



Harry Kreisler: Welcome to a “Conversation With History.” I’m Harry Kreisler of the Institute of International Studies. Our guest today is Bart Ehrman who is the Gray Distinguished Professor of Theological Studies at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. His new book is God’s Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question, Why We Suffer. He is on the Berkeley campus as the 2008 Foerster Lecturer. Bart, welcome to Berkeley.

Bart Ehrman: Thanks for having me, Harry. Yes.

HK: Where were you born and raised?

BE: Lawrence, Kansas.

HK: Aha, the Midwest.

BE: Yes.

HK: Looking back, how do you think your parents shaped your thinking about the world?

BE: Well, it was a fairly conservative time and place. I was born in the mid-fifties and Lawrence is a university town, so I think it is a little more progressive than a lot of the rest of Kansas but basically it was a pretty conservative upbringing.

HK: What sort of conversations did you have around the dinner table? Politics or religion, the Bible?

BE: Yes, yes, and yes. And so, yeah, my parents were quite interested in all of the above.

HK: When did you come to the conclusion that you might be interested in religion? I guess you became born again, as you describe in your book, in high school.

BE: Yeah, I had a religious upbringing. We attended an Episcopal church when I was a child and we were active in the church. But then when I was in high school I started attending a Youth for Christ club which was in the high school, and looking back it seems a little strange to me that I needed to be born again. I'm not sure what I'd been born from, since I already was a religious Episcopalian, but I think the idea was that I needed to have a personal relationship with God through Christ, and so that's what happened. Then when I was maybe 16 years old I became a very committed and hard hitting evangelical Christian.

HK: And I gather that you see the origins of your commitment to scholarship during the same period. I believe you say you became ill in high school, and tell us what happened as a result.

BE: Well, yeah, I wasn't a brilliant scholar in high school, I was fine, I did well, but between my junior and senior years in high school I was playing baseball and I got sick. I got hepatitis and it kept me from playing baseball, and it kept me homebound, and I decided to work on the debate topic for that year. I was on the debate team, and I through myself into it the way I had thrown myself into athletics before this. After a while I was just completely absorbed by the idea of books, and reading, and knowledge, and research. And so, I trace my becoming a scholar to that moment in my life when I really became intensely involved with a high school debate topic.

HK: Then where did you do your undergraduate work?

BE: So then, since I had had this born again experience I thought that to be a really committed Christian I needed to have Christian training, and so my options were to be on the debate team at Kansas University or to go off to a Christian school. I decided that I really wanted to be committed, and so I went to Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, which was a three-year degree program where I studied Bible and theology, graduated from there, and then I went to Wheaton College in Illinois, which is Billy Graham's alma mater to finish out my degree.

HK: Then from there it was on to graduate school at Princeton, at the theological studies program there.

BE: Yeah, that's right. So, when I was at Wheaton I took as my foreign language Greek. I wanted to do that because the Bible is written in Greek, the New Testament is written in Greek, and to understand it fully, of course you need to be able to read it in the original language. And so, I took Greek at Wheaton, and it turned out I was pretty good at it. I decided I wanted to do my graduate work on the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, and as it turns out, the leading expert of that in America taught at Princeton Theological Seminary, a man named Bruce Metzger, and he was at the end of his career and I wanted to study with him. And so, I went to Princeton Theological Seminary and the only degree option for me there was a divinity degree, so I was actually trained to be a minister but I was really more interested in the academic side of things and continued on then and did a Ph.D. there in the Greek New Testament.

HK: And along the route of your education in religious studies did you have any mentors other than Metzger that really influenced you, that kind of narrowed the focus of where you wanted to go in your research?

BE: I had a number of people, my Greek teacher in college, a fellow named Gerry Hawthorne [sp?], who was very influential on me, and I had several other professors at Princeton Seminary. Most of them were New Testament scholars and they were of varying degrees of theological persuasion. Some of them were rather conservative, as Bruce Metzger was. Others were on the other side of the theological spectrum. And so, I think I was exposed to a wide range of things there that otherwise, prior to that, I hadn't been exposed to.

HK: And after getting your degree you were actually a minister to a congregation in Princeton, New Jersey?

BE: That's right. I was the pastor of the Princeton Baptist Church for a year. It was when I had actually started my teaching. I graduated from Princeton Seminary with my Ph.D. and I started teaching at Rutgers University, and while I was doing my teaching I was also, for one year, the pastor of this American Baptist church. It wasn't a conservative southern Baptist church, it was fairly liberal. By this time I had become fairly liberal in my views of things, and so I pastored this church for a year.

