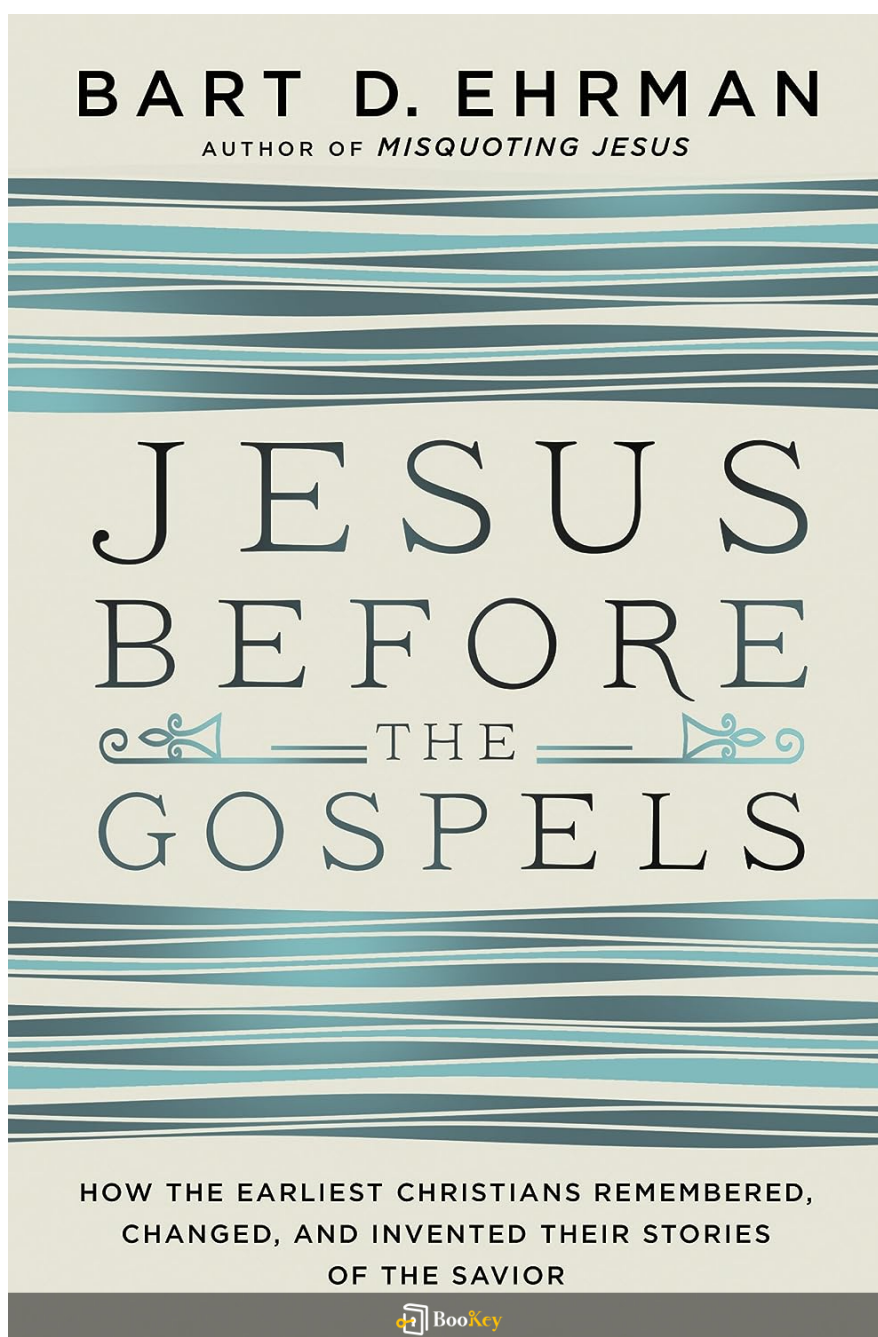


# Jesus Before The Gospels PDF (Limited Copy)

Bart D. Ehrman



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## **Jesus Before The Gospels Summary**

