



Apostle: Travels Among the Tombs of the Twelve (Deckle Edge)

By Tom Bissell

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A profound and moving journey into the heart of Christianity that explores the mysterious and often paradoxical lives and legacies of the Twelve Apostles—a book both for those of the faith and for others who seek to understand Christianity from the outside in.

“Expertly researched and fascinating... Bissell is a wonderfully sure guide to these mysterious men.... This is a serious book about the origins of Christianity that is also very funny. How often can you say that?” —*The Independent*

Peter, Matthew, Thomas, John: Who were these men? What was their relationship to Jesus? Tom Bissell provides rich and surprising answers to these ancient, elusive questions. He examines not just who these men were (and weren't), but also how their identities have taken shape over the course of two millennia.

Ultimately, Bissell finds that the story of the apostles *is* the story of early Christianity: its competing versions of Jesus's ministry, its countless schisms, and its ultimate evolution from an obscure Jewish sect to the global faith we know today in all its forms and permutations. In his quest to understand the underpinnings of the world's largest religion, Bissell embarks on a years-long pilgrimage to the supposed tombs of the Twelve Apostles. He travels from Jerusalem and Rome to Turkey, Greece, Spain, France, India, and Kyrgyzstan, vividly capturing the rich diversity of Christianity's worldwide reach. Along the way, he engages with a host of characters—priests, paupers, a Vatican archaeologist, a Palestinian taxi driver, a Russian monk—posing sharp questions that range from the religious to the philosophical to the political.

Written with warmth, empathy, and rare acumen, *Apostle* is a brilliant synthesis of travel writing, biblical history, and a deep, lifelong relationship with Christianity. The result is an unusual, erudite, and at times hilarious book—a religious, intellectual, and personal adventure fit for believers, scholars, and wanderers alike.

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Editorial Review

Review

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—*The Independent*

“At time when most discussion of religion in the public sphere is couched in impregnable certainty, mealy-mouthed apologetics or scoffing rationalism, Bissell’s voice is rare. He is properly caustic and profane about Christianity’s absurdities when necessary, but he is also vividly empathetic and conscious that this is not just one of the most significant stories ever told but also one of the most beautiful.” —*The Times* (UK)

“A writer of wanderlust and obsessed curiosity... *Apostle* is a ride-along through unanswerable questions about 12 imperfect men who set out in the first century to spread the word of Jesus Christ. The book is a trip into faith, history and skepticism. The story glows with enchanting asides and stitches together how Jesus’ life and meaning were edited and refined through the ages from contradictory accounts and incongruous translations... Bissell is a writer of magpie instincts, a man seeking enlightenment amid strangers in distant geographies. His entourage of translators, drivers, a monk, an archaeologist and assorted pilgrims are, like the apostles, colloquial and universal, restless and oblivious souls that are at once amusing and profound.”

—Jeffrey Fleishman, *The Los Angeles Times*

“Tom Bissell’s book is consistently fascinating about the stories that crept as inexorably as lichen over a gravestone around the people closest to Jesus. The travelogue elements make for a pleasant hike out of the archive and into surprising places.”

—Stuart Kelly, *The Guardian*

“A writer of restless curiosity and lively wit... Bissell has mastered his source materials in a meticulous and open-minded manner.”

— Michael Upchurch, *The Seattle Times*

“By turns edifying and entertaining, this investigation into the lives of the Twelve Apostles mixes irreverent travelogue and earnest textual analysis. Bissell, a lapsed Catholic, proves an able guide through Biblical scholarship and legend. He is at his best when describing pilgrimages he took to apostolic tombs in Europe and Asia: an injured pigeon near the shrine of St. Andrew, in Patras, Greece, is ‘an awkwardly hopping rotundity’; tourists visiting the Basilica of St. John amid the ruins of Ephesus wear “welding-mask-like Burberry sun visors that covered their whole faces, giving them the effect of extraterrestrials here to take a surface sample before heading back to the mother ship.”

—*The New Yorker*

“Tom Bissell is a wonderful, elegant writer and a dryly funny non-believer (a lapsed Catholic) who is nevertheless fascinated by Christianity... within [Jerusalem’s] Old City he brilliantly evokes the burning tension and borderline madness of a city like no other on earth... Throughout his travels, Bissell listens to today’s pilgrims with a laudable mix of good humour, empathy and polite but firm inquiry... Bissell also reads the New Testament with scrupulous attention... Bissell is a cheery traveller, and *Apostle* is a richly entertaining mishmash of travel book, history of early Christianity, journey of religious non-faith and human comedy.”

