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Andreas J. Köstenberger and Michael J. Kruger.
*The Heresy of Orthodoxy:
How Contemporary Culture's Fascination with Diversity
Has Reshaped Our Understanding of Early Christianity.*
Wheaton: Crossway, 2010.

Reviewed by Noel B. Reynolds

Readers interested in the ongoing debate over the reliability of the New Testament texts will find this new book to be an excellent contribution to the defense of those texts. Authors Köstenberger and Kruger are both allied personally and professionally with the contemporary movement that defends the inerrancy of scripture. Andreas J. Köstenberger is Professor of New Testament and Greek and director of PhD and ThM studies at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina. He is the editor of the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* and is the author of books and articles on biblical texts and theology. Michael J. Kruger is Associate Professor of New Testament and academic dean at the Charlotte campus of the Reformed Theological Seminary, which is explicitly and institutionally committed to “The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy.”¹

Over the last half century, the academic battle over Christian origins and the historical Jesus has focused increasingly on diverging characterizations of the New Testament texts and other related texts from the early Christian centuries. Ironically, some of the most determined critics of traditional Christian understandings are themselves former Evangelicals. An outsider watching these developments over the last half century could easily conclude that the evangelical passion for biblical inerrancy has spawned many of the Bible scholars who are engaged most passionately on the two sides of this war. It seems bright young Evangelicals who commit themselves to a life of Bible study arrive at leading graduate programs, where they quickly discover a wide range of textual discrepancies and changes that are hardly deniable. Some seem to react by saying something like, “I should

1. International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, “The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy” (1978), http://65.175.91.69/Reformation_net/COR_Docs/01_Inerrancy_Christian_Worldview.pdf (accessed November 11, 2011).

have recognized this all along, and it is probably not an unsolvable problem for biblical faith.” Others, like Bart Ehrman, feel that they have been lied to all their lives. And, like Professor Ehrman, they react by compiling and promoting every conceivable criticism of the texts and the traditional Christian self-understanding.²

Latter-day Saints can find themselves in the strange position of cheering on both sides. The LDS tradition from Joseph Smith to the present has always recognized that the Bible as we have it today may suffer from errors in translation and errors of transmission—both deletions and insertions—among other possible textual problems. So when Walter Bauer and now Bart Ehrman challenge the standard approach in biblical studies, LDS readers sometimes find these writings supportive of their own reservations regarding scriptural inerrancy. But the Bible is also at the center of the LDS canon, and for the first century and a half of the Restoration it was clearly treated as the most authoritative and fundamental scripture, if only because ongoing missionary work in largely Christian cultures made this a common point of dialogue. Since the LDS Church’s correlation program was undertaken in the 1960s and 1970s, emphasis on the Book of Mormon has increased, and that scripture perhaps can now be seen as having supplanted the Bible in position of primacy.³ Even so, the Bible continues to be

2. Ehrman discusses his fundamentalist upbringing and the shattering of his inerrantist presumptions in the introduction of *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 1–15. Of particular interest is his initial realization that Mark may have misidentified the high priest Abiathar in 1 Samuel 21:1–6: “Once I made that admission, the floodgates opened. For if there could be one little, picayune mistake in Mark 2, maybe there could be mistakes in other places as well. . . . If [God] wanted his people to have his words, surely he would have given them to them. . . . The fact that we don’t have the words surely must show, I reasoned, that he did not preserve them for us. And if he didn’t perform that miracle, there seemed to be no reason to think that he performed the earlier miracle of inspiring those words. . . . This was a seismic change for me. . . . My faith had been based completely on a certain view of the Bible as the fully inspired, inerrant word of God. Now I no longer saw the Bible that way. . . . What if God *didn’t* say it? What if the book you take as giving you God’s words instead contains human words? What if the Bible doesn’t give a fool-proof answer to the questions of the modern age—abortion, women’s rights, gay rights, religious supremacy, Western-style democracy, and the like? What if we have to figure out how to live and what to believe on our own, without setting up the Bible as a false idol—or an oracle that gives us a direct line of communication with the Almighty? There are clear reasons for thinking that, in fact, the Bible is not this kind of inerrant guide to our lives” (9–14, emphasis in original).