Unveiling Oral Traditions: Shaping Jesus' Stories Before the Gospels

Written by New York Central Park Page Turners Books Club

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## About the book

In "Jesus Before the Gospels," esteemed Bible scholar Bart D. Ehrman delves into the significant role of oral tradition in shaping the narratives of Jesus that we find in the New Testament. Ehrman posits that the stories of Jesus were primarily transmitted verbally for several decades before they were written down, a time he refers to as the "silent period" between Jesus' life and the Gospel accounts.

Ehrman employs insights from psychology, which studies human behavior and mental processes, and anthropology, which examines human societies and cultural development, to illustrate how memory and storytelling affected the transformation of these narratives over time. He highlights the impact of collective memory, suggesting that groups shared and altered the stories of Jesus based on their experiences and cultural contexts, making each retelling a reflection of the community's beliefs and values.

This exploration challenges contemporary understandings of the origins of Christianity by emphasizing that the Gospels are not merely static accounts of Jesus' life but rather dynamic narratives, deeply influenced by the oral traditions that preceded them. Ehrman encourages readers to reassess their perspectives on these sacred texts, recognizing the complex interplay of memory, community dynamics, and storytelling that shaped the portrayal of Jesus.

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Through a blend of scholarly rigor and accessible writing, Ehrman invites us to engage with the rich oral histories that form the foundation of the Gospels, reshaping the way we interpret and understand Christian origins. Ultimately, "Jesus Before the Gospels" serves as a thought-provoking examination that urges us to appreciate the fluid and evolving nature of these ancient narratives and their lasting impact on faith and tradition.

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## About the author

Certainly! To summarize the chapters effectively while maintaining a smooth, logical flow, I'll ensure that any necessary background information is included to enhance understanding.

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### ### Chapter Summary

In the initial chapters, we are introduced to Bart D. Ehrman's scholarly journey into the complexities of the New Testament and early Christianity. Ehrman lays a foundation for his investigation by discussing the concept of textual criticism, a field that examines the texts of the New Testament to identify variations and establish the most authentic versions. He explains how ancient manuscripts have survived, often with multiple copies that vary significantly due to copying errors, intentional alterations, or theological motivations.

Ehrman delves into the historical context of Jesus, emphasizing that our understanding of him is shaped by the Gospels, which were written decades after his death by authors with distinct beliefs and goals. This introduces the idea of the "historical Jesus" versus the "Christ of faith," highlighting the challenges historians face in extracting facts about Jesus's life and teachings.

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As we progress through the chapters, Ehrman introduces key figures in early Christianity, including the apostles—such as Peter and Paul—whose interpretations of Jesus’s message helped shape the burgeoning Christian faith. The conflicts and theological debates among early Christians are also examined, notably the tension between Jewish followers of Jesus and the Gentile converts. This illustrates the diverse landscape of the early church, where differing beliefs and practices often resulted in division.

The chapters further explore the development of early Christian texts, including the formation of the New Testament canon. Ehrman explains how the process of selecting which texts to include was influenced by theological, political, and social factors, shedding light on why certain writings were deemed authoritative while others were excluded.

In the latter part of the chapters, Ehrman reflects on the implications of his findings, questioning the reliability of certain New Testament accounts and encouraging readers to consider how historical analysis impacts modern understandings of faith. He invites a critical examination of the sacred texts, suggesting that a deeper engagement with historical context can enrich one's spiritual experience rather than diminish it.

Ultimately, these chapters serve as a profound introduction to the

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complexities of the New Testament literature and the historical factors that have shaped early Christian beliefs. Ehrman's expertise not only challenges preconceived notions but also encourages a pursuit of knowledge in the ever-evolving relationship between history and faith.

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This summary organizes the main themes and developments of the chapters while ensuring a logical progression for easier comprehension.

