing Jew.

Maybe I'm compartmentalizing. Maybe I'm being apologetic. I don't know. But the bottom line to me is not only that my faith has not been weakened but that it has been strengthened by my scholarship.

Shanks: Bart, it sounds to me as if all these people kind of agree with you that the historical questions you're raising about the Bible are of very doubtful veracity, but it hasn't destroyed their faith. They're talking about faith that isn't grounded in historical propositions.

Ehrman: Yes, but even Larry thinks that at the end of the day you have to believe in God. And then your original question about "What kind of attributes does God have?" matters. Just believing in God is for me an amorphous idea. I think belief has content. Without content it's simply some kind of feeling that you have inside. I think that faith has to have substance. But once you start putting some substance onto that, you get into trouble. Faith in the Judeo-Christian tradition has a God who intervenes. That's what the Exodus event is, that's what the crucifixion is: it's a God who intervenes, and when I look around this world, I don't see a God who intervenes.

Dever: Precisely my experience.

Strange: What I can't help but notice is that two people look at precisely the same event and one sees God intervening and the other does not. Apparently the one who has seen God is either fooling himself or there is something genuinely happening that's going on. Bill doesn't see a God where I'm seeing God.

Dever: I'm glad you do. I just don't need to do that. Religion doesn't do anything for me and it hasn't for a long time, and I've decided I don't need its excess baggage.

Ehrman: I have a different view. I would actually like to be a believer.

Dever: I would too. I wish it were true. I really do.

Schiffman: I see the whole thing as a lifelong quest. It's not that either a person believes or doesn't believe. The life experiences of people are very difficult and very complex, and believing in God is itself a challenge. It's not about whether I know the Exodus happened or didn't happen. It has to do with understanding the difficult world that we're in. Faith is a process.

Dever: A dynamic.

Schiffman: It is a dynamic. A person goes through many experiences.

Strange: It's certainly not just a set of beliefs.

Dever: Or a warm fuzzy feeling. If that's all it is, I'm just not interested.

Schiffman: In Judaism there is actually a commandment to believe. What does that mean, a command to believe? Well, it wouldn't be a commandment if it were so easy. There has to be a struggle that a human being goes through in this complex world, in which we don't really know what's going on. That's why the believer can't say of the non-believer, "Oh this guy is some kind of a fool; you're a heretic, an infidel." No, you're a person who has certain experiences. And you react in a certain way to those experiences.

Ehrman: I think what's happened in the case of both Larry and Jim is that they have a tradition that they inherited. That's the way they were born and raised. The experiences they've had they interpreted in light of that background. When I interpret my experiences, I don't have that background anymore because I've left the kind of propositional faith that I used to have. And so the question for me is, Why should I believe one thing rather than another? Why should I be a Jew instead of a Buddhist? There are thousands of options out there.

I just think faith, in order to be intelligent, needs to have reasons behind it. I myself just don't have sufficient reasons for believing in the Christian tradition. The same thing, I think, for the Jewish tradition.

Shanks: All right. How about a final statement: Has your scholarship affected your faith?

Schiffman: Perhaps because of my intellectual background—the way I understand Judaism in general—the more I've done in scholarship, the more it has strengthened my faith, even though it has refined it in certain ways. There's a non-literalist tradition that I'm coming from. And for this reason a lot of these issues aren't challenges to my faith. They're rather part of the ongoing debate and dialectic.

Dever: At this stage of my life I'm interested only in finding out what it was really like in ancient Israel, if possible, and I find faith an impediment to that.

Strange: I think I would say that faith/unfaith is sort of a false dichotomy. I think faith always contains elements of unfaith and vice versa. So in a way, we can't avoid it. It's just a matter of deciding what fits and what works. And also, where we get hope from.

Shanks: How about your scholarship, Jim? Has that had any effect?

Strange: Scholarship doesn't give me hope. Scholarship is a wonderful intellectual exercise.

Shanks: The last word is yours, Bart.

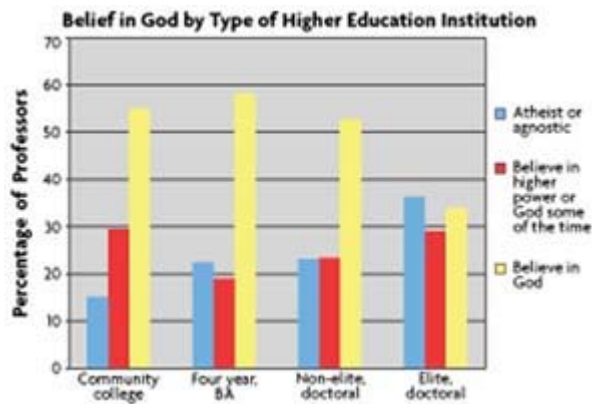
Ehrman: Historical scholarship calls into question certain beliefs and can call into question faith. But it can't resolve any faith issues. There are historians who agree with everything that I think about the historical Jesus, about the New Testament, about the development of Christian doctrine, and yet they're professors in theological seminaries training pastors. If you ask them, they will say, "Yes, Jesus is God. Historical scholarship doesn't determine what we believe." So I think what's important is that people engage in historical scholarship. It's better to have a knowledgeable faith than an ignorant faith, and it may be that it will change faith, but it's not necessarily going to lead somebody to agnosticism.

Shanks: Thank you all very much.

All photographs for this interview were taken by Jim Haberman.

How Religious Are America's Professors?

Sidebar to: [Losing Faith: Who Did and Who Didn't](#)



America's increasingly pluralistic society and the ever-growing value placed on scientific and technological advancement have led many to assume a secularization of American higher education. Some studies indicate that the American professoriate is dominated by liberals, and it is charged that they discriminate against conservatives and create a hostile environment for religious faculty, staff and students. Recently Dr. Neil Gross (assistant professor of sociology, Harvard University) and Dr. Solon Simmons (assistant professor in the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University) conducted a survey to measure the political, social and religious attitudes of America's college and university professors. They collected data from a random sampling of professors in various disciplines and institutions. The types of institutions broke down into four categories: community colleges, four-year colleges or universities, non-elite Ph.D.-granting institutions and elite Ph.D.-granting institutions (identified as the top 50 in the latest *U.S. News and World Report* ranking).

The study found that 23.4 percent of the professors surveyed classify themselves as agnostic or atheist—far from the majority. However, this compares with the 6.9 percent of all Americans and 11.2 percent of Americans with four or more years of college education who consider themselves agnostic or atheist.

Professors at elite doctoral institutions tended to be less religious than other professors, with 36.6 percent falling into the agnostic/atheist category. Noticeable variations were reported across disciplines as well: 61 percent of biology and psychology professors are agnostic or atheist, whereas the opposite is true for accounting professors: 63 percent of them say they have no doubt that God exists.

Few professors (12.6 percent) consider themselves to be traditionalists—as opposed to progressive or moderate. Only 6.1 percent of the respondents agreed with the statement, "The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word."—D.D.R.

Endnotes:

1. (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1960).

Reference for this article:

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