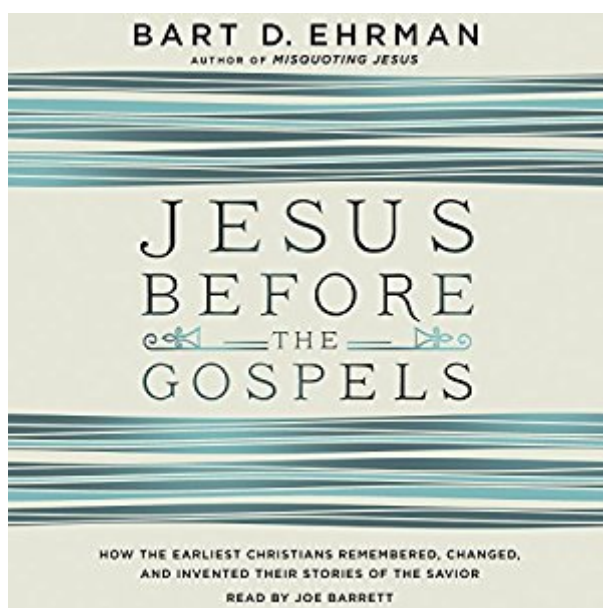


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Jesus Before The Gospels: How The Earliest Christians Remembered, Changed, And Invented Their Stories Of The Savior



Synopsis

The best-selling author of *Misquoting Jesus*, one of the most renowned and controversial Bible scholars in the world today, examines oral tradition and its role in shaping the stories about Jesus we encounter in the New Testament - and ultimately in our understanding of Christianity.

Throughout much of human history, our most important stories were passed down orally - including the stories about Jesus before they became written down in the Gospels. In this fascinating and deeply researched work, leading Bible scholar Bart D. Ehrman investigates the role oral history has played in the New Testament - how the telling of these stories not only spread Jesus' message but helped shape it. A master explainer of Christian history, texts, and traditions, Ehrman draws on a range of disciplines, including psychology and anthropology, to examine the role of memory in the creation of the Gospels. Explaining how oral tradition evolves based on the latest scientific research, he demonstrates how the act of telling and retelling impacts the story, the storyteller, and the listener - crucial insights that challenge our typical historical understanding of the silent period between when Jesus lived and died and when his stories began to be written down. As he did in his previous books on religious scholarship, debates on New Testament authorship, and the existence of Jesus of Nazareth, Ehrman combines his deep knowledge and meticulous scholarship in a compelling and eye-opening narrative that will change the way we read and think about these sacred texts.

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Customer Reviews

"Jesus Before the Gospels" may not be Bart Ehrman's best book so far, but it is certainly his most original. In his earlier works, he explained contradictions between - and within - 27 books of the New Testament by careful analysis of the textual sources from antiquity. In "Jesus Before the Gospels" Ehrman steps outside the 200 year old academic discipline of source criticism in which he perfected, and interpret Christianity's based on insights and research from psychology, ethnology, social anthropology and cultural history. Ehrman explains why the gospels are far from modern biographies which should not be taken as face value: "the disciples of Jesus did not actually write the Gospels. The disciples were lower-class, illiterate peasants who spoke Aramaic, Jesus's own language. The Gospels, on the other hand, were written by highly educated Greek-speaking Christians forty to sixty-five years later. The stories had been in circulation for decades, not simply among disciples who allegedly memorized Jesus's words and deeds, but also among all sorts of people, most of whom had never laid eyes on an eyewitness or even on anyone else who had. And so, just as there is no evidence that Jesus's followers memorized his teachings, the idea that everyone throughout Christendom telling stories about Jesus had memorized them is beyond belief" But how can our modern knowledge on how stories change when they are retold for decades? "We know in fact that they were changed, because we can compare different accounts of the same words or activities of Jesus and find discrepancies. Yet other accounts are historically implausible, and so appear to have been created in the years of transmission as people recounted what they had heard about the life of their Savior." Ehrman cites many interesting interdisciplinary examples as well as classic studies from a broad range of fields in support for his view. Ehrman also tries to explain how social groups remember, as opposed to how individuals remember stories: "From that point on, as more members of a group recount this distorted memory, the other members of the group - even if they either distinctly think that the memory is wrong or don't remember it - feel considerable social pressure to agree with everyone else." The early Christians "... told stories that remembered Jesus's past in light of the community's present. These may have been "distorted" memories in the sense that for the form critics they involved words and deeds that did not actually go back to the historical Jesus. But they were valuable memories nonetheless, and no less real to the people who held and shared them than recollections that actually were rooted in the life of the historical Jesus" When writing about a subject like New Testament history, repetitions are unavoidable. If you have read

Ehrman's earlier works, you will recognize more than half of the repeated from earlier works. (This is the reason I give it 4 not 5 stars). There may be decades between each time new and important written source may be discovered. Finding support from social science for writing about history gives new perspectives. Other fields of history has gained significantly from methods from social history, ever since historians of the "Annales-school" started this movement of memory history more than fifty years ago. Of Ehrman's books my favourites are "How Jesus became god" and "The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings". The newest book "How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee" is great, but not as excellent as these.