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# Chapter 1 Summary: 1 Oral Traditions and Oral Inventions

## ### Chapter 1: Oral Traditions and Oral Inventions

The chapter opens with a deep dive into the intricate nature of memory, particularly in relation to historical figures like Jesus. It introduces the distinction between two types of personal memory as defined by psychologist Engel Tulving: episodic memory, which recalls specific personal experiences, and semantic memory, which encompasses factual information disconnected from personal recollection. The author explains that memories are inherently fallible; they can be accurate or distorted, and importantly, collective memory—how groups remember historical events—plays a crucial role in shaping a society's perception of its past.

A significant focus of the chapter is the varying collective memories associated with Jesus. Different groups, influenced by their unique social and political contexts, remember and portray him in diverse ways. These portrayals, far from being fixed representations of the past, reflect contemporary values and concerns. For instance, the chapter contrasts Reza Aslan's interpretation of Jesus as a passionate Jewish teacher with Bill O'Reilly's more politically charged depiction in "Killing Jesus." These differing narratives highlight how the audiences' prevailing beliefs and



priorities mold their memories of Jesus.

The author asserts that not all memories concerning Jesus are grounded in historical truth. Many narratives around him, including those involving miraculous events attributed to figures like Peter, may be more imaginative constructions than factual accounts. This notion of distorted memories extends to the childhood and birth of Jesus, where apocryphal texts like the Proto-Gospel of James and the Infancy Gospel of Thomas present fantastical elements that embellish his early life and contribute to a legendary image.

Contributing to the discussion, the author contrasts these collective memories with more historical accounts, questioning the reliability of various sources. The recollections of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection are often intertwined with theological motivations, leading to discrepancies in how these events are recorded and remembered.

In conclusion, the chapter argues for the vital importance of memory in understanding both the historical and contemporary significance of Jesus. The narratives constructed around him—whether they accurately reflect historical events or are products of distortion—are crucial for grasping the beliefs and values of the early Christian community. The author calls for a deeper investigation into these early memories through the lenses of psychology and social memory studies, emphasizing that our understanding of Jesus's impact is enriched by recognizing the complexity of how he has



been remembered throughout history. This exploration of memory not only shapes our understanding of Jesus but also reveals the broader implications for faith and scholarship today.

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# Chapter 2 Summary: 2 The History of Invention

## Chapter 2: The History of Invention - Summary

This chapter delves into the complexities of memory, particularly in the context of significant historical figures such as Jesus. Memory researchers have identified a phenomenon known as "distorted memories," which are recollections of events that did not occur as individuals tend to remember them, albeit without any malicious intent. Stories about Jesus frequently exhibit these distortions as they are passed down through generations, reflecting a natural tendency for narratives to evolve.

Interestingly, while many are quick to spot discrepancies in stories outside the New Testament, they often overlook similar inconsistencies within the biblical texts. This observation is common among critical scholars when they engage students, who may initially fail to recognize contradictions in the Gospel accounts until prompted.

Psychological insights further illuminate this phenomenon. Experiments, such as the famous "Gorillas in Our Midst," demonstrate how people's expectations shape their perception. Consequently, individuals may miss significant details simply because they are not focused on them at the time.



Historically, Hermann Samuel Reimarus stands out as an early biblical scholar who argued that memories of Jesus were significantly altered after his death by his disciples. His unpublished writings raised questions regarding the discrepancies found in biblical accounts, highlighting the concerns scholars have over the reliability of these narratives.

As time passed, even before the canonical Gospels were formalized, memories about Jesus began to distort through oral storytelling. Scholars have long recognized that oral traditions can undergo substantial changes over time, which can result in the creation of "invented" narratives that may stray from original events.

The contributions of form critics, such as Hermann Gunkel, Martin Dibelius, and Rudolf Bultmann, emphasize the importance of analyzing the oral traditions that preceded the Gospel texts. They argue that these traditions were often shaped by the contexts of the communities that recounted them, rather than serving as accurate historical records.

