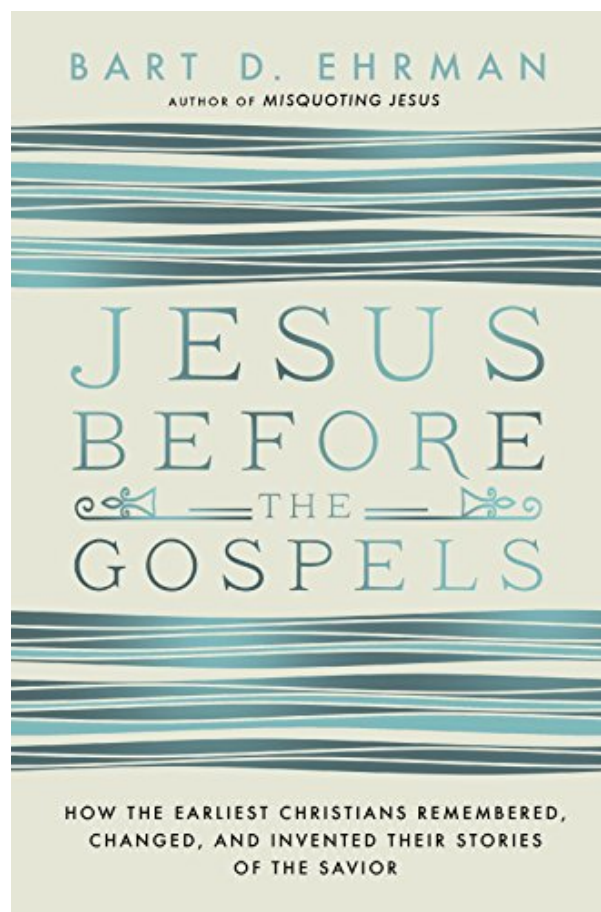


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BART D. EHRMAN

AUTHOR OF MISQUOTING JESUS

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Social science inspired view of the bible

By Harald Groven

"*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.

82 of 91 people found the following review helpful.

In the beginning

By Hande Z

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. He proceeds to discuss the making or construction of the memories of Jesus, and the significance of other writings such as the Gospel of Thomas; and the significance of Biblical interpretation - not just what the words might mean but also why some early writings were deemed heretical and others to be true gospel.

This is a book that should appeal to theologians, philosophers, lay church goers, and non-believers alike.

17 of 19 people found the following review helpful.

thinly developed

By Tracy Cramer Austin, Texas

As someone who has learned a great deal from Bart Ehrman's books and lectures, I must say I found this book rather thin. His presentation of the idea that the stories of Jesus that came to be incorporated into the Gospels were shaped by the then present life situations and needs of the communities that the story tellers came from, is clear enough. His presentations of studies of the ways modern psychology, sociology and anthropology have shown how memories are formed, were also very clear. My problem was that he then only very thinly applies this in any rigorous and systematic way to the stories of Jesus. Instead, he regularly reasserts his thesis at the expense of its development through its application to what I thought what was supposed to be his main subject: the stories of Jesus before the Gospels were written. He has far better books out than this one, most importantly that of *How Jesus Became God*. *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee*

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