

## *Skepticism, Scholarship and the Confessions of Thomas and Peter*

The account of the encounter of the Holy Apostle Thomas with the risen Christ occasions a reflection on the relationship between scientific and historical investigations of religious truths and simple faith. This relationship is of primary importance in our contemporary world. Are such investigations irrelevant to faith, or perhaps sinful? The example of Thomas shows not. Thomas' skepticism was based on questions all-important to him – not tangential, such as to be dismissed as irresolvable without too much concern. Thomas had to know the truth. Our Lord then gave Thomas all the empirical proof he asked for, albeit with a new beatitude: “Blessed those who have not seen and yet have believed” (Jn 20:29). The resulting confession of Thomas was more profound and consequential than that of the Apostle Peter.

As did Thomas, people of every era have had questions and have investigated matters of faith, especially as pertain to the person of Jesus Christ. Yet different people looking at the same “data” might come to vastly different conclusions. The same was true after the Resurrection when “some doubted” (Mt 28:17). How should we understand or approach these questions? Much depends on a person's desire to know God on God's terms, which always involves selfless love. For example, those who were expecting a political Messiah (a Messiah on their terms) were greatly disappointed in Jesus. In other words, one's desire to know God (or not) often determines one's “theology” and has a great impact on how one approaches questions of faith and of Jesus Christ.

Take, for example, the contemporary scholar, Bart Ehrman (U.N.C., Chapel Hill). Ehrman is an accomplished philologist and New Testament textual scholar and has written a dozen books on “contradictions” in the Bible – in particular in the New Testament – for example, surrounding the accounts of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. These contradictions, Ehrman readily and systematically informs his readers, have caused him to become an agnostic. After all, if God wrote the Bible and the Bible is His Revelation, Ehrman argues, then would He not have written something perfect? Why also would we not have the original books or manuscripts of these writings, but only copies? Ehrman shares his journey from his teenage conversion, his studies at two of the citadels of Fundamentalist Protestantism (Moody and Wheaton), and his subsequent loss of faith at Princeton while studying under Bruce Metzger (a renowned New Testament scholar who was himself a believer). What are we to make of Ehrman's views and of the discrepancies he brings attention to?

Without delving into details, it can easily be shown that the Holy Fathers were well aware of all the discrepancies in the Gospel narratives, including chronological differences, which Ehrman points out. But these discrepancies obviously did not cause the Holy Fathers to lose faith. Why then did Ehrman?

In the final analysis, Ehrman's theology is the answer. Ehrman's approach is typical of most Protestantism: it equates Divine Revelation with the Bible. When the human side of the Bible is revealed, then not only is faith in the Bible shattered but also the validity of the Revelation it claims. In Orthodoxy, however, the Bible – as holy and revered as it is – is a book *about* Divine Revelation but is *not itself* Divine Revelation. Divine Revelation is nothing other than Jesus Christ Himself, who alone has revealed both God the Father and the destiny of humanity in His Resurrection and in granting the deification of the Spirit. The Bible therefore points to Divine Revelation, witnesses to it and thereby participates in it, but can never replace or substitute for that Revelation, which is a living Person, the eternal, incarnate, crucified, risen and exalted Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, “who is One of the Holy Trinity.”

If we keep this fundamental theological truth in mind, we can see why so many Biblical scholars who are engaged in textual criticism yet believe in Jesus Christ and fully accept the witness of the Holy Scriptures. Among these, as noted above, was Ehrman's own mentor, Bruce Metzger. Another is N. T. Wright, currently the Anglican bishop of Durham (U.K.), who has recently published a 700+ page book defending the historicity of the Resurrection. In this book, Wright points out that we do not have the original documents of any number of historical works (e.g., Josephus, or even Plato, etc.), and that similar "contradictions" appear in all of these works by the same authors. In fact, such contradictions support the historicity of events rather than denigrate them. For example, the fact that the cock crowed once in Matthew and twice in Mark indicates the existence of two independent accounts of Peter's denial, which points to the fact that Peter really did deny Christ. If on the other hand the event was simply a story written much later, there would be no contradiction in accounts. The differences in accounts reflect how real events are perceived, related and recorded by real people.

There is much, much more that could be added here regarding the approaches to Biblical criticism, the number and quality of manuscripts, witnesses to the historicity of their existence and content, etc. Suffice it to say that seeking the truth in sincerity, as a matter of life and death, will always lead to the Truth. He who seeks shall find (Mt 7:7).

Such was the case with Thomas. When Thomas secured the empirical proof of Jesus' Resurrection he did not simply say, as did Peter, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God" (Mt 16:16). This same "information" was requested and given to the High Priest (Mt 26:63) and did not lead to any confession of faith whatsoever. On the contrary. The "information" is never enough because this would force belief in and love for God and God does not desire forced love, which is never true love. Hence Thomas did not make a confession like Peter because it would have allowed him to walk away, as if having learned and stated an objective fact which subsequently did not impact his own life. Thomas' confession reveals that the goal of Thomas' questioning was not simply knowledge but *salvation* – a *salvific* knowledge. Thomas had to know the truth because it was a matter of life or death for him. Having learned it, Thomas turned his very life over to Jesus Christ by exclaiming "My Lord and my God" (Jn 20:28).

Thomas is an example for us today: skepticism is not a sin if finding the Truth is our ultimate and *salvific* concern. If it is, proofs will be given by God Himself. These may not be accepted by others who do not have that concern – there are many who would not believe "even if one rose from the dead" (Lk 16:31). In fact, Someone *did rise* from the dead and Christ's prophecy holds: they still do not believe. But if we are seeking we shall find. Or rather, God will find us, as He did Thomas. Then it will be up to us to say, like Thomas, "My Lord and my God."