Moreover, the assumption that Jesus's followers could have accurately memorized his teachings is subjected to scrutiny. While Rabbinic pedagogy suggests that memorization was a common practice among students of Jewish teachers, evidence supporting this method among Jesus's disciples is notably sparse.



Kenneth Bailey proposed a more nuanced approach, suggesting that early Christians preserved oral traditions through informal communal gatherings. However, critics challenge his views, arguing that many members of these communities were likely not eyewitnesses to the events they recounted.

Questions about the authenticity of the Gospels also arise due to the lack of eyewitness accounts in early church communities. Given that the Gospels were composed several decades after Jesus's life, concerns linger about whether they accurately reflect the firsthand experiences of those who knew him.

Ultimately, the dissemination of Jesus's stories was not confined to individuals who personally encountered him. The nature of storytelling within oral cultures allowed for significant transformations in how Jesus's life and teachings were remembered, illustrating the dynamic and evolving character of these narratives over time.

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# **Chapter 3 Summary: 3 Eyewitness Testimonies and Our Surviving Gospels**

## **Eyewitness Testimonies and Our Surviving Gospels**

### **Introduction to Eyewitness Testimony Studies**

In the early 20th century, criminologist Hans von Liszt initiated groundbreaking research on the reliability of eyewitness testimonies. His 1902 study demonstrated alarming inaccuracies, revealing that up to 80% of eyewitness accounts could contain errors. This study raised significant concerns about the credibility of such testimonies, especially in legal contexts.

### **Research on Eyewitness Testimony**

The exploration of eyewitness reliability gained momentum in the 1980s, particularly as DNA evidence began to expose wrongful convictions based on faulty memory. This era also saw the emergence of discussions around repressed memories, particularly in cases of childhood trauma. The resulting recognition that therapeutic processes could implant false memories further complicated the trustworthiness of personal recollection.

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## **The Faultiness of Memory**

Numerous psychological experiments illustrate the prevalence of false memories across a range of situations, from mundane events to extraordinary claims like UFO encounters. These studies reveal that memory recall can be significantly altered by the act of discussing even vivid experiences. Such findings profoundly impact our understanding of historical narratives, including those surrounding Jesus, casting doubt on the accuracy of accounts attributed, even if they originate from purported eyewitnesses.

## **Comparison with Other Historical Figures: Baal Shem Tov**

The life of Baal Shem Tov, an 18th-century Jewish mystic renowned for his miraculous acts, exemplifies how oral tradition can transform narratives over time. The accounts of his teachings were recorded long after his passing, prompting similar doubts about the reliability of oral histories concerning Jesus. This parallel serves to highlight the complexities of historical storytelling, where authenticity may become lost in retellings.

## **The Relationship of the Gospels to Eyewitness Accounts**

The New Testament Gospels, largely anonymous and composed in Greek, reflect stories passed down orally for extended periods. Scholars actively debate the extent to which these texts incorporate actual eyewitness



testimonies versus the influence of early Christian communities on their narratives. The anonymity of the authors adds a layer of mystery regarding the source of these accounts.

## **Investigating Eyewitness Reliability**

Bauckham contends that the Gospels encapsulate direct eyewitness testimonies; however, this assertion is a matter of contention among contemporary scholars. Many emphasize the inherent inaccuracies in human memory, especially given that the initial audiences for the Gospels likely lacked direct familiarity with the events described. This necessitates a careful evaluation of how the narratives were formed and shared over generations.

## **Citations and Historical Context**

Early Christian leaders often referenced the Gospels without explicitly naming them. The formal attribution of these texts to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John did not occur until the second century. Historical figures like Papias acknowledged the significance of these writings but stopped short of affirming their authorship, leaving their origins somewhat ambiguous.

## **Conclusion**

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The intersection of memory, narrative tradition, and theological intent shapes our understanding of the Gospels. Upcoming discussions will delve into how these complex interactions influence our perceptions of the memories associated with Jesus's life and teachings and the contexts in which these stories were formulated and preserved.