—Christopher Hart, *The Sunday Times* (U.K.)

“*Apostle* is a fine mash-up. Certainly, early Christianity is its subject, but storytelling is its object, how we call our world into existence and try to make sense of it. In the end, Bissell asks: ‘What if a story is enough for a thing to be?’ Just so.”

— Peter Lewis, *Philadelphia Inquirer*

“Fascinating... the research is deep and well done and incorporates both ecclesiastical and secular sources... Written with tact and thoughtful inquisition, *Apostle: Travels Among the Tombs of the Twelve* takes the reader through centuries of Christian thought, showing the occasional rocky road of what has emerged as modern Christianity from its beginnings on a hill outside Jerusalem to the far corners of the Roman Empire and beyond.”

—Jerry Lenaburg, *New York Journal of Books*

“Bissell’s eye for detail shines as he recounts his explorations in Europe, the Middle East and Asia . . . A fascinating read for believer and nonbeliever alike. Bissell’s sense of place is evocative, vividly casting images in the reader’s mind of the catacombs, ruins and cathedrals he sees, as well as the variety of faith he encounters.”

—Howard Shirley, *BookPage*

“Bissell, in delving into the lives of the twelve apostles, brings us the intrigue of the Bible without the religious agenda. *Apostle* is interesting history—replete with fun facts . . . Bissell traipses around apostle land with a rogue academic charm.”

—Lauren Larson, *GQ*

“Bissell’s apostolic journeys create a fascinating and quirky blend of contemporary travel narrative and scholarly investigation into the New Testament.”

—Jane Ciabattari, BBC.com “9 Books to Read in March”

“Bissell . . . takes on a formidable task: melding a travelogue with intensive biblical scholarship. From 2007 to 2010, he traveled to the tombs of the 12 Apostles . . . Bissell writes with a keen eye about his fellow pilgrims at the tombs: the young Evangelical who, despite his religion’s tepid view of the saints, still goes to the resting place of Phillip and James; the Greek guide who can rattle off every fact about John as if they were, well, the gospel truth. But Bissell mostly uses these stops as jumping-off places for an erudite discussion of theology, biblical history, and competing religious theories . . . Profound . . . He is a beautiful stylist . . . This is no ordinary tourist trip through the Holy Land; rather, it’s a thoughtful journey and should be savored.

— Ilene Coope, *Booklist*

“*Apostle* is an ambitious hybrid of a book—part history of the early years of Christianity, part group biography, and part travelogue . . . The tension between Bissell’s skepticism and his fascination with Christianity weaves an intriguing thread through the book . . . [an] absorbing tale of pilgrimage.”

— John V. Bennett, *First Things*

“[Bissell’s] account of his travels is an excellent cornucopia of history, exegesis, travelogue, biography, analysis, corrective, and hilarity . . . Bissell includes questions, definitions, traveler’s tales, and sprightly interviews with the pilgrims, translators, and docents he meets, and these bolster his Bible commentaries; his accounts are always grounded in his meetings with scholars and church fathers. Even if readers don’t care about the apostles, Bissell’s style is compelling on its own. His unforced humor is delightful, his wealth of

research grounds this formidable apostolic project, and his crafty rhetoric and irresistible charm make it a must-read.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“A deep dive into the heart of the New Testament, crossing continents and cross-referencing texts... On the page, Bissell finds the Gospels to be a vast, crazy quilt on which every jot and tittle is suspect, from proper names to history, due to both the vagaries of oral tradition as well as the varying translations and competing agendas of copyists, scribes, and leaders. The author examines all these controversies in scholarly depth. Was there really a Judas? Was John actually the Beloved Disciple of history, or was that someone else? Was James actually the stepbrother of Jesus? Were the Gospels written as a reaction to the fact that the second coming did not immediately occur? As a long-lapsed Catholic, Bissell's driving concern is why people still believe . . . Illuminating . . . A rich, contentious, and challenging book.”

—*Kirkus* (starred review)

“Well-documented, with an extensive bibliography, this is a full-bodied read for the religiously curious.”

—Sandra Collins, *Library Journal*.

“Bissell [has] turned his attention and wit to the apostles... Insightful, biting, and funny... It's some of the best travel writing you can read, critical of others and self, but always, ultimately, kind and fair... Bissell is also traveling through millennia of Christian (and religious) history as he surveys the life and history of the apostles, their relationship to one another and Jesus, and how communities formed around and still revolve around them. A lapsed Catholic, Bissell occasionally brings his own experiences of religion to bear on this study, and these moments add some levity to his analysis, which is deep. Bissell proves to be just as well-read and thoughtful about these questions and issues as any traditional Biblical scholar or theologian I've read... Vital... Essential reading.”

