



Rembrandt, Crucifixion (detail)

Session 11: April 29: John; the Passion

Assignment:

Ehrman, ch. 11, 12 (Associates, Deeds, Controversies; Last Days)

Ehrman on the “Signs Source” in John [[link](#)]

John, 1:1-18 (Prologue); 2:1-11, 5:2-9, ch 6 (from the “Signs Source”);
8:1-11; ch 9; 11:1-13:30;

Mark ch 11-12; ch 14-16:8 (Passion)

Matthew ch 21:1-17; 25:31-28:20 (Passion)

Luke ch 19:29-40, 45-46; ch 22-24 (Passion)

John 2:13-25 (Temple incident); ch 18-20 (Passion);

Optional Reading:

Acts ch 1-2 (appearances; Pentacost)

Notes on the reading

Scholars have identified six likely sources for the text of John:

- 1) the prologue seems to be a stand-alone hymn added to the beginning;
- 2) the “signs source” as discussed in the reading from Ehrman’s blog;
- 3) two “discourse” sources: the long section from chapter x to y appears to consist of a long discourse into which another has been inserted;
- 4) the passion source;
- 5) chapter 21 which is probably a later supplement given its very different style.

I've suggested reading the Passion narrative in John following the others because I hope you'll notice the significant differences. Note that the Temple incident appears in John at the start of Jesus' ministry rather than during the final week.

Ehrman on "exaltation" v. "incarnation" Christology

An "exaltation" view of Christ is the view that at some point of his existence, Christ was "exalted" by God to a high level of divinity. This was the view of the earliest Christians, as seen for example in Paul's speech on Acts 13:33 (where God made Jesus the Son of God by raising him from the dead; you find a similar view in Romans 1:3–4 and in more exalted terms in Philippians 2:6–11).

Some people who held this view in early Christianity thought that Christ started as a human, and God made him divine; others thought that Christ started as a divine being and God exalted him to a higher level of divinity. In both cases, God exalted Jesus, either at his resurrection, or at his baptism, or at some other point of his existence.

The earliest followers of Jesus had an exaltation Christology. They knew Jesus as a man, but they came to believe he had been raised from the dead. Once they thought that, they assumed he had been taken up to heaven and made divine. As time went on, other Christians began to think that Jesus was not originally a human, but that he was a divine being for his entire life, and then an incarnation theology developed.

Ehrman on Jesus as God Incarnate and Other Things

[This is an edited transcript of an interview of Ehrman.]

I absolutely don't think the historical Jesus equated himself with God, as he is portrayed doing in the Gospel of John.

Judaism has lots of supernatural beings who are not equal with God: angels, archangels, principalities, powers, and so on. Non-Jews in the ancient world would have considered these divine beings — superhuman spiritual entities that dwell in heaven. It turns out, most Jews thought of them in that way, as well.

It's not that any of these was equal with God. They were all *created* beings. But they were created *divine* beings. Ancient Jews even thought that *humans* could be made into divine beings. The Jewish philosopher, Philo, for example, thought that at the end of his life Moses was made into a god. Not God Almighty, of course, but a god nonetheless.

Even in the Hebrew Bible, humans could be called God. Think of Psalm 45, where God speaks to the king of Israel and says, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever"; or Psalm 110 where we learn, again about the king, that "The LORD said to my Lord, sit at my right hand...". It seems weird to us because in our world virtually everyone is a monotheist, believing that there is only one God. But ancient people — including Jews — thought there were other divine beings, including some who were human!

[Do the gospels describe Jesus as creator of the world?] I do not think that Matthew, Mark, and Luke understood Jesus to have been the Creator of the world. They never say that, or hint at that. He *is* worthy of worship, though, since God exalted him to his heavenly throne at the resurrection.

The Gospel of John, on the other hand, does believe that “the Word” of God created the world. And the Word became incarnate as the man Jesus Christ. But it’s not quite right to say even for John that Jesus was the Creator of the world. Jesus did not exist, for John, until the Word became flesh. When it did so, it became the man Jesus. So, it was the Word that was the creator. And then the Word became flesh, the man Jesus. Only in *that* sense is Jesus associated with creation, as the incarnation of the Word that created all things.

[What’s the relationship between the tradition of the empty tomb and the resurrection appearances?] The apostle Paul speaks of Jesus’s appearances, but never mentions the story about the women going to the tomb and finding it empty. Strikingly, the Gospel of Mark tells the story about the women going to the tomb to find it empty, but never mentions any stories about Jesus’s post-resurrection appearances.

In the Gospels (and Acts), the empty tomb functions to show that Jesus really was physically raised from the dead. But, strikingly, it never leads anyone to believe. (And why would it? If a body was buried in a tomb and later it was not there, would someone immediately say: “He has been raised from the dead?” Of course not. They would say: “Grave robbers!” Or, “Hey, I’m at the wrong tomb!”)

On the other hand, the resurrection appearances function to show that Jesus really did come back to life. And it is these appearances, and only these appearances, that cause people to believe.

It’s difficult to establish historically that there really was an empty tomb; but some of the disciples believed they saw Jesus later, and on that basis they came to believe he had been raised and exalted to heaven.

[Any other thoughts about the empty tomb stories?] We know what Romans did to crucified victims. The ancient sources tell us. They left them on the cross for several days to decompose and be subject to the ravages of time, elements, and scavengers. This was all part of the humiliation and punishment. Your body was publicly left to rot. This was to show what happens to anyone who opposes the power of Rome. Our evidence of this is unambiguous. Did Romans make an exception of Jesus? Why would they do that? Would it be because they knew that he was the Son of God? They didn’t believe that. Would it be because someone (Joseph of Arimathea) asked nicely?

They didn’t give a stuff. I know this cuts across what so many people think and assume, but historians have to look at our sources and come up with the most viable explanation, even if it is contrary to what we ourselves have always thought and wanted to believe. If Jesus was crucified by the Romans, he almost certainly was not given a decent burial that afternoon. If that’s true ... well, there are rather radical

implications. It would *not* mean he was not later raised from the dead. But it *would* mean that the empty tomb stories (based on a burial by Joseph) are later legends.

Questions on Ehrman, chapter 11

Are you persuaded by the argument that historians, using the tools of historians, cannot conclude that a miracle probably happened? (Note that this argument does not cause the historian to conclude that a miracle did not happen.)

Are you persuaded that the claims in the gospels that Jesus violated Mosaic law all involved violation of traditional (at least among Pharisees) *interpretations* rather than of the written law. What should we do about Mark's statement that Jesus declared all foods clean?

Questions on Ehrman, chapter 12

If the Temple incident was "a prophetic gesture, an enacted parable," for whom was it enacted? Is it more plausible to understand that Jesus was "a country fellow" whose experience of the "sheer opulence" of the Temple made his blood boil on principle?

Which seems more probable: that Jesus thought the Temple would be destroyed 1) so a new Temple could be built, or 2) because the Kingdom of God would not need a Temple?

Are you persuaded by Ehrman's solution to the puzzle of what Judas revealed to the authorities?

Questions on the Passion accounts

Are you persuaded by Ehrman's reason for dismissing the historical likelihood of the entry into Jerusalem?

Notice the significant elaborations of the Judas story in Matthew: 30 pieces of silver, attempt to redeem himself, suicide by hanging. Even more in Acts 1!