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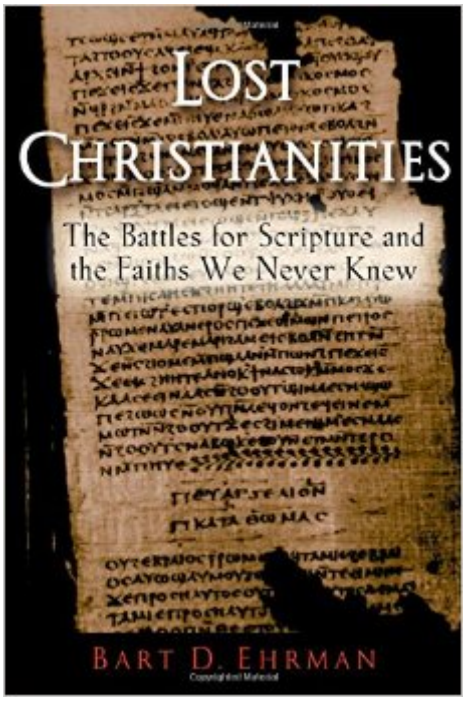
Lost Christianities: The Battles For Scripture And The Faiths We Never Knew



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Synopsis

The early Christian Church was a chaos of contending beliefs. Some groups of Christians claimed that there was not one God but two or twelve or thirty. Some believed that the world had not been created by God but by a lesser, ignorant deity. Certain sects maintained that Jesus was human but not divine, while others said he was divine but not human.In Lost Christianities, Bart D. Ehrman offers a fascinating look at these early forms of Christianity and shows how they came to be suppressed, reformed, or forgotten. All of these groups insisted that they upheld the teachings of Jesus and his apostles, and they all possessed writings that bore out their claims, books reputedly produced by Jesus's own followers. Modern archaeological work has recovered a number of key texts, and as Ehrman shows, these spectacular discoveries reveal religious diversity that says much about the ways in which history gets written by the winners. Ehrman's discussion ranges from considerations of various "lost scriptures"--including forged gospels supposedly written by Simon Peter, Jesus's closest disciple, and Judas Thomas, Jesus's alleged twin brother--to the disparate beliefs of such groups as the Jewish-Christian Ebionites, the anti-Jewish Marcionites, and various "Gnostic" sects. Ehrman examines in depth the battles that raged between "proto-orthodox Christians"--those who eventually compiled the canonical books of the New Testament and standardized Christian belief--and the groups they denounced as heretics and ultimately overcame.Scrupulously researched and lucidly written, Lost Christianities is an eye-opening account of politics, power, and the clash of ideas among Christians in the decades before one group came to see its views prevail.

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Customer Reviews

This is fundamentally a popular treatment of the topic that doesn't tell us that much new about the subject. But it is not a bad introduction. Indeed, if you are not aware that the Christian New Testament was not agreed upon until more than three centuries after the death of Jesus, that there is a whole host of other "Christian" literature some of which has as good (or bad) a claim to holy inspiration as the canon, that there were a whole host of Christian sects which radically deviated from the eventual orthodoxy, that in many areas these Christian sects were the original representatives of Christianity, and that what we now know to be Orthodoxy won its battles by, among other things, altering the text of holy scripture, then you should read this book.Ehrman's book is divided into three parts. The first looks at four Christian works that failed to enter the New Testament. Ehrman first looks at the remainder of "The Gospel of Peter," which survives to this day as an account of the crucifixion. Interestingly, Ehrman suggests we have about as many copies and references to it from this time as we do with the Gospel of Mark. We also learn about "the Apocalypse of Peter," which gives a guided tour of hell (women who braided their hair are especially miserable.) Ehrman then discusses the Acts of Thecla, a supposed apostle of Paul. We then get a discussion of the Gospel of Thomas, a collection of supposed sayings of Jesus. Some scholars believe that the Gospel of Thomas may go back to the mid-first century, but Ehrman is rather sceptical. Then we look at the Secret Gospel of Mark. According to leading Biblical scholar Morton Smith there is a seventeenth/eighteenth century copy of a letter of Clement of Alexandria (2nd century) which quotes from the supposed secret gospel. It tells of Jesus raising a man from the dead, and then insinuates a homosexual encounter between the two. Unfortunately, we have only photographs Smith took of the letter, and no-one has been able to find it in the Israeli monastery where Smith supposedly discovered it. Indeed, we cannot rule out the idea that Smith forged the letter himself.Ehrman then discusses the many groups whom emerging proto-orthodoxy eventually condemned as heretics. There were the Ebionites, who saw Christianity as part of Judaism, and viewed Jesus as fully human. There were the Marcionites, after their founder Marcion who viewed the God of the Old Testament as fundamentally flawed, and viewed Jesus as an emissary from the true God who would liberate humanity. They were the producers of the first Christian canon: ten Pauline epistles and an edited Gospel of Luke. Then there are Gnostics who promoted a variety of views about Jesus, usually denying his humanity. Some, the Docetists, thought that Jesus's