—J. Ryan Parker, *Patheos*

About the Author

TOM BISSELL is the author of eight previous books, most recently *The Disaster Artist*, and has been awarded the Rome Prize and a Guggenheim Fellowship. He writes frequently for *Harper's Magazine* and *The New Yorker*.

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From *Peter*:

IV.

Catholic tradition holds that Peter brought the faith to Rome. Today, the Vatican's view of this long-battered, almost certainly inaccurate belief is highly qualified. The actual founder of Roman Christianity is not known. The scholar Peter Lampe, in his groundbreaking work on the origins of Roman Christianity, used multiple sources—ancient pagan history, scripture, archaeological studies—to determine beyond all reasonable doubt that Roman Christianity began as a number of Jewish cells in some of the poorest Roman neighborhoods, particularly the crowded, stinking, and destitute harbor quarter and brick-making neighborhood of Trastevere. Once established, Christian believers gathered in homes across the city and worshipped according to their own understandings, with no centralized authority. There was evident friction between these new Christians and the city's Jews, one cause of which might have been the Christians' successful efforts to win non-Jewish God fearers* away from the synagogue. The synagogues fought back in some manner dramatic enough to have moved the emperor Claudius to take action. In the late 40s, Claudius

banned a large number of “Jews” (early Christians, almost certainly) from Rome. This expulsion marks Roman Christianity’s first historical appearance.

Despite its eventual destruction of Jerusalem, Rome was not a fierce enemy of the Jews. In fact, Diaspora Jews frequently sought out Rome’s protection, and Rome (Claudius’s expulsion edict notwithstanding) usually provided it. Josephus, the great first-century Jewish philosopher Philo, and others suggest that, among Diaspora communities at least, elite Jews could find favor among the Roman authorities. Even during the Jewish War against Rome, Jews did not suffer unusual maltreatment in Rome, provided they did nothing to support the insurrection.

The first Christians in Rome might have anticipated equal benevolence: as immigrant slaves, many of them occupied a position of similar social ambiguity. In fact, Christianity likely infiltrated Rome via slavery, as a number of Jewish (and, thus, Jewish Christian) slaves were sold to Roman aristocrats by members of the Herodian dynasty. Later, many Roman Christians voluntarily sold *themselves* into slavery, the proceeds of which they apparently used to feed the poor in their communities.

The break between Gentile God fearers and Roman Jews did not happen instantly. In all likelihood, a theologically immature form of Christianity reached Rome by the late 30s or early 40s. A decade would go by before Claudius’s expulsion edict. During this time, early Roman Christians, many of them former God fearers, most likely periodically attended the synagogues of their choice, and most of the Jews of these synagogues, however grudgingly, tolerated them. One result of Claudius’s expulsion was to permanently separate Christians from Rome’s synagogues. Less than twenty years later, during the anti-Christian terror of Nero, Jews and Christians were viewed as distinct groups of people.

Well into the third century, not a single Roman church was anything other than a private home. (The word “basilica” does not occur in the Roman tradition until the fourth century.) This lack of a public place of worship made early Christianity much unlike Judaism or paganism; meetings between pagan groups often occurred in private homes, but to worship there was unusual. Yet Roman Christianity as a whole apparently had access to quite a bit of money. Various scattered references allow us to infer that by the middle of the second century Roman Christianity was the richest of all the world’s Christian communities and had been for some time. Roman support was a good thing for the Christians of the Mediterranean world, but it caused unease among the Christians of Rome, who feared the corruption of the faith as it moved deeper down the corridors of power. *The Shepherd of Hermas*, a product of early Roman Christianity that dates from the beginning of the second century, contains a devastating portrait of rich, hypocritical Roman Christians.

Just as there were no churches in early Roman Christianity, there were no “popes.” There were, perhaps, presbyters or bishop-like figures but no single recognizable leader of the faith. Paul mentions no leader in his letter to the Romans, and neither does Ignatius in his letter to the city, written roughly fifty years later. The first titles of identifiable ecclesiastic authority do not occur before the middle of the third century.

For Catholics, then, it would seem that the only salvageable part of Peter’s foundation of the Roman church was the idea that Peter came to Rome and ultimately died there. And now, in the grottoes, Zander and I were getting close to his supposed tomb.