HK: So, help us understand what an academic committed to theological studies, or a scholar of the literature of the Bible – what is it exactly that you do? [laughs]

BE: Yes, right. [laughs] Good question. So, I think roughly speaking, very roughly speaking, there are two kinds of people who do the sorts of things I do. There are some people who are theologically oriented, who teach in divinities and seminaries, who are in the business of training people to be ministers. And so, those are the kinds of professors that I studied with, people training ministers. But also, there's another type of scholar who works outside of a divinity context, and that's where I started working at Rutgers University, which is the State university of New Jersey, it's a secular university, and after teaching there I've been teaching since 1988 at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In this context religion professors are teaching about religion rather than trying to affirm religion, or trying to convey religion. They're teaching about religion the way political scientists teach about political science. They're not necessarily committed to a particular point of view, and they're not trying to espouse a particular point of view, or trying to evangelize anybody. They're simply teaching about religion, in my case teaching about ancient Christianity and the New Testament as part of ancient Christianity.

HK: So, if students were interested in going this route, what can you tell them about the skills that are required to do this work? Obviously languages.

BE: Yeah, languages, but the religious studies department at Chapel Hill, or anywhere else where there're religious studies departments, are usually parts of the humanities. And so, the kinds of skills are the same skills that students would have if they were studying classics, or philosophy, or history, or actually any of the humanities or social sciences. Religion is understood as an important historical and cultural phenomenon, and it needs to be studied as other historical and cultural phenomena are studied. So, that involves looking at the literatures religions, looking at practices of religions, looking at philosophical undergirdings of religions, and so forth. During this time, when I was teaching, I – I mean, the part we've left out so far is that I moved away from my conservative religious beliefs, and I was teaching not as somebody who was intent on converting to some kind of religion, I was actually just a historian of ancient religion.

HK: And this is the point I wanted to go to next, which is, as one looks at your story as recounted as kind of a sidebar in your book, God's Problem, you're on two trajectories, basically. That is, very early you become a person of faith, drawing on your youthful enthusiasm and strong beliefs, on that trajectory, and then another trajectory, which you've just described, is that of evidence, historical analysis, a search for truth in the secular way of doing these things at the university. And I get the sense that at a certain point these two trajectories weren't going on a parallel course, that they crossed in one way and you chose the other. Talk a little about that.

BE: Well, no, that's exactly right. I think I got interested in pursuing the study of religion when I was a born again Christian and was interested in knowing more about this faith, and that drove me into scholarship because I wanted to learn more and more. But the more I pursued scholarship, the more I saw that scholarship at many points was at odds with my religious convictions. And so, over time I had to deal with this on the personal level, which is – it's quite unlike most academics. My wife is an expert in medieval English drama and this does not cut up against her personal beliefs in any way, and so it's how she's chosen to pursue her academic life. But in my case, my academic life was originally driven by personal religious convictions and then came to create tension with my personal religious convictions, and something had to give, and what gave were my convictions.

HK: It struck me as I was reading your book that there's an element of courage involved in the path that you took, and by that I mean you must have believed, and you must have believed strongly, and these two worlds clashed in a way, and at a certain point you have to confront yourself in the mirror and say, well, you know, I have to wonder about this.

BE: Yes. Well, as it turns out, it's very difficult emotionally to move away from a perspective, religious perspective, religious world view that you've held deeply. I see this with my own students at Chapel Hill where my students, many of them, come from conservative Baptist backgrounds and they're very committed to the Bible and their beliefs, and when I teach the New Testament from a historical perspective, bracketing the question of belief, and they learn historical information about the New Testament, it actually confronts them with things that they're not comfortable with. And it does create a good deal of emotional turmoil that is fairly unusual in the world of academics, I

think. But if one is going to be a serious academic, one needs to, of course, engage in the study and things fall out as they do.

HK: In looking at your work and the textual analysis you do in the course of this book, and some of your other books which I looked at, it's very clear that comparative historical studies are very important as you look at these texts. And I want to talk a little about that because it seems to be very important. So, you're looking at a work that we know as the Bible, or some piece of it, and what are the questions one has to ask about that work when you're trying to understand its multiple meanings?

BE: The study of the Bible, especially the New Testament, which is what I'm particularly expert in, is a complicated affair because a lot of people read the New Testament and a lot of people have opinions about the New Testament, but scholarship on the New Testament tends to be different from the popular reading of the New Testament, in part just for the reason that you mentioned, that to understand the New Testament one really has to situate it in its own historical context. When people read the New Testament today, mainly the people who read it are believers who simply assume that this is speaking to them in some way, but the historians want to know what these books are as first century documents. These are written by Christians in the first century who were living in a particular time and particular place with a particular set of assumptions about the world, with a particular set of assumptions about how religion works, and one needs to understand these writings within their own historical context. And once one does that, once one engages with these books from the point of view of history, they start looking very different from the way that they look to just simple believers who are reading the text for personal reasons.