suffering was illusory since the real Jesus did not have a real body. Others, known as Adaptionists, thought that Jesus was only adapted to receive the power of the Christ at the time of his baptism, and that it left him on the cross. Ehrman provides interesting reasons why these groups were not successful. Ebionites were too Jewish, the Gnostics were too spiritually elitist, while Marcion's religion was too new to fit the conservative religious prejudices of the day. We also learn that one of the pillars of Orthodoxy had to become an antipope, because the properly elected pope believed in "heresy": the idea that Jesus was not God the son, but God altogether. The majority of the Roman church had come to this view because they believed a) Jesus was God and b) there is clearly only one God in the Bible. The antipope Hippolytus argued correctly that Jesus and God are clearly two separate people in the New Testament, and then argued, not so correctly, that Jesus must therefore be divine in a separate sense from his father.Ehrman then discusses Orthodoxy's response. By the third century there was consensus about most of the books of the New Testament, though there were heated debates over books such as Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, and the Apocalypse of John. Opponents correctly realized that the apostles did not write these books. (Over the past two centuries scholars would realize that seven Pauline letters are the only books in the New Testament correctly attributed to their author.) We read about the Epistle of Barnabas, an early Christian letter that almost made it into the Bible. It would have been extremely embarrassing had it done so, since it claims that weasels conceive through their mouths, that hyenas change their sex every year, and that rabbits grow a new orifice every year. The most interesting part is Ehrman's discussion of the corruption of the New Testament text. We know that "heretics" altered biblical texts. The Ebionites changed a couple of letters and turned John the Baptist into a vegetarian. Ehrman also discusses Orthodox "corrections." We know about some of them because enough alternate texts survive to see the manipulation. For example the Proto-Orthodox altered passages in Luke where Mary refers to Joseph as Jesus' father. Other Christians tried to alter Jesus' final statements in Mark ("why have you forsaken me,") because it fit too well with the adoptionist heresy mentioned above. But other manipulations are harder to track. It appears that Luke's reference to Jesus "sweating blood" may have been an addition to counter Docetist beliefs. While the addition of "by the Grace of God," to a passage in Hebrews may have countered another heresy. As we do not have the original texts, we cannot tell how much of the New Testament was altered to fit the desires of Orthodoxy.

Review of Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew, by Bart D. EhrmanReviewer: Mark LamendolaThe advice "Don't discuss politics or religion" usually makes good sense, because such discussions often pit one uninformed opinion against another-with a net

negative result.What happens, however, when a person undertakes massive research to present an objective, respectful, scholarly view of a religious subject? One possible result is a captivating book that opens your mind and touches your heart. Bart Erhman achieved that result with this book.Ehrman discusses the various agendas of the authors behind both "scripture" and "heresy." He discusses how various writings supported the case for one faction of Christianity or another. He discusses what these writings were, how they came to be, how they were discovered after centuries of being lost, and how scholars have analyzed them.During all of this discussion, Ehrman doesn't push an agenda of his own. Indeed, he appears to explain the views and goals of each faction without taking the side of any of them. Consequently, the book moves the reader to a deeper, more informed, appreciation of Christianity. That appreciation creates a desire to replace divisive dogma with healing spirituality.The New Testament did not exist in early Christian times. It came about much later, and was a weapon in the battle for dominance among various factions. It served to unite many disparate churches into an orthodoxy. But, that orthodoxy necessarily negated the views of those whose "scriptures" weren't included in the New Testament. The New Testament is a collection of writings that support a particular set of views of Christianity (Ehrman explains why this is both a good thing and a bad thing).Many of the canonized books are not what they are commonly purported to be. In fact, some of them are forgeries. At first glance, such a statement seems inflammatory. Perhaps that's why Ehrman takes the reader through the evidence-rather than making simple proclamations. Here's a tidbit to consider. You may not know that III Timothy was considered for canonization, but then dropped-while II Timothy was included though it was known to be a forgery. What about the other books of the New Testament? And what about the other books that didn't make it into the New Testament? Ehrman answers those questions in a manner that does not attack Christianity, but instead reframes it in the spirit of truth.Many churches have split over differences in "following God's Word." Often, the underlying disagreements arise over interpretations of a passage in the New Testament. The "combatants for Christ" may mean well, but they both are most likely basing their differing interpretations on a forgery-rather than an Apostolic letter. As a result, we have many sects of Christianity rather than one true way.As varied as our flavors of Christianity are today, however, the variance was much greater in the early years of Christianity. Understanding this basic fact and understanding where our divisive doctrines came from will help anyone be a better member of the Christian family. For anyone who seeks to achieve such a goal, this book tills the soil and plants the seed. If you can do just a little watering and weeding, your faith will grow like a mustard seed.

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