He encouraged me to explore, but much of the area was a red-velvet-rope-lined maze used to corral those not fortunate enough to have Zander guiding them. There were two grottoes: the Old Grottoes (the part contiguous to Saint Peter’s nave) and the New Grottoes (a U-shaped gallery beneath the basilica’s central crossing), which are older than the Old Grottoes but were opened to visitors later. Hulkingly squat columns divided the Old Grottoes into three aisles festooned with the doorless crypts of several popes and esteemed

Catholics, including John Paul I; Queen Christina of Sweden; and Adrian IV, the lone Englishman in the history of the papacy, who had been entombed beneath a Medusa-headed sarcophagus for reasons unknown even to Zander. Also here was Pius XI, whose death had instigated the grottoes' refurbishment.

Hundreds of people were moving through the grottoes' velvet-rope maze in herd-animal silence. Many of them were priests and nuns. No cameras flashed, and no guidebooks were consulted. A good number of the grottoes' visitors seemed in a state of reverently subdued grief. Zander suggested we abscond to the part of the grottoes found directly beneath the basilica's *confessio* and directly above the site of Peter's purported grave.

Above the archway leading into this space was a carved marble scroll sculpture, on which was written *sepulcrum sancti petri apostoli*. On either side of the archway, a stone lion lay with its paws forward. Mounted nearby was a pair of angel statues salvaged from Constantine's Basilica. The archway itself was roped off. Zander seemed genuinely pained he could provide no escort closer than this to the "tomb," which seemed to glow within a soft ochre light that had no immediately discernible source, other than, possibly, God.

The anti-Christian emperor Julian the Apostate once rather cunningly condemned the Christian practice of revered burial: "You have filled the whole world with tombs and sepulchers, and yet in your scriptures it is nowhere said that you must grovel among tombs and pay them honor." There was a time, however, when Christians venerated the dead by drinking half a bottle of wine with a few like-minded friends beside small memorials; when secrecy governed all ritual; when proofs of faith were more personal if no less strongly felt. A few scattered leavings of this abandoned form of Christian devotion could be found in the necropolis, toward which Zander and I now headed.

* Again, pagans who took an interest in the god of the Jews, attended synagogue, or maintained some of Judaism's behavioral requirements.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Deborah Tate:

This *Apostle: Travels Among the Tombs of the Twelve* (Deckle Edge) book is not really ordinary book, you have after that it the world is in your hands. The benefit you have by reading this book is information inside this book incredible fresh, you will get info which is getting deeper you read a lot of information you will get. This kind of *Apostle: Travels Among the Tombs of the Twelve* (Deckle Edge) without we know teach the one who examining it become critical in thinking and analyzing. Don't become worry *Apostle: Travels Among the Tombs of the Twelve* (Deckle Edge) can bring whenever you are and not make your handbag space or bookshelves' turn out to be full because you can have it within your lovely laptop even cellphone. This *Apostle: Travels Among the Tombs of the Twelve* (Deckle Edge) having great arrangement in word along with layout, so you will not feel uninterested in reading.

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Hey guys, do you wish to find a new book to study? Maybe the book with the subject *Apostle: Travels Among the Tombs of the Twelve (Deckle Edge)* suitable to you? The particular book was written by a well-known writer in this era. The particular book titled *Apostle: Travels Among the Tombs of the Twelve (Deckle Edge)* is the main one of several books that everyone reads now. This specific book has inspired a lot of people in the world. When you read this guide you will enter the new way of measuring that you never knew before. The author explained their thought in a simple way, therefore all of us can easily comprehend the core of this reserve. This book will give you a great deal of information about this world now. In order to see the representation of the world in this book.

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The book titled *Apostle: Travels Among the Tombs of the Twelve (Deckle Edge)* contains a lot of information on it. The writer explains your girlfriend idea with easy technique. The language is very simple to implement all the people, so do not really worry, you can easily read the item. The book was written by a famous author. The author provides you in the new age of literary works. It is easy to read this book because you can continue reading your smart phone, or gadget, so you can read the book inside anywhere and anytime. In a situation you wish to purchase the e-book, you can start their official web-site and order it. Have a nice examine.

Eric Kyler:

As a pupil, I exactly feel bored to help reading. If their teacher asked them to go to the library or to make a summary for some guide, they are complained. Just little students that have reading's spirit or real their passion. They just do what the professor wants, like asked to the library. They go to right now there but nothing reading seriously. Any students feel that studying is not important, boring along with can't see colorful photographs on there. Yeah, it is being complicated. Book is very important for you personally. As we know that in this era, many ways to get whatever you want. Likewise, word says, many ways to reach Chinese's country. Therefore this *Apostle: Travels Among the Tombs of the Twelve (Deckle Edge)* can make you truly feel more interested to read.

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