HK: Is there a moment early in these two phases of your life where a light bulb went off, or was this transition to full-time scholar from part-time evangelical the culmination of years, or was there some moment came...? And here I'm not as much interested – we'll talk a minute about how you watched suffering and how that was a key part, but really, I'm interested in the contrast between these two worlds.

BE: Well, there were a number of aha moments for me when I realized that there's a tension here, and one of the early ones – I mean, it sounds a little bit silly now, looking back on it, but I had done a term paper for a class I was taking. In seminary one takes courses on – the book of the New Testament will be the entire course, and so I was taking a book on the Exegesis for the interpretation of the Gospel of Mark. And one of the problems with the Gospels that historians have long noted is that there are a number of discrepancies among them, and contradictions, and they have different perspectives, and how does one grapple with this. I was dealing – I wrote a term paper on a specific passage in the Gospel of Mark. It's a tiny little detail but there's this passage in Mark where Jesus' disciples are accused by the Pharisees of eating grain on the Sabbath, and Jesus tries to defend them by saying that these Pharisees should remember what happened when King David went into the temple and ate the **show** [?] bread which is only supposed to be eaten by the priests, and they did this when **Abiafar** [?] was the high priests. And so, Jesus backs them down with this reference to the

Hebrew Bible. The problem is that when you actually read the Hebrew Bible passage about this in the Book of Samuel, it's not Abiafar, the high priest, who is reigning at the time, it's his father, **Rehimalek** [?]. And so, I wrote this 35-page paper trying to explain how it was that even though Mark said it was Abiafar that was the high priest, in fact, what he meant was that it was Rehimalek. In other words, I was trying to reconcile a contradiction, and I spent 35 pages of detailed interpretation, dealing with the Greek text and the grammatical problems of the Greek text in order to argue this point. And at the end of this paper, my professor who was a very pious Christian man simply wrote a comment where he said, "Maybe Mark made a mistake." [laughs] And it just blew open the whole thing for me. I realized I had gone to all this effort to try and show that, in fact, there's not a contradiction here but it's just much simpler to say it's a mistake. And once that happened I started realizing that, in fact, there are a lot of mistakes in the Bible, contradictions, discrepancies, different points of view, different authors have different things that they have to say about fundamental issues about who Jesus is, who God is, what salvation is, and so that the Bible is not a unified monolith, in fact, it's a book that has lots of different points of view represented in it.

HK: And this is an important point because you're dealing with the problem of the human author – I'm not talking about Jesus now, but obviously the disciples who, as you just said, make mistakes – but it's also [that] these works come to us after translations, and so on, that add another layer of mixed meanings.

BE: Yes, absolutely. It's very – my older view, that the Bible is the inspired word of God with no errors in it, came under fire for just this reason. We don't have the originals of any of the copies of the New Testament, or of the Hebrew Bible either. What we have are copies that were made centuries later, in most cases, by scribes, some of whom weren't very good, and these copies that we have all have changes in them. This is what my earlier book on misquoting Jesus was about, is that we have thousands of copies and these thousands of copies have hundreds of thousands of differences in them. And I got to a point where it no longer made sense for me to say that God had inspired the words of this text because we don't have the words of this text. And so, what would be the point of even saying God had inspired them? We don't have them. And so, this was another sort of moment for me when I realized that, in fact, this older belief of mine simply wasn't credible.

HK: Now an important theme in your book is your own experience in addressing the question of human suffering, was also a catalyst for this transition to just being a scholar, in essence, but at the same time, you continued to be, I guess, a humanitarian, or somebody focused on the problems of the world and finding your commitment to faith as not giving you the answers as you worked through the text. Talk a little about that, because it's a very human sense of not just your suffering but the problem of suffering, which leads to changes in your thinking.

BE: That's right. When I was pastoring this church in New Jersey was when I was moving away, in many ways, from my Christian faith, and one of the things that happened in those years was that I was teaching at Rutgers and was asked to teach a class at Rutgers called "The problem of suffering in the Biblical traditions." It was a class that was on the books and they needed somebody to teach it

and they asked me to teach it, and I found it to be an interesting class to teach because I think a lot of the authors of the Bible are wrapped up with just this question, why is there suffering. And so, I taught this class at Rutgers and it got me thinking deeply about the very problem of suffering and why there's suffering, and I realized in the course of teaching this class that different Biblical authors have different answers to why they're suffering, that a lot of these answers are not answers people would have today, and a lot of these answers are at odds with one another. And this drove me deeper into trying to understand how we can explain this world that we live in, with so much pain and misery in it, if there is, as the Bible says, a good and all powerful God who's in charge of it. If there is a God who's in control of this world, why is there massive starvation? Why are there hurricanes, why are there tsunamis, why are there earthquakes? Why are there genocides, why is there a Holocaust? I mean, all of these things became very pressing issues for me, as I started thinking more and more about the world and the relationship to some kind of true God, ultimate God.

