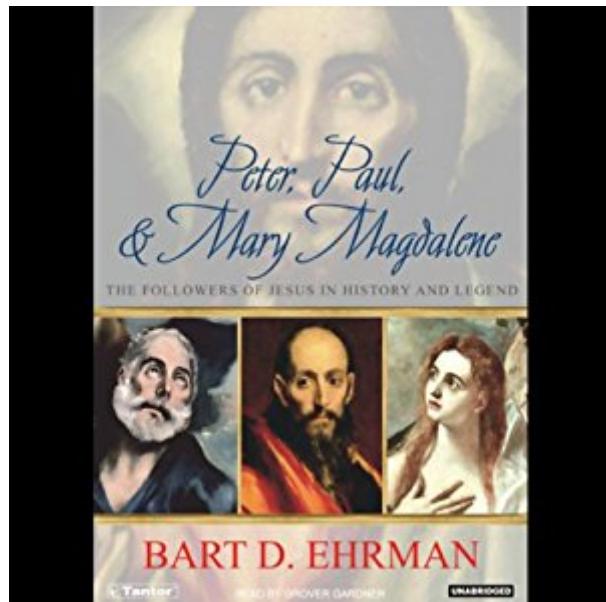


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Peter, Paul, And Mary Magdalene: The Followers Of Jesus In History And Legend



Synopsis

Bart Ehrman, author of the best sellers *Misquoting Jesus* and *Truth and Fiction in The Da Vinci Code*, here takes listeners on another engaging tour of the early Christian church, illuminating the lives of three of Jesus' most intriguing followers: Simon Peter, Paul of Tarsus, and Mary Magdalene. What do the writings of the New Testament tell us about each of these key followers of Christ? What legends have sprung up about them in the centuries after their deaths? Was Paul bow-legged and bald? Was Peter crucified upside down? Was Mary Magdalene a prostitute? In this lively work, Ehrman separates fact from fiction, presenting complicated historical issues in a clear and informative way and relating vivid anecdotes culled from the traditions of these three followers. He notes, for instance, that historians are able to say with virtual certainty that Mary, the follower of Jesus, was from the fishing village of Magdala on the shore of the Sea of Galilee; but there is no evidence to suggest that she was a prostitute, and little reason to think that she was married to Jesus. Vibrantly written and leavened with many colorful stories, Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene will appeal to anyone curious about the early Christian church and the lives of these important figures.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

With captivating strength and clarity, New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman has written another winner. He exudes competency, frequently reminding us that his conclusions are those of a historian. In "Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene," this means he will not be an advocate for or

against any specific theology - instead, he will give us his best assessments from all available sources about these three historic personalities. I was subjected (through age 20) to more than my share of fundamentalist preaching, yet values at home were more those of inquiry and evidence toward the world in general. Ehrman's approach to the Bible is more to my liking than reiteration of a dogma I've already heard, documented by passages of scripture preselected to prove that certain view. Consider a book where all aspects of the early development of Christianity are subjected to scrutiny. Issues of dogma are extensively discussed, but not endorsed nor advocated. Instead, they are examined for consistency within the whole context of Biblical and non-canonical sources and the political setting in which the early church solidified its views. Few seminary graduates that have studied Biblical Textual Criticism have seen fit to share this type of information with their flocks. Ehrman fills this gap - every page chock full of information you would not find compiled anywhere else. This is his forte. Mary Magdalene is incredibly popular, despite being mentioned in the Bible only thirteen times. One of the Bible's best stories is that of Jesus and the adulterous woman, mistakenly identified by many as Mary Magdalene. The Pharisees brought her to Jesus, asking what they should do with her. Of course, it was a trap. If he said she should not be punished, he would be going against scripture. If he recommended punishment, his message of mercy and love would be compromised. While writing something (speculations abound as to what) in the sand, he invited the sinless one amongst them to cast the first stone. Later when he looked up, they were gone, except the woman. Jesus told her to "Go and sin no more." What a great story - adding suspense and pathos to many a sermon. It's a shame that it was a late addition - not present in the oldest and best Greek manuscripts of John's gospel, nor in any of the gospels. Not only that, its writing style was different and it included many words and phrases not used elsewhere in John. But it was such a wonderful and well-known story, more than one scribe decided to add it to the New Testament - and in several differing locations. Ehrman compares the teachings of the historical Jesus with the theological views of the apostle Paul: Jesus proclaimed the imminent arrival of the Son of Man, and urged his followers to repent and return to a faithful adherence to God's law. Paul, on the other hand, insisted that following the Law would have no bearing on one's salvation, that in fact one could be saved only through faith in Christ's death and resurrection. Notwithstanding the broad similarities between these two men, both of them first-century apocalyptic Jews, their differences are striking. Do Jesus and Paul represent the same religion? Or has Paul transformed the religion OF Jesus into the religion ABOUT Jesus? For all three of our characters, Ehrman goes to great pains to point out the difference between historical accuracy on the one hand and the eventual legend on the other - both being important. The former tells us what Biblical scholars think

