

Bart Ehrman is part of a legitimate, ongoing conversation

By [Greg Carey](#)

April 15, 2014

It's almost Easter, which can mean only one thing: it's time for the blockbuster Bible bestsellers. Last week, Bart Ehrman promoted his new book, [How Jesus Became God](#), on NPR's [Fresh Air](#). Ehrman advances a common argument: Christian conceptions of Jesus' identity grew more elaborate with time. His followers first perceived Jesus as a remarkable preacher or prophet, but eventually believers came to regard him as God incarnate.

Although I was aware of Ehrman's book, I missed the publicity blitz. But in this age of social media, there was no escaping the immediate impact of his interview. On Facebook, an old friend perceived an attack on Jesus. "Sounds like he needs to do a little more research before he writes a book," he retorted.

I'd forgotten that another friend, Christopher Skinner, [had already taken a look](#) at a [multi-author "response book" to Ehrman](#). A former evangelical himself, Skinner didn't so much review the book as raise some hard questions about evangelical responses to blockbusters like Ehrman's. Skinner suggested that perhaps conservative Christians undermine their own position. They convey the impression that ideas like Ehrman's frighten them—especially when they appear to gang up on their opponents.

There are a few things that are important to understand here, concerning both Ehrman's book and the online fracas.

First, **Bart Ehrman is a good person and an outstanding, maybe superior, scholar.** Let's start there. When some Christians respond by attacking an author's credentials or character, they've already ceded legitimacy in the public discourse. And it doesn't help to dismiss Ehrman for being an agnostic, as if agnostics have nothing to teach Christians about the Bible, Jesus, or faith. Character assassination is always wrong—and it does not help Christians' image in the eyes of our neighbors.

What's more, **there is a live conversation among biblical scholars about how most Christians came to regard Jesus as divine.** In other words, Ehrman's book

raises questions that should interest us all. This is not about liberals and secularists attacking the church. It's an ongoing debate that crosses the usual party lines.

Right now there are two major streams of thought on Jesus' divinity. Ehrman represents the more common view, that conceptions of Jesus' identity grew more exalted with the passage of time. For example, Mark portrays Jesus as ignorant of who touched him, angry with people who oppose or interfere with him, and even abusive toward the Syrophenician woman. Matthew and Luke tend to remove this sort of material—and of course they include the tradition of Mary's virginal conception. Then John adds the famous prologue: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (1:1). There's a long journey from Mark's Gospel to Nicea. This is Ehrman's position, and it's the majority opinion.

Others believe high christology started very, very early—maybe even with Jesus himself. Such scholars often appeal to Mark's portrayal of Jesus doing things only God can do. He forgives sins (2:7). He echoes God's action in the psalms—stilling the storm (4:35–41; Ps. 107:29) and making people who are "like sheep without a shepherd" recline on green grass (6:31–45; Ps. 23). These scholars also appeal to Philippians. Whatever this epistle's history of composition, 2:5–11 clearly represents very early Christian material, and it speaks of Jesus' "equality with God." (Some, such as [Daniel Boyarin](#), even find a divine messiah concept in noncanonical Jewish thought and attribute such ideas to Jesus.)

The latter opinion is gaining popularity, and I'm beginning to embrace it myself. But it remains the minority view among scholars.

**Most Christians, however, have no idea that Ehrman's book represents a genuine conversation among informed scholars.** This is unfortunate. Nothing Ehrman is saying would surprise a biblical scholar at even the most conservative theological school. This knowledge gap constitutes a failure of educational ministry in the churches. We Christians should be learning to engage legitimate public conversations about Jesus, about the Bible, and about our faith. And we should attend to spiritual development that equips us to enter those conversations with humility and love.

When a book like Ehrman's upsets laypeople, it's a symptom of important work that needs to be done in the church.