HK: And when you were a minister you mentored and nurtured a Cambodian family, and you talk about that in the book. Tell us a little about that, because that was kind of a personal way that this hit you.

BE: Yeah, it was actually right after I stopped being the pastor of this church in New Jersey. I decided that I wanted to be involved in some kind of social work, and I hooked up with the Lutheran social services and they had me tutor a family, a Cambodian family, in English as a second language. And so, every week I would go over to this family's apartment in Trenton, New Jersey. The fellow's name was Marsay [Marseilles?] Noon [sp?] and his wife, Sufi [sp?], and we would spend an hour or two working on English. And as I worked with them over the weeks and months, it became clear they had gone through horrible suffering themselves. They had been in Cambodia during the purge of the Khmer Rouge and had lived in Phnom Penh and had been driving out of the city with everyone else when they depopulated the cities in Cambodia, and had been put in slave labor camps. And as I talked with them more I realized just the horrors they had gone through, very much like the movie, "The Killing Fields," and they had escaped finally. Marsay had tracked down his wife and children and they escaped under cover of night over the mountains into Thailand and had been put into a refugee camp, and then had been brought to the United States by the Lutheran social services.

HK: And you were struggling with comprehending how they could have gone through this, I guess, these experiences in Cambodia.

BE: Well, they were horrible experiences, and this is a case where a good deal of the suffering is simply caused by humans. I mean, Pol Pot's regime was awful. And so...

HK: And of course, our bombing of Cambodia was one of the factors that helped create that regime.

BE: It's what started the whole thing. And so, there were a number of factors leading into it, including American policy in Vietnam, to begin with. But then the question was – I mean, on a deeper level – you can explain why, on a political level, this happens, but on a deeper level, as somebody who was still a person of faith, I had to ask myself, why does this sort of thing happen, and how does one explain this. If one believes that there's a God who answers prayer, for example – I mean, what is the evidence of that, exactly, in Cambodia? I'd say there's virtually no evidence of it, and this is what began making me challenge my previous faith in a good and all powerful God.

HK: And this becomes the goal of your book, which you conceived of thirty years, or so, back, but only now have written. And so, give us an understanding of how you set out with this problem in mind to do the research that you do.

BE: Well, I taught this class at Rutgers and I thought it was an interesting topic, about how different Biblical authors deal with suffering. The biggest problem I had at Rutgers, actually, was convincing my 19- and 20-year-old, New Jersey middle class, white students that there was a problem. [laughs]

HK: That there was suffering.

BE: Yeah, that suffering existed and there was a problem of it. And so, this was actually during one of the Ethiopian famines and I resorted to doing things like bringing in pictures from the newspaper of women, starving to death with children on their breasts, starving to death, and pointing to these pictures and saying, "Look, this is a problem." And so, I think the students got the idea by the end of the semester, but then when the term ended I thought, "I'd really like to write about this," about how different Biblical authors struggle with it. But then I thought, "You know, I'm only 30 years old. I'm not really old enough to write about suffering. I need to live a while longer." And so, a couple of years ago, after I'd written a bunch of other books on other topics, I thought, "You know, I'd like to go back to that question of suffering," and then I thought, "No, you're too young to write the book." But then I realized that when I'm 80, I'm going to say, "I'm too young to write the book." [laughs] And so, I thought, "Well, I'll just go ahead and do it." And so, over these intervening years I've continued to think about it, and to read about it, and so I decided to devote some serious research time into how the Bible authors deal with this problem, and my book is the result of that.

HK: So, let's talk about this, and let's take one answer of the Bible at a time and see what we can draw out of you about the way you study problems, in addition to explicating what the Bible has to say. So, the first item that goes back in the Bible to the beginning of the Bible, the Old Testament – what was the answer there? What were we told in that work about why we suffer?

BE: Well, one of the oldest answers that you get in the Bible, and an answer that pervades much of the Hebrew Bible, and is found in the New Testament as well, is the answer that you find in the early Hebrew prophets, and it doesn't really matter which prophet you read, whether it's Isaiah,

Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosaiah [Isaiah?], Joel, Amos. All of these prophets basically have the same view. The question they're dealing with is why is it that Israel, the people of God, suffer. And the solution in the prophets is that the reason the people of God suffer is because they have violated God's will, they've broken the Torah, the Law, and God is punishing them. God is punishing them to get them to repent so they're return to him, and if they return to him then things will be fine and the suffering will abate. And so, you find there's page after page after page of these prophets, so that the basic answer they give is that suffering comes as a punishment for sins.

HK: Give us one story that is an example of this that really makes the point which is repeated again and again.