Ehrman is always interesting, well-researched, and thought provoking. This book examines the process of memory and how it likely affected the gospels. Namely that memory is seldom historically accurate and is subject to interpretation under the current conditions. It is a non-fiction work filled with references, and is meant to both teach and persuade. As with all such books, it can sometimes be repetitive. Nonetheless, this both well written and thought provoking. I recommend it.

JESUS BEFORE THE GOSPELS introduced me to the "Proto-Gospel of James" which, though written in the second century, could arguably be regarded as one of the earliest works of science fiction. It tells the story of Joseph and Mary before the birth of Jesus and uses "Etruscan" that are right out of Hollywood's blockbuster summer films. Joseph leaves Mary alone in a cave to seek out a mid-wife when suddenly time freezes. The birds-in-flight become stationary, defying gravity. A shepherd's swing of his rod becomes immobile. And when time resumes, Joseph returns to Mary and finds a brilliant light engulfing the cave and out of it a shining cloud emerges as infant Jesus promptly walks out and up to Mary to suckle at her breast. Beam me up Scotty. So there is a wide range of documents that the author draws upon to weave his tale, including a good deal about the new research into the nature of memory. The material about how untrustworthy eye witnesses really can be makes me glad for DNA and other forensic advancements. But the one area I wished the author had gone into more detail is folklore, especially Jewish folklore because I think the "Egyptian" of some of these oral stories point towards a hidden tradition, or to be more precise, a repressed tradition, that might be called "Tales of the Lost Tribes of Israel". Take, for example, the story of Moses and the "sapphire staff" that God gave to Adam

when he was driven from the Garden of Eden. Adam gave it to his son, Enoch who in turn passed it along to Noah. For centuries the sapphire staff was transmitted from father to son until the Jacob gave it to his favorite son Joseph, the Viceroy of Egypt. But when Joseph died the time-honored tradition was broken because Jacob's nephew Reuel (Jethro) stole the sapphire staff. Eventually, Moses is born and raised in Egypt and when he leaves that exotic land he finds himself in the company of Reuel in the Midian oasis. Reuel attempts to kill Moses by throwing him into a pit. To make a long story short, Moses escapes and reclaims the sapphire staff. The point of this folktale is that Reuel sought to kill Moses, that they were contemporaries, and that Moses was the son of Joseph. This adds one more parallel to the stories of Moses and Jesus: they both had fathers named Joseph. By the way, the idea that Moses was the son of Joseph has a long pedigree outside of folklore. The Roman historian Marcus Junianus Justinus (3rd century) declared it to be a well-known fact. Relying upon an earlier, now lost, source (Pompeius Trogus, a contemporary of Jesus) Justinus wrote the following about Joseph the Viceroy of Egypt: "His son was Moses. Of course the Bible teaches us that Moses was born four centuries after the death of Joseph but then again how does Reuel (Jethro) come to be on both sides of that timeline? Reuel was Jacob's nephew (and Joseph's cousin) and became father-in-law to Moses. Anomalies, like this, can sometimes be signposts to discovery. The story of the sapphire staff is told in Josephus but I prefer the tale as told by Angelo S. Rappoport in his MYTH AND LEGEND IN ANCIENT ISRAEL (volume 2). The strength of JESUS BEFORE THE GOSPELS is the scope of the research and I hope the author adds Jewish folklore to his repertoire. May I suggest MOSES BEFORE THE TORAH as a possible future book?

Well written and thoughtfully conceived, Jesus Before the Gospels gives much needed insight into how the Gospels (and the Bible itself) came into existence and how cultures influenced the version we have today. I have never been one to believe the Bible should be read as a literal guide to Christianity, but rather that God intends it to be a guide for his people, written largely in parables and analogies. I did not realize until reading this book that the Gospels were written so many years after Jesus lived on earth. The writer presented many evidentiary descriptions about the culture of story-telling and how we come to have the stories in the Bible today. I enjoyed the book, found it easy to understand and very enlightening.

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