3. See Noel B. Reynolds, “The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon in the Twentieth Century,” *BYU Studies* 38, no. 2 (1999): 6–47.

a fundamental scripture and a deeply valued source of prophecy, history, and inspired teaching for Latter-day Saints.

The twentieth-century challenge to Christian orthodoxy arose principally in the work of German scholar Walter Bauer and swept through the academic world after the 1971 publication of the English translation of his study *Orthodoxy and Heresy*.⁴ Bauer built on the Enlightenment's doubts about the supernatural origins of Christianity and on the comparative religion approach being taken by historians of religion, important studies of the Gnostic movement and other heresies, and new scholarly emphasis on the apparent early conflict between Pauline and Petrine forms of Christianity. Bauer's dramatic conclusion, based on the work of his predecessors and his own studies, was that mainstream Christianity was in fact a late coalescence of diverse earlier forms—that heresy preceded orthodoxy:

According to Bauer, the orthodoxy that eventually coalesced merely represented the consensus view of the ecclesiastical hierarchy that had the power to impose its view onto the rest of Christendom. Subsequently, this hierarchy, in particular the Roman church, rewrote the history of the church in keeping with its views, eradicating traces of earlier diversity. Thus what later became known as orthodoxy does not organically flow from the teaching of Jesus and the apostles but reflects the predominant viewpoint of the Roman church as it came into full bloom between the fourth and sixth centuries AD. (24–25)

The Bauer thesis soon became the standard view of the academic world, as exemplified in the theological writings of Rudolf Bultmann,⁵ the Christian histories of Helmut Koester and James M. Robinson,⁶ and the New Testament textual studies of James D. G. Dunn.⁷ In spite of a growing wave of journal articles attacking and refuting specific assumptions and claims of Bauer's initial work, the overall assumption that diversity preceded unity in the formation of Christianity became the standard assumption of the academic world well before the end of the twentieth century.

4. Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, ed. Robert A. Kraft and Gerhard Krodel, trans. Paul J. Achtemeier (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971). This translation made the 1934 German original available to the full range of scholars and significantly accelerated Bauer's influence.

5. See, for example, Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955).

6. See, for example, James M. Robinson and Helmut Koester, *Trajectories through Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971).

7. See, for example, James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1977).

The later decades of the twentieth century saw the emergence of a new breed of competent Bible scholars with personal commitments to the Bible as the foundation of their Christian faith. Köstenberger and Kruger are not the first Bible scholars to respond to the twentieth-century attack on the Bible's scriptural authority or textual reliability. Indeed, their broadly gauged project was possible only because of the more specific, ground-level textual studies conducted by many others. Reading between the lines, I suspect that it was the popularization of the Bauer thesis in the widely publicized writings of Elaine Pagels⁸ and Bart Ehrman⁹ that galvanized Köstenberger and Kruger and inspired them to assemble this systematic response to "the Bauer-Ehrman thesis." Drawing on a multitude of original studies by other scholars, Köstenberger and Kruger not only feature the work of such scholarly giants as Larry W. Hurtado,¹⁰ Richard Bauckham,¹¹ and Darrell L. Bock¹² but also do their readers the favor of documenting their argument with a careful survey that includes the relevant contributions of a host of lesser-known scholars. The introduction does an excellent job of reviewing the literature that leads up to the present volume.

The main body of the book is divided into three parts. The first part shows how all of the key assumptions and claims of Bauer's *Orthodoxy and Heresy* have been refuted over the last half century by more careful and detailed studies of the extant evidences for early Christian teachings and practices in different locations around the Mediterranean. The authors marvel that the Bauer thesis should still have such a hold on the academic mind-set, and they are undoubtedly motivated in their compilation of all these studies to force mainstream academia to recognize that it is operating with a long-refuted set of assumptions. One prominent part of this argument demonstrates that Bauer relied entirely on second-century materials for his generalizations about first-century Christianity. They also review a host of specific studies on early Christianity in different locales to show that Bauer's assumptions about those local areas turn out to be mistaken.

8. See Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979); and *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House, 2003).