BE: Well, it starts off – it's not just the prophets, it's the entire historical narratives of the Hebrew Bible. The Bible begins with Adam and Eve being told not to eat the fruit in the Garden, they eat the fruit and they're punished as a result. They're kicked out of the Garden, Adam now has to work and get his bread by the sweat of his brow, Eve now, when she bears children, will experience terrible pain. These are curses put on them by God because they disobeyed. And as the narrative goes on this theme keeps getting repeated. The entire world eventually, all of the human race, is wicked, and so God decides to punish them by sending a flood, and so he kills everybody on earth, except for Noah and his close family. And it goes from there. You can read this narrative throughout the entire Hebrew Bible. The sequence is that people sin, it leads to punishment from God. If it leads to repentance, good enough, if not, then more punishment comes.

HK: And we'll move to the second solution in the Bible, but the question arises, as you move from solution to solution, is it that the previous solution, or the one that has dominated, or the one that has come first, has proven inadequate? Is that what's going on here, in your mind as a scholar?

BE: That's part of it. Some of the subsequent solutions come about precisely because the earlier solutions don't seem to work. The problem with saying that suffering comes as a penalty for sin is that you can't explain why the righteous suffer. You would expect, under the prophetic scenario, that the people suffering all the time would be the wicked, and the righteous would be prosperous, but it obviously doesn't work that way. And so, other solutions have to be devised in order to explain that. There are other solutions that are probably independent of one another. There're a lot of smart people in ancient Israel and among early Christians, and they had lots of different views, and they weren't all just reacting to one another, but this kind of progressive idea certainly generated a number of the solutions that you get in the Bible.

HK: And the second solution is what?

BE: Well, it's not a sequence of one, two, three and four. [laughs]

HK: Yeah, right. We're doing the sequence of your book as opposed to – but here we have to find another explanation, and maybe it's what man does to man.

BE: Yeah. Well, the prophets actually realized this, that not all suffering comes because of God punishing people. The reason God punishes people is because people are doing bad things to other people. And so, there's implicit in that, of course, the understanding that a lot of evil happens simply because people are wicked, or they behave in a wicked way. This is the closest thing that you get in the Bible to what is now, among Christians anyway, the prominent explanation. The prominent explanation among Christians is that the reason there's suffering in the world is because people have free will. God has given people free will – if he hadn't given them free will, they would be programmed like robots simply to do what God had asked them to do, but since they have free will, they have the freedom not only to love God but also to hate, they have the freedom not only to do good but also to do evil. And so, necessarily there is suffering in the world, because of the existence of free will. And so, the Bible doesn't quite go at it in those philosophical terms but it certainly understands that human beings can do nasty things to other human beings, and that's one of the reasons there's so much suffering.

HK: As you're looking at these answers, and you point it out, that there were bright people in these religious communities who were thinking about these issues, but what other things should we look at, you as a historian, in terms of their social milieu, the historical forces at work. One of the things that comes up again and again is this was all happening in areas of the world that were being conquered by one empire after another.

BE: Yeah. Well, it's not an accident that the Biblical authors are so taken up with suffering, I mean, just precisely because of their historical situation. Israel, of course, is located at a place that was a very desirable place for anybody wanting to claim to be a world empire. It's situated roughly on the fertile crescent between Babylon and Assyria over to the east, and Egypt to the southwest, and anybody who wants to control that whole area has to control the land that Israel claimed. And so, Israel continually, on top of regular natural disasters that anybody in the ancient world had, famine, and drought, and pestilence, and so forth – Israel had the problem of constantly being conquered by other countries. And so, in the 8th century BCE it's conquered by the Assyrians, in the 6th century by the Babylonians, later by the Persians, later by the Romans, and the Greeks, the Romans, and so it goes. And these prophets, in fact, were responding precisely to these situations and saying, "The reason Assyria has overthrown you is because you've sinned. If you hadn't sinned, it wouldn't have happened." But then some people looked around and noticed that the righteous people in Israel suffered just as much from the Assyrians as the wicked did, and so they have to have some other explanation.

HK: And the third alternative here is suffering as redemption, which becomes very important in the New Testament.

BE: It does, and it becomes probably the key motif in the New Testament's understanding of suffering, but it's found already in the Hebrew Bible, as well.

HK: In the story of Joseph, you mentioned, yeah.

BE: The story of Joseph. In the Book of Genesis Joseph is sold by his brothers as a slave and ends up in Egypt as a slave to a household, and so this is not a great life. He's eventually thrown in prison for being falsely accused of rape, and very bad things are happening to him. But the way the story works is that God is working behind the scenes all along the way, so that at the end Joseph is elevated to a position of power in the government of Egypt and he's able to bring salvation to his family that's starving to death back in Palestine, and they come to Egypt and he's able to provide them with what they need. And so, they are saved from a dire famine because of Joseph's suffering, indirectly, so suffering can sometimes have a silver lining, or sometimes suffering actually brings salvation of some sort. And that's the view that gets picked up, of course, in the New Testament where Jesus himself suffers for the sake of salvation. And so, in that view salvation is directly a result of suffering.

