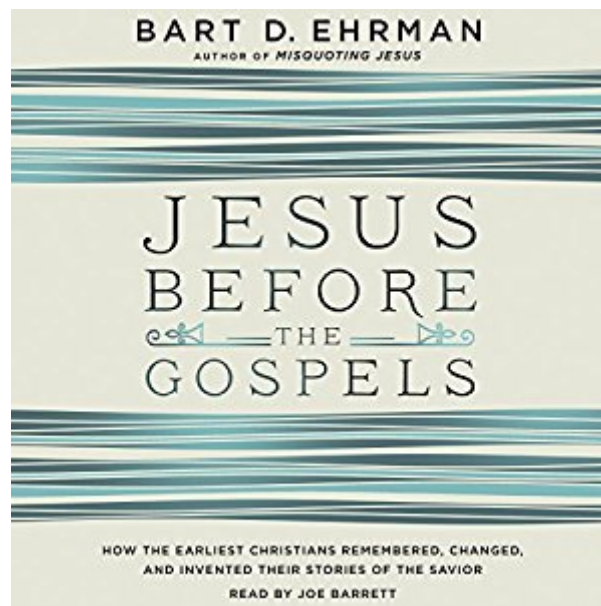


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Jesus Before The Gospels: How The Earliest Christians Remembered, Changed, And Invented Their Stories Of The Savior



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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In a way, this book may be said to be dedicated to those who claim that the Gospels of the Bible are true because they are based on eyewitness reports for it was because of that claim that Bart Ehrman pursued his studies that led to this book. Jesus the man died about 30 CE. Written accounts of his life appeared more than 40 years after that; there were only oral accounts prior to that. So, Ehrman writes, 'When it comes to Jesus, all we have are memories...Memories written after the fact. Long after the fact. Memories written by people who were not actually there to observe him...They are memories of later authors who had heard about Jesus from others, who were telling what they had heard from others, who were telling what they had heard from yet others. They are memories of memories of memories'. Since this is an examination of memories, Ehrman provides a chapter on the study of memory and the act of recollection. In that chapter he explains up-to-date studies in psychology and science, explaining the concepts of 'episodic' and 'semantic' memory, and the way our brains use these modes of recollection. Ehrman discusses the types of Jesus stories. There are some stories that recur. They all have the same form but differ only in the details. For example, there are the healing stories in which a sick person goes to Jesus and asks to be healed. Jesus talks to him or touches him, and the sick man is cured. He discusses the origin of the oral precedents to such stories. Ehrman also discusses the Gospels, beginning with the reminder that 'all four are completely anonymous'. He studies them with reference to a much ignored authority, namely, Papias. He examines how the names Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John came to be attributed to the gospels.

"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.

What we know of Jesus was written 40 years and more after his death by people who did not know him, meaning our knowledge of Jesus comes from second and third (and/or more) hand oral tellings. There is some chance that there is a lost written source often called Q - but the consensus is that the New Testament information on Jesus is all or mostly from oral testimony. This book explores the validity memory, oral tradition and eye witness testimony and applies the research on these to their use as historical methods for documenting the life and crucifixion of Christ. Ehrman shows how contemporaneous memories of Jesus differ with conflicting reports of the same events from the Bible and other writings of the time. The most fantastic of these is the Papias account of Judas swelling up; the most curious perhaps are the quotes of Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas, discovered in 1945. As in other Ehrman books, there is a lot on the authority of the sources. For instance there is discussion on who Matthew, Mark, Luke and John might be and how they got their knowledge. He shows through their nuanced language what the authors do and do not reveal about themselves. For instance, "Blessed are the poor in spirit" differs in meaning from "Blessed are the poor"; When read along with other passages, you see how this subtly speaks to the concerns of the writer. One example of the tweaking of events struck me for different reasons. Each gospel has a slightly different report of Pilate asking Jews if Jesus should be pardoned and his subsequent release of Barabbas (convicted of crimes against the Roman government). No other source records any of this. Why would an autocratic Roman ruler ask the Jews (either a crowd or an assembled body) such a question?

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