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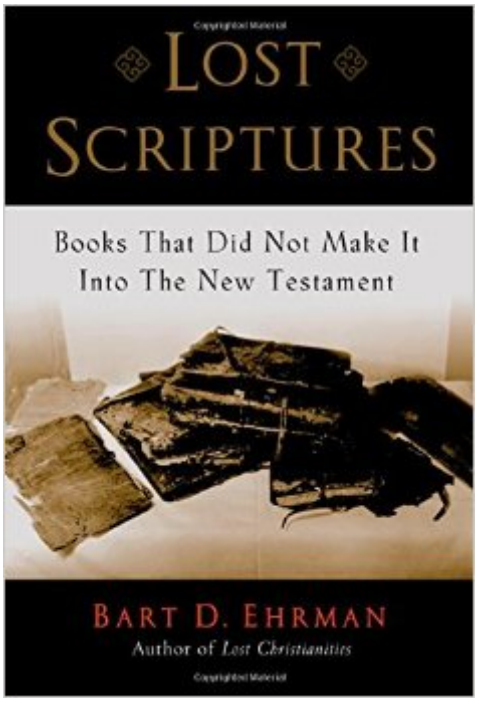
Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It Into The New Testament



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Synopsis

While most people think that the twenty-seven books of the New Testament are the only sacred writings of the early Christians, this is not at all the case. A companion volume to Bart Ehrman's Lost Christianities, this book offers an anthology of up-to-date and readable translations of many non-canonical writings from the first centuries after Christ--texts that have been for the most part lost or neglected for almost two millennia.Here is an array of remarkably varied writings from early Christian groups whose visions of Jesus differ dramatically from our contemporary understanding. Readers will find Gospels supposedly authored by the apostle Philip, James the brother of Jesus, Mary Magdalen, and others. There are Acts originally ascribed to John and to Thecla, Paul's female companion; there are Epistles allegedly written by Paul to the Roman philosopher Seneca. And there is an apocalypse by Simon Peter that offers a guided tour of the afterlife, both the glorious ecstasies of the saints and the horrendous torments of the damned, and an Epistle by Titus, a companion of Paul, which argues page after page against sexual love, even within marriage, on the grounds that physical intimacy leads to damnation.In all, the anthology includes fifteen Gospels, five non-canonical Acts of the Apostles, thirteen Epistles, a number of Apocalypses and Secret Books, and several Canon lists. Ehrman has included a general introduction, plus brief introductions to each piece. This important anthology gives readers a vivid picture of the range of beliefs that battled each other in the first centuries of the Christian era.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

If you come into this book with a good knowledge of the Bible but a fairly vague knowledge of other ancient Christian works, as I did, you're in for a mind-bending treat.Ehrman picks a number of "Lost Scriptures" -- that is, books which were at one time considered sacred or near-sacred Christian works but have, for various reasons, not been included in the current Bible -- and he gives a brief prelude to each before offering their English translations. He breaks these books up into 5 groups: the Lost Gospels (think Gospels), Acts (think Acts), Letters (think Paul's Epistles), Apocalypses (think Revelations), and Sacred Cannons. The last section is merely a sample of some lists of what ancient Christians considered sacred books.What this book deals with is primarily the source documents. That is to say, assigning context to said documents is not this book's mission. Instead, it tries to give a survey of what we now call lost Scriptures.Confoundingly, many of the books are only published in fragmentary form. In many cases, this was not optional because of the fact that only small fragments of the source documents exist; in the astounding Gospel of Peter, for example, we have only what appear to be the last few chapters, beginning with Pilate at the trial. While this was usually not Ehrman's fault, it was rather frustrating at other times when he truncated some of the books himself, presumably in the interest of saving space.I read this book in tandem with Ehrman's "Lost Christianities," and I highly recommend doing so. "Lost Christianities" provides historical context for the raw materials of "Lost Scriptures." Brace yourself before beginning, however, because both books are dense and demand considerable attention to detail.

In my view, Bart Ehrman is the most important New Testament scholar of this generation. I have heard him speak, have listened to his tapes and have read his books. He absolutely exudes competency, always pointing out that he is looking at his subject from the point of view of a historian. In the case of "Lost Scriptures," this means he will not be an advocate for or against any particular book that did not make the cut. Instead, he will try to put each book in its historical perspective considering the political tone of the times: "We should not overlook the circumstance that in some times and places these 'other' writings were in fact sacred books, read and revered by devout people who understood themselves to be Christians...for the New Testament itself is the collection of books that EMERGED from the conflict, the group of books advocated by the side of the disputes that eventually established itself as dominant and handed the books down to posterity as 'the' Christian Scriptures...moreover, the victors in the struggles to establish Christian orthodoxy not only won their theological battles, they also rewrote the history of the conflict; later, readers, then, naturally assumed that the victorious views had been embraced by the vast majority of Christians from the very beginning."I was reared in a setting of somewhat fundamentalist preaching,

yet values at home were those of inquiry and evidence toward the world in general. Ehrman's approach is much more to my liking than reiteration of a dogma I've already heard, documented by passages from scripture pre-selected to prove a certain view.

This book contains 17 non-canonical gospels from a variety of sources, as well as five books relating to activities of the apostles, 13 non-canonical letters (epistles), seven apocalypses and revelations, and five different canons, all of which were superceded by the Council of Nicaea under Constantine's guidance.These, in other words, were ancient Christian books that Constantine's scholars saw fit to view as heresies, or did not include in the Council's version of what constituted "true" scripture for whatever reason.The author holds the chair of religion at the University of North Carlina at Chapel Hill, and has translated many of the works himself. He is a recognized, respected scholar in his field.Although this is a book for laymen in that it reads easily, and is bereft of the usual scholarly jargon, the individual gospels, letters, and acts, etc., are often murky and hard to make sense of.I think it is because we are unfamiliar with the idioms in use at the time they were written, and the culture from which the writers sprang.For example, today, to indicate anger in our culture, many people use the uncouth, course phrase "pissed off." That language is tantamount to Aramaic in the beginning of the current era, which then was the language in common use by the people in the Holy land. In a thousand years, our language will have evolved as it has continually in the past. It will be interesting to see how scholars, translating writings from today that use the term will translate the phrase which, although we use it to indicate mild anger, actually will translate to something to do with urination.And so it goes.

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