HK: And then we move – well, not sequentially, but another alternative here is that God is all powerful and we have to accept that, and you find this in Job.

BE: Job is a very interesting book, and of course, any book that talks about suffering in the Bible has to talk about Job. What people frequently don't understand about Job – I'd say most readers of Job don't understand – is what scholars have recognized for a very long time, which is that Job actually has two different authors with two different books that have been put together into one book. And so, the book people are familiar with is the beginning and the end of the story, where you have Job who's a very righteous man and because he's so righteous he has thousands of cattle, and thousands of sheep, he has a great family, seven sons, three daughters, and he's got a terrific life. And the Satan, the sort of devil's advocate up in Heaven, tells God that the only reason Job is righteous is because he's getting everything out of it, and God and Satan, in effect, have a bet that Satan can get Job to curse God. Satan does his worst, it doesn't happen, Job doesn't curse God, he's a patient sufferer even though everything is taken away from him, his camels, his sheep, his possessions, his children are killed, everything is taken away but he still doesn't curse God. And so, then God rewards him. He rewards him by giving him back twice as much of everything he had before, so he got twice as many sheep, camels, servants, he gets ten children back and dies a happy, old man. So, in this view of suffering in Job suffering comes as a test of faith. Will he remain faithful even if things aren't good? And if you do, then you'll get rewarded. That's a powerful story. I find it offensive, actually, in part. What I find especially offensive is this idea that Job can be given back ten other children as if the murder of ten children – that can be made all right by the substitution of ten additional children. I find that completely offensive, but that's one of the views of Job, this narrative at the beginning and the end. What people don't realize is that the middle part of Job is written by somebody else. It's not written as a story, it's written as a series of poems in which Job and his three so-called friends have dialogues about why Job is suffering, and the friends take the prophets' point of view, that Job is suffering because he's done things wicked and God's punishing him, and Job insists he's not wicked, he's innocent, he hasn't done anything wrong, and after chapter after chapter of them going back and forth, Job finally demands that God appear to him so

that he can state his case and show that he doesn't deserve this. And God appears out of the whirlwind, but instead of explaining to Job why he suffered, you know, "Job, well, it was actually a bet that I had with Satan," or "It was a test to see if you'd be strong but you've passed the test," or instead of giving some explanation what God does is he overwhelms Job with his power and begins by saying, "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?" And he starts in on Job telling him that he's almighty and Job is a mere peon, and basically he squashes Job in the dust, and Job ends this poetry by saying, "I repent in dust and ashes." Well, he repents, he didn't do anything wrong, but since God is almighty and Job is a mere mortal he has no right to question the almighty about why he's suffering. So, that's the answer to the poetry.

HK: It's interesting here because of the textual analysis you're doing and the work of your scholarship. You actually unravel layers of subtlety and complexity here, which is interesting.

BE: I think to understand Job without that kind of unraveling of its different parts, Job doesn't make any sense. [laughs] But I think when you look at it in this way, that you actually have two different authors whose books have been spliced together, and you realize that, in fact, the patient Job of the beginning and end isn't the impatient Job of the poetry, and that the view of suffering at the beginning and end isn't the view of the middle of the book, it actually then makes better sense.

HK: Now Ecclesiastes and the vision there is the one that you seem most to relate to.

BE: Yeah, I do. I think the Book of Ecclesiastes is maybe under-read. It's a terrific little book. It claims to be written by Solomon, the wisest man ever to have lived, but in fact, it was written hundreds of years later. Scholars who are linguistic experts in Hebrew can date books on the basis of the style of the writing, and it's pretty clear this is a later book, somebody claiming to be Solomon who wasn't. The point of the book can be found at the very beginning where the author says, "Vanities of vanities, all is vanity." The word "vanity" is a Hebrew word, "hevel," which means – it's something like the mist that's around for a while and then burns off and it disappears. So, it means something that's transient, temporary, impermanent, and that's what all of life is. This world goes on and on and on, nothing ever changes, there's nothing new under the sun, but we're here just for a little while. And so, what does one do with that? Well, the Book of Ecclesiastes looks around and sees there's no justice, and he looks around and sees we're not here for long, and his conclusion is we should eat and drink, and enjoy our toil, and enjoy our spouse. He believes that you should grab the simple pleasures in life for as long as you can because this life is all you have. There's no afterlife, this isn't a dress rehearsal for something else, it's not a dry run, this is it, and so you should enjoy life for all it's worth while you can.