actually happened. The latter tells us what future generations wanted to believe as the stories changed to accommodate evolving theologies - and their corresponding legends. For example: In our later sources, but not in our earlier ones, Mary Magdalene progressively becomes more important in Jesus' life, with eventual hints of possible intimacy. Reversing the chronological order: Sixth century - Pope Gregory in his 33rd Homily took individual parts from several stories in the gospels and made a composite out of Mary Magdalene, portrayed her as a repentant prostitute. Fourth century - "Greater Questions of Mary:" In this gnostic book, Jesus takes Mary up to a mountain where she observes a sensuous event involving Jesus. Third century - "Gospel of Phillip:" In this gnostic gospel, we are told Jesus loved Mary more than the other apostles and frequently would kiss her. Second century - "Gospel of Mary:" Another gnostic gospel where Jesus loves Mary and the other apostles equally, but He has granted Mary special revelations unknown to the others. Gospel of John (latest gospel) - Here, Mary is never mentioned during Jesus' lifetime, but she discovers his empty tomb and he appears to her first after rising from the dead. Gospel of Luke - Mary is assumed (not specifically named) to be among the women at the tomb, since she is named as one of the women from Galilee who followed Jesus to Jerusalem. Gospel of Mark (earliest gospel) - Mary is not named until the end. She and other women find Jesus' tomb empty and flee out of fear, telling no one what they have seen. Ehrman's point is that that the later (legendary?) sources suggest an intimacy that was not there at all in the earlier sources - not even a hint. Were Jesus and Mary married, as advocated in "The Da Vinci Code?" - no evidence whatsoever, not even in the non-canonical literature. Although Mary Magdalene is always a major star in a stage or film production, history does not support the way she is usually portrayed. In Luke 8, she is one from whom seven demons have been exorcised. That's the only reference to Mary's relationship with Jesus during his ministry. She became a figure of paramount importance only because she was one of the women who observed the crucifixion, watched his burial, and came on the third day to anoint his body, only to find the tomb empty. In a couple of our sources, the resurrected Jesus appeared to her first, even before he appeared to Peter. The critical theology of Christianity is based on Jesus' death and resurrection, and Mary was there. From this came her legacy, earning Mary eighty-five pages of commentary by Ehrman - much of it based on sources from outside the Bible. Together with similar analyses of the lives of Peter and Paul, this book provides a unique perspective of early Christianity. Perhaps not for all readers, but if you are one of those curious Christians or non-Christians who wish to be exposed to a scholarly and historical account about these three most favored New Testament characters - this is your book. Literal Bible interpreters welcome!

Bart Ehrman's bibliography includes some thoughtful and accessible work on the diversity present in early Christianity, particularly his duel "Lost Christianities" and "Lost Scriptures." While these books made him popular, his critical work reviewing the many absurdities of Dan Brown's "Da Vinci Code" -- "Truth and Fiction in the Da Vinci Code" -- launched him into a truly popular sensation. That is all to the good. Professor Ehrman's scholarship is generally excellent and he offers readers many helpful insights into an important topic. That said, his newest work, "Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene," whose stated goal is to review what is known of the lives of these three early followers of Jesus appears a rather uneven text, much of it derivative of his previous books. At its essence the book might be summed up as follows, "A bit, quite a bit, and almost nothing." Of Simon Peter we can know almost nothing independent of the Christian Scripture. While Ehrman can tease out some useful biography - a fisherman, lower class, married, denied Jesus thrice, head of the Jerusalem Church along with Jesus' brother James - there is little here that cannot be found on a Wikipedia search. Reviewing the various writings attributed to Peter, Ehrman rejects them all as not from the Apostles own hand, some more convincingly than others. He does, however, do a good job showing what followers of Peter generally held to among the sects of the early church, mostly Jewish Christians ascribing to abstinence seeing Jesus as a Jewish Messiah. On Saul of Tarsus we know more, so Ehrman can offer a more substantive biography, though again he often diverges into speculation. As with his work "Misquoting Jesus," we here see an excellent case made as to why many of the letters attributed to Paul likely do not come from his own hand. While the whole of the case does not need to be repeated here, it generally goes to contradictory points within the letters, thus while Paul praises a woman as "first among the apostles" in Romans, he says they should be silent in Corinthians. Even in this, Ehrman makes a good case that within letters we have later additions such as in Corinthians where we are told women should "be silent" in one place and "cover their heads" when they prophesize and pray in another, the latter he argues being an addition by a later scribe opposing female participation. As with Peter, much of the analysis relies on speculation based on what we can suppose about someone of Paul's class and period. That said, Ehrman does a good job teasing through the sources, particularly showing the effort to "harmonize" Peter and Paul in Acts and the alterations of Paul's theology in that later work. As for Mary, what the author describes as a current "popular favorite," the short answer is we can know almost nothing. The text offers few tidbits and Ehrman can refute a few aged myths such as her status as a prostitute, but as for real biography, we can know so little because she gets little attention in the early sources we have and the questionable reliability of the later sources. Still, we at least can, in his short biography, understand the reasons why this is true. Many other reviewers here and in other

places attack Ehrman taking his textual methodology as an attack on their faith and literalist ideology. One sharing their view - and one might add rather closed minded approach - may well want to avoid this work. Unlike the Jewish textual methodology, which has for thousands of years sought to tease out and understand contradictions within their text, Christian history tends to favor a "don't ask, don't tell" approach, often enforcing it with a heresy trial and a burning at the stake. Thus we see a fair bit of resistance to scholars like Ehrman who point out contradictions between the gospels that make it hard to believe they should be taken literally - Jesus dying in one after the Passover in most, on the Passover in another one (John); Changes in Jesus last words in one to the other; etc. Such theologically based attacks should not shy readers away from the author's work. While those who have read his other books may find little new here, for those unfamiliar and looking for an introduction to the subject, Ehrman's produced an interesting and relatively short work for their perusal.

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