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# Chapter 4: 4 Distorted Memories and the Death of Jesus

## CHAPTER 4: Distorted Memories and the Death of Jesus

In Chapter 4, we delve into the intriguing nature of memory and its implications for the storytelling traditions surrounding the life of Jesus. While extraordinary memory capabilities exist, most individuals experience an average memory that often leads to forgetfulness. This is pivotal in understanding how stories about Jesus were initially conveyed orally before being transcribed into the Gospels.

Psychology, particularly through the work of pioneers like Hermann Ebbinghaus, has revealed that memory is not a perfect recording; rather, it is a reconstructive process. Ebbinghaus identified that forgetting occurs rapidly, with the most notable loss of information occurring shortly after an event. This phenomenon highlights how powerful emotions and experiences can blur the clarity of details over time.

F.C. Bartlett's experiments on recall further illustrate this, demonstrating that memories can change significantly with each retelling. His "serial reproduction" method showed that the details of stories often become distorted, especially when recounted soon after the original event. These fundamental concepts about memory are essential for understanding early



Christianity and how followers came to remember and narrate the life of Jesus.

Eyewitness accounts, typically considered reliable, may contain inaccuracies due to the fallibility of memory. The chapter argues that as details about Jesus were shared within communities, they could undergo substantial alterations, leading to what are termed "distorted memories." These modifications were often shaped by cultural and theological contexts, influenced by the storytellers' intentions and agendas.

Various key events from Jesus's life, particularly surrounding his death, are examined for their memory-based distortions. For example, the trial of Jesus before Pontius Pilate suggests that while he was broadly recognized as having found Jesus guilty, the discrepancies across different Gospel narratives highlight how memories may have evolved to absolve Pilate of guilt.

The chapter also addresses the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, where Jesus's reception is colored by the political context of early Christians living under Roman rule. Their memory of this event as a triumphant arrival stands in stark contrast to the subsequent cries for his crucifixion, revealing a complex relationship with authority.

Another significant event discussed is the Cleansing of the Temple. The

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Gospel accounts may exaggerate Jesus's actions in the temple, imbuing the event with symbolic meanings that resonate more with the early Christian community than with historical accuracy.

The chapter also critiques the Barabbas episode, which raises skepticism due

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# Chapter 5 Summary: 5 Distorted Memories and the Life of Jesus

## ### Chapter 5: Distorted Memories and the Life of Jesus

In this chapter, the complexities of memory and its impact on the oral traditions surrounding the life and teachings of Jesus are explored. The discussion opens with insights from neuropsychologist Alexandre R. Luria, who studied a remarkable mnemonic savant known as "S." These insights raise critical questions about the reliability of memories in oral traditions compared to those documented in written forms, highlighting how the advent of literacy may diminish the necessity for precise memorization.

### #### Oral Cultures vs. Written Cultures

Contrary to common belief that oral cultures boast stronger memories due to their lack of written texts, researchers like anthropologist Jan Vansina and orality expert David Henige illustrate that oral traditions are not static; they evolve significantly over time. Oral storytellers adapt narratives to resonate with their audiences, meaning that what may appear as faithful accounts often undergo substantial alterations.

### #### Impact of Sociocultural Context

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The chapter emphasizes the profound influence of sociocultural context on memory. It posits that the Gospels reflect not just the memories of Jesus but the theological and social concerns of the early Christian communities. As these communities retell stories about Jesus, they morph in response to varying contexts, speaker intentions, and audience needs, which skews our understanding of historical accuracy.

#### #### Evolution of the Accounts

Examining the accounts of Jesus's baptism, his disciples, and his miracles reveals significant discrepancies among the Gospel narratives. Each Gospel presents differing details about critical events—like Jesus's baptism and the calling of his disciples—illustrating how these accounts were shaped by the beliefs and circumstances of the communities they originated from.