HK: One of the solutions that you discuss has appeared to have greater relevance in our time because of the way it appears to have intruded on American politics, and here we're talking about the apocalyptic vision to solve this problem, to explain suffering by the notion of apocalypse. And your analysis points to the way that this appears initially in the Old Testament, in the Book of Daniel. Talk a little about that, and then help us understand what the key components were to this answer.

BE: This answer becomes prominent in early Judaism, near the end of the Hebrew Bible period, in the Book of Daniel, which is the last of the books of the Hebrew Bible...

HK: And that would have been what year?

BE: About 150-160 BCE. But this view becomes dominant in the New Testament and becomes *the* explanatory position of the New Testament. This view is called apocalyptic because it's based on the Greek word "apokalupsis" which means revealing or an unveiling. The idea is that God has revealed the heavenly secrets that can make sense of earthly realities, and so God explains why this world is in the state it's in. The Apocalypticists were reacting against the prophetic point of view. The prophets thought that God was punishing people, that's why they were suffering, but the Apocalypticists realized that righteous people are the ones who are suffering, and so God must not be punishing them. So, why are they suffering? And the Apocalypticists came up with the idea that there are forces opposed to God that are creating suffering in the world. This is the period in which Jewish thinkers came to think that God has a personal enemy, the Devil, and the Devil has demons who work his nefarious ways here on earth, and there're all these cosmic forces that are creating havoc here on earth, but God is ultimately going to establish his sovereignty over the world by destroying these forces of evil and setting up a good Kingdom on earth. And so, the Apocalypticists believed that in the future God would once again reassert himself and good would emerge triumphant, and God's Kingdom would come to replace these wicked earthly kingdoms on earth.

HK: Now when you were discussing the prophet Daniel it becomes very interesting that his prophecies and descriptions come at a time when the Greek influence, and the efforts by the Greek Empire at that time, to Hellenize and to stop the traditional Jewish rituals, prayers, ways of behaving that follow the dictates of God, that this is how we get the Maccabee revolt, which is celebrated by Jews today as the holiday of Hanukkah. So, Daniel is a man of his time who's dealing with real historical forces, the efforts to colonize this Jewish community in Judaea, and his language becomes very metaphorical, basically.

BE: Yeah, that's right. So, this was an awful time period for people living in Israel. The monarch of Syria, who was trying to Hellenize, trying to make Israel Greek, basically outlawed the possibility of following Torah to the extent that women who had their baby boy circumcised, the children would be murdered and hanged around their mothers' necks. We learned about this in some of these books, First and Second Maccabees, for example. And Daniel is responding to this. He sees this not just as human evil, bad things that humans do, he sees it in a bigger cosmic context that, in fact, there are forces that are bigger than us that are at work in this world that are creating this kind of havoc, and since these are cosmic forces they need to be dealt with on the cosmic level. God himself is going to intervene and destroy these forces of evil, and get rid of the evil kingdoms to set up his good Kingdom on earth.

HK: And you suggest that when you look at what they're writing, it's on the one hand very descriptive. It's like four chapters have been written and these are the chapters of where we are and what has happened to us, and so on, and that what the Apocalypticists are giving the people of the time is the next chapter, looking ahead to the future. So, in a way, they're kind of futurologists.

BE: Yes, absolutely. In fact, they use a very interesting ploy. Daniel, as we said, was probably written maybe 150-160 BCE, but the author claims to be Daniel living 400 years earlier under the Babylonian captivity. And so, this author pretending to be Daniel 400 years earlier predicts what's going to happen in the future, but as he's predicting what's happening in the future, the real author, of course, is recounting what's already happened in the past, so that the reader reads this and thinks that this ancient person was correct about all of his predictions. But the author then goes on to predict what's going to happen next and the reader doesn't realize that now he's changed gears and is talking about what's going to happen in the future. The reader thinks the whole thing has been a prediction, but this then provides validation for his predictions of this good Kingdom that's going to come in a matter of months, and so provides hope for readers that, in fact, this has all been foreseen, it's all been according to plan, it's all under God's sovereignty, and if we hold on for a little while longer it'll be okay.

HK: Why do you think that these kinds of visions have taken on a new influence, a new power, and not just today but in recent years in our culture, and had such a political impact?

BE: It's a very good question. There continue to be people today who think that some kind of apocalyptic scenario like this is going to be played out. When I was in college in the 1970s, the best selling book in the English language – this isn't widely known – apart from the Bible was a book called The Late, Great Planet Earth by Hal Lindsey, which was an apocalyptic scenario about what was going to happen when war broke out in the Middle East, and the Soviet Union was going to march in, and there was going to be a confederate of European nations that came in to oppose the Soviets, and a nuclear holocaust was going to happen. And this was told as a prediction of what really was going to take place based on prophecies of the Bible, the Book of Daniel, the Book of Revelation, and so forth. This was an extremely popular book, millions and millions of this thing were read and believed, and in our day the "Left Behind" series – many people watching this show may not know the "Left Behind" series but it was extremely popular. It sold more copies than The Da Vinci Code, and people believe that there's going to be this apocalyptic – and I think it's a very interesting question, why it is, especially in American Christianity, that it's believed that this apocalyptic moment is going to happen, that people are so dissatisfied with this world that they think that it's controlled by Satan and his henchmen and that God's going to do something about it. It's a very interesting question, what exactly the appeal is.