9. See, for example, Bart Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faith We Never Knew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

10. See, for example, Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003).

11. See, for example, Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2006).

12. See, for example, Darrell L. Bock, *The Missing Gospels: Unearthing the Truth behind Alternative Christianities* (Nashville: Nelson, 2006).

The second part of the book reviews and rethinks the formation of the canon that came together in the New Testament. Bauer and particularly Ehrman have used the large number of noncanonical texts that are now known to conclude that historical circumstances determined which texts wound up in the Bible. Köstenberger and Kruger have taken up this challenge in ways that are both effective and original, adding new and valuable insights to our understanding of canon formation. They begin by demonstrating that there was actually a notion of canon already functioning in the earliest practices of Christianity and that it persisted up until the orthodox canon was finalized in the late fourth century. They then trace the emergence of a canon in the first century and support this with some previously unrecognized evidence. Finally, they trace the establishment of canon boundaries through the second and third centuries in the context of a growing collection of apocryphal works, many of which were valued by Christians but almost none of which had canonical status in any corner of the Christian world. For many scholars, this part of the book may be the most helpful and original because it provides compelling arguments that powerfully refute many of the basic assumptions promoted by Ehrman in his highly publicized attacks on the canon.

The third part of the book deals with a range of issues that have been of long-standing interest to Latter-day Saints because they concern the significance of errors or textual changes introduced by scribes over time. Using the standard tools of textual criticism, the authors demonstrate rather persuasively that while there are a large number of textual variations that can give rise to doubts about reliability, there are also powerful and reliable methods of identifying erroneous traditions—of determining which manuscripts are most reliable. They argue persuasively that, outside of a short list of obvious problems, there are very few variants that have much significance for Christian history or theology. LDS readers will notice that these authors do not deal with the problem of omissions in the early texts—one of the principal concerns of LDS scholars, arising from the reference in 1 Nephi 13:34 to “plain and precious parts of the gospel of the Lamb which have been kept back.”¹³ Köstenberger and Kruger do not recognize that as a problem because the kinds of New Testament

13. See John Gee’s discussion of this issue in his essay “The Corruption of Scripture in Early Christianity,” in *Early Christians in Disarray: Contemporary LDS Perspectives on the Christian Apostasy*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2005), 163–204. Because of Köstenberger and Kruger’s focus on Bauer and Ehrman, many issues raised by LDS studies of early textual problems are not addressed or even recognized in *The Heresy of Orthodoxy*.

omissions emphasized by Ehrman are easily shown to be Gnostic documents of much later origin.

While the extreme positions on biblical inerrancy are not defended in this volume, the authors conclude that the standard tools of textual criticism available to scholars today do support the conclusion that there is not likely much error in modern versions of the Bible that has not been identified and corrected by scholars. While there is always the possibility of errors that crept in so early that no later texts or commentaries could take notice, they see this as a minor problem that in no way offers support for Bart Ehrman's radical questioning of the canon. And they point out tellingly that Ehrman's latest work still ignores Richard Bauckham's pathbreaking study that argues powerfully that the canonical gospels were written by or under the immediate direction of eyewitnesses of Christ's ministry—and that they were in no way distillations of stories passed around in Christian communities over a period of several decades.¹⁴

For LDS readers, Köstenberger and Kruger have performed the invaluable service of bringing together all the major contributions to this eighty-year debate about Christian origins and texts. Latter-day Saints will be comforted by the strong evidence provided that earliest Christianity did have a unified self-understanding. But they will not be nearly so confident as these authors that the orthodox theology established in the late fourth century was unchanged from the first century. On this question, these authors give themselves a pass and assume that they have demonstrated that early and late orthodoxy were the same thing. But they have responded effectively to the attacks from Bauer, Ehrman, and the Jesus Seminar. Their book will be most helpful to LDS readers who are interested in this debate and its implications for an LDS understanding of early Christianity.

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14. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*. See Thomas A. Wayment, review of *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* by Richard Bauckham, *BYU Studies* 48, no. 2 (2009): 165–168; and Noel B. Reynolds, “In the Mouths of Two or More Witnesses,” *FARMS Review* 23, no. 1 (2011): 155–56.