#### #### Teaching Transmissions

Oral traditions thrive on performance; thus, each retelling reflects the unique circumstances and motivations of the narrators. The chapter highlights discrepancies between the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and the Gospel of John, showcasing how the teachings attributed to Jesus evolved over time. Some accounts may be rooted in genuine memories, but many likely represent later interpretations influenced by the developing



theological landscape of the early church.

#### #### Conclusions on Remembering and Retelling

In conclusion, the chapter asserts that while the core essence of Jesus's teachings may have been retained, the specific details are often subject to significant alterations during their oral transmission. The interplay of memory, context, and the evolutionary nature of storytelling contributes to a continually reshaped understanding of the historical Jesus. This underscores the necessity for a critical approach in discerning the historical truths within the narratives of Jesus's life and teachings, ultimately calling for a nuanced analysis of the dynamics inherent in oral traditions.

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# **Chapter 6 Summary: 6 Collective Memory: Our Earliest Gospel of Mark**

## **Chapter 6: Collective Memory: Our Earliest Gospel of Mark**

### **I. Understanding Collective Memory**

The chapter opens by exploring the concept of collective memory, illustrating how social contexts can shape individual recollections. Through personal anecdotes about perceptions of the American Civil War, the author emphasizes the role that different groups play in reconstructing memories of the past. This serves as a foundation for discussing the broader implications of memory on identity and cultural perspectives.

### **II. The Study of Collective Memory**

Collective memory is defined as a communal experience influenced by social interactions and cultural contexts. Scholars like sociologist Maurice Halbwachs assert that memories are inherently social, shaped by group identities and collective experiences. This understanding positions collective memory as crucial in interpreting group behaviors and perspectives.

### **III. Halbwachs and Collective Memory**

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Halbwachs theorized that memories cannot exist in isolation but are always embedded within social frameworks. This is especially pertinent to religious memories, which evolve to align with contemporary beliefs and societal demands. However, some modern thinkers, such as Barry Schwartz, challenge Halbwachs's clear separation of memory from history, proposing that historical events also inform the construction of collective memory.

#### **IV. Jan Assmann and Memory-History**

Jan Assmann introduces the notion of "mnemo-history," which emphasizes the collective nature of memory shaped by societal influences. He examines how individuals engage with historical figures through the lens of collective memory, suggesting that present contexts often redefine our comprehension of the past.

#### **V. The Case of Masada**

Masada serves as a significant example of how narratives about historical events can transform over time to fulfill contemporary purposes. Originally a site of Jewish resistance against the Roman Empire, it has evolved into a symbol of Jewish endurance and unity within modern Israeli culture. Scholars note that current interpretations frequently highlight themes of heroism and sacrifice that may diverge from the actual historical events.



## **VI. Jesus in the Gospel of Mark**

The Gospel of Mark presents a unique interpretation of Jesus, portraying him as a misunderstood messiah marked by suffering and rejection.

Throughout the narrative, a key theme emerges: the constant misunderstanding of Jesus's identity by those around him, including his own family, disciples, and religious authorities. Despite performing miracles, he remains largely unrecognized as the true messiah, underscoring the struggles of his community.

## **VII. Conclusion: Memory and Identity**

In conclusion, Mark's Gospel embodies the memories of a community facing suffering and persecution, providing insights into how they reconciled these experiences with the figure of Jesus. The chapter underscores the significance of collective memories in shaping identities and belief systems, particularly within the early Christian context, where memory serves as both a personal and communal foundation for faith.



## **Chapter 7 Summary: 7 The Kaleidoscopic Memories of Jesus: John, Thomas, and a Range of Others**

In Chapter 7 of Bart D. Ehrman's examination of early Christianity, the author delves into the diverse recollections of Jesus that emerged within various Christian communities. This exploration highlights how collective memories influenced the way Jesus was remembered and portrayed differently across different texts, notably the Gospel of John and the noncanonical Gospel of Thomas, as well as the Synoptic Gospel of Mark.