HK: And is it that, in some ways – I want to be careful here – that the elements of this make sense at one level, and that people of faith who are looking for explanations of what's going on in the world, and they're not sort of grounded in political analysis or economic analysis, that one can see

them making that leap, and when you get a work that purports to put everything together, then you've got an audience?

BE: Yes, absolutely. These apocalyptic scenarios as painted in the Bible, the New Testament for example, they speak about awful natural disasters. There'll be earthquakes, and there'll be hurricanes, and they lay out off these disasters, there'll be wars and rumors of wars, and of course, every generation has had earthquakes, and hurricanes, and tsunamis, and wars, and rumors of wars. And so, people who read the Bible literally think, "Oh, this is talking about our day." If you go into a concerted evangelical bookstore today, you'll find shelf after shelf of prophecies coming fulfilled, you know, this was going to happen to Israel and this has happened, there were supposed to be disasters and look what happened, we had tsunamis, we had Katrina, etc. And so, things are being fulfilled in our own day.

HK: Given your background as a person who brings historical analysis to these texts, you seem to be in a unique position to address a very important question, namely how are people of faith drawn to the present situation in a more progressive way, so that their faith leads them to be concerned about the environment, so that their faith leads them to the humanitarian concerns that are a theme throughout your book. And I'm curious – does your perch, your portfolio, as somebody who starts as a person of faith, moves away from that but continues to study these issues as they appear back in time and contributes to the interpretation of text – is there an answer there that you can help us see a way toward?

BE: I think one of the most hopeful signs on the religious scene is that a large number of people on the religious right have taken up important social issues. The reason this is a hopeful sign is because the apocalyptic scenario that I just painted out has often led to social complacency. If the end is coming and God's going to make right all that's wrong, and God is going to resolve all of our problems, then there's no point in us really doing much about it now because we can't do much about it. But Christians of the far right have started realizing that, in fact, if God is going to do this in the future we ought to be doing something about it now, and so you find people who are typically conservative Christians who are now supporting things, like environmental issues, global warming, and concern for world poverty, and issues like that, which have traditionally been more liberal issues but they're being taken up by these conservative Christians because they realize that their theology, in fact, virtually requires them to be concerned about these things. And so, I see that as actually one of the more hopeful signs on the political scene right now, in terms of what's going on with the religious right.

HK: How do you advise students to prepare for the future? Because presumably it's not just students who want to become ministers who are in your classes at the University of North Carolina, but also people of faith who want to deal with the problems of the world. Is there some advice that you would give them, in terms of their studies, in preparing to address those problems?

BE: You know, the strange situation that one is in, teaching religion in a secular institution, is that you're teaching a subject about which – I mean, you can't promote a particular aspect of your subject because of the separation of church and state. So, I do get students who are planning on going on to ministry, but by far my students are simply people taking the class because they're interested in taking a class in the New Testament along with their classes in philosophy and history and classics, or whatever. But what I try to do in my classes is actually fairly basic. I do try to get students to understand that you have these different perspectives in the Bible. Whether you're a person of faith or not, the Bible contains a lot of different answers to a lot of different issues, so that I'm trying to get them to see that you can't simply rest on the Bible, the way that many of my students in North Carolina think they can do. But basically, what I'm trying to do is to do what I think every university professor needs to do, which is to get students to think more. And teaching Bible in the South is a perfect way to get this to happen, because students come in with a vested commitment and interest in the subject matter, unlike almost any other subject they're taking, and if you disabuse them of many of their perspectives and their assumptions, it forces them to think, so that they have to come up with solutions themselves for things that otherwise they thought were going to be handed to them on a silver platter. This makes them, I think, not only more interesting and more able to deal with religious diversity, but also with political diversity, for example. Instead of simply accepting what their parents told them about the political situation, they're forced to think about it, and so that's really kind of my strategy, I think, is to get students to reflect on big issues and to realize that there are multiple views represented and that one has to come to some kind of decision based on rational thought about what position one wants to take, whether religiously, politically, economically, or anything else.

HK: Well, on that note, Bart, I want to thank you very much for being here. Let me show our audience your book again, which has actually been on the best seller list, God's Problem, and I want to thank you again.

BE: Okay. Well, thank you.

HK: And thank you very much for joining us for this "Conversation With History."

[End of Interview]