



Albrecht Dürer, *Resurrection* (no. 15) 1512  
New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art

Readers of this issue of the *Midwestern Journal of Theology* will be interested to read the transcript of a debate on the historical reliability of the New Testament accounts of the resurrection that took place between Professors Craig A. Evans and Bart D. Ehrman on 1 April 2010 in the Midwestern chapel.<sup>1</sup> The debate served as a kickoff event for the second annual Hastings Institute of the Study of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Early Christianity Conference. During the course of the debate, Professor Ehrman likened the transmission of the early Christian tradition to a child's game of telephone. Here is what Ehrman said:

What happens when stories circulate by word of mouth, not for just a day or two, but for years? Well, your kids probably played the telephone game when they were little at a birthday party. One child tells a story to the next child, who tells it to the next child, who tells it to the next child and you go around the circle, and by the time it comes back to the first child it is a different story. If it weren't a different story it would be a very dumb game to play on your birthday. Stories change when they circulate.



What happens if you don't simply tell the story in the same living room with all kids in the socioeconomic group, who speak the same language, who are telling the story within three minutes of each other? What happens if you tell the story across the Roman Empire and you translate it into different languages and people tell the story for purposes of their own? What happens to the stories? The stories change.

Since a number of other prominent New Testament scholars were also present at the conference, I thought it might be of interest to readers to hear how they responded to his analogy. So I invited all of them to respond if they would to the following question:

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<sup>1</sup> Photos of Craig A. Evans and Bart Ehrman (R. Huggins), those of Hurtado, Porter, Wallace, Wegner (Charis Buckland).

Ehrman’s analogy of the telephone game: Is it a historically credible way of talking about oral transmission in the ancient world and Early Christianity in particular?

**Here is how they responded:<sup>2</sup>**

**Craig A. Evans (Acadia Divinity College)**



“The analogy of the ‘telephone’ game is not helpful because it does not take into account realistically the pedagogy involved—that of Jesus teaching his disciples and that of the disciples teaching others. This teaching involves repetition, saying things over and over again, applying them in a variety of ways, and soliciting feedback from those being taught. In ‘telephone’ one hears something once and then tries to pass it on to someone who

did not hear the original form. The *didache*, or teaching, of Jesus was not handed down this way.”

**Larry W. Hurtado (University of Edinburgh)**

“Ehrman’s ‘telephone game’ is not a good analogy for oral transmission of sacred lore in a religious body of believers. There are concerns to preserve sayings of “the master” not found in a parlour game. But also there are needs to make the tradition meaningful in new situations, so there are adaptations too, but they




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<sup>2</sup> Listed alphabetically by author’s last name. Answers by email from Evans (Sept 12, 2010), Hurtado (Sept 5, 2010), Porter (Sept 3, 2010), Wallace (Sept 11, 2010), Wegner (Sept 9, 2010).



aren't the haphazard kind in the parlour games."

**Stanley E. Porter (McMaster Divinity College)**

"Ehrman trivializes the process of transmission of the fundamental stories of Christianity by equating it with a contemporary children's party game. Transmitting the message of Christianity was not part of some clever diversionary entertainment, but it involved the faithful conveyance of a life-changing message. Those who

were responsible to tell and retell the story of early Christianity had been transformed by the story of Jesus, and the evidence clearly shows that they took every effort to tell this story faithfully."

**Daniel B. Wallace  
(Dallas Theological Seminary)**

The major problem with Ehrman's analogy is that it is a case of *reductio ad absurdum*. The telephone game is one line, with a not-so-coherent story in the first place, intended to create confusion and result in a garbled message. The oral tradition behind the gospels is multiple lines, as Ehrman himself admits, has a remarkably coherent message, and would be disastrous for early believers if the message



became garbled. Their lives were on the line. Would they really be willing to die for a Jesus who *became* deity through a garbled transmission of the gospel? Further, there was shared memory in community, something alien to the telephone game. And the message would be repeated hundreds of times by eyewitnesses before it was written down. Just taking one feature that is different and we can see how absurd the comparison is: suspend telephone game participants over a pit of crocodiles and tell them that if they get the story wrong, they'll be

eaten alive. My guess is that their memory would be better by several magnitudes.



**Paul Wegner  
(Phoenix Seminary)**

“I believe a more reasonable analogy is a child’s beloved bedtime story which the child has heard so often and loved so dearly that even the slightest variation will be noted. The Gospel stories about Jesus are not some meaningless words, but were the very events of their beloved savior and certainly they would have treated them with honor and respect.

The New Testament world was an oral society and thus memorizing wording was a way of life. Our society has largely lost the importance of spoken words, but the New Testament believers would have cherished Christ’s words and constant repetition would have kept them accurate and fresh in the minds of the disciples.”

**AND THERE IS MORE**

Following the Ehrman/Evans debate we continue our issue theme of the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection with three additional pieces, one by Don Veinot, President of EMNR, on Ehrman’s list of alleged discrepancies, a second by our Managing Editor on Ehrman’s flawed methodology, and a third, by Old Princeton Theologian Benjamin B. Warfield, on the resurrection as historical fact. In addition to its theme articles this issue also includes a number of other interesting contributions on a range of relevant topics.

I would like to thank my Assistant Editor, Josh Mann, for helping me at every step along the way, and Catherine Renfro, for transcribing the debate and valiantly undertaking the tedious task of proofreading the entire issue. Good Reading!

Ronald V. Huggins  
Managing Editor