### **Jesus as Remembered in the Gospel of John**

Written around 90–95 CE, the Gospel of John is recognized as the final canonical Gospel, offering a unique portrayal of Jesus that diverges significantly from earlier accounts in the Synoptic Gospels. From its prologue, John positions Jesus as the preexistent Word of God—a fundamental figure in creation and the promise of eternal life. This Gospel emphasizes a spiritual narrative, where Jesus openly reveals His divine identity, contrasting sharply with the Synoptic portrayal where He often maintains a level of secrecy about His messianic role. Miracles in John serve not just as acts of compassion but are intended as signs that affirm Jesus's divine nature and mission.

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## **Jesus's Self-Revelation and Early Memories**

Early testimonies within John's narrative, including those from figures like John the Baptist and Jesus's own followers, recognize Him as the Messiah from the outset. This open declaration of His identity is in stark opposition to Mark's depiction of Jesus primarily as an apocalyptic figure, underscoring a fundamental shift in understanding the core message of Jesus's ministry.

## **Jesus as Remembered in the Gospel of Thomas**

The Gospel of Thomas presents a collection of 114 sayings attributed to Jesus, focusing primarily on secret or esoteric knowledge rather than a traditional narrative. This text shifts the emphasis away from Jesus's death and resurrection, highlighting instead the significance of understanding His teachings as a pathway to eternal life. Moreover, Thomas diverges from Jewish law, promoting a more ascetic form of spirituality that resonates with certain early Christian attitudes towards religious practice.

## **Variations in Early Christian Memories**

Ehrman broadens the scope of investigation by incorporating the

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perspectives of other figures and texts that also reflect varied memories of Jesus, such as the Apostle Paul, the Q source, the Gospel of Matthew, as well as more fringe accounts like the Gospel of Judas. Paul's letters, for instance, focus heavily on the significance of Jesus's death and resurrection while glossing over details of His earthly life. In contrast, the Q source emphasizes Jesus's ethical teachings and apocalyptic messages, showcasing an alternate interpretation of His mission. Theodotus highlights Jesus's humanity, while Marcion pushes for a view that distinguishes between a benevolent divine figure and a lesser demigod.

## **Conclusion: The Kaleidoscope of Memories**

In concluding this chapter, Ehrman asserts that the myriad of memories concerning Jesus across these different communities arose from the pressing social and theological contexts of their time. As each community grappled with its distinct challenges and beliefs, their recollections of Jesus were shaped to reflect those experiences. This rich tapestry of memories illustrates the complexity and evolving nature of early Christianity, presenting a multifaceted understanding of Jesus that continues to influence theological discussions to this day.



## Chapter 8: 8 In Conclusion: A Paeon to Memory

### In Conclusion: A Paeon to Memory

In his thoughtful exploration, Bart D. Ehrman delves into the profound significance of memory, particularly in the context of the New Testament and the formation of early Christian narratives. He draws attention to the fact that the Gospels were composed several decades after the death of Jesus by authors who were not direct witnesses to the events they recounted. This temporal distance raises questions about historical accuracy, leading to various discrepancies and contradictions within the texts.

Despite these inaccuracies, Ehrman argues that memory serves as a crucial source of understanding and meaning in historical contexts. He acknowledges that memories can be warped over time, yet they remain invaluable for shedding light on the realities faced by early Christians. By examining how different Gospel writers—Mark, John, and Thomas—recalled Jesus amidst their unique societal circumstances, we gain insight into how these narratives reflect the evolving beliefs and values of their time.

Ehrman expresses concern over a common tendency among some readers to dismiss the Gospels as irrelevant due to their historical inaccuracies. He

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insists that while historical scrutiny is vital, it is equally important to recognize the deeper significance of these texts. Christianity is multifaceted and extends beyond mere historical fidelity; it is also about meaning, experience, and the interpretations that shape faith communities.

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