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Finding John the Baptist (And Jesus too)



In the second episode of *Finding Jesus*, the CNN special based on the new book by David Gibson and Michael McKinley, the focus is on John the Baptist. That being the case, this episode might be termed: *Finding John the Baptist* (okay, and Jesus too). And, within the quest for Jesus, learning all one can about John the Baptist is a fine place to begin.

In all four canonical Gospels John the Baptist is seen as a forerunner of Jesus' ministry, and in the Gospel of John, some of Jesus' first followers are presented as disciples of John who leave John in order to follow Jesus. In my view, this rather informal presentation seems more informative than more programmatic presentations of Jesus' calling twelve disciples in the Synoptics. They follow Jesus because of personal interest, providing also hints of connections between Jesus and John. The film furthers that link as it relates to Jesus' first followers and their allegiance to the Baptist and then to Jesus.

Jesus' connections with John the Baptist are well documented here, including the relationship between Mary and Elizabeth -- mothers of Jesus and John -- who were related to each other as kinfolk. Jesus' having been baptized by John in the Jordan River also marks the beginning of his public ministry, and in that sense, understanding the ministry of Jesus receives a helpful assist by focusing first on the mission of John. He is presented in the Fourth Gospel as having come to point Jesus out, and declaring that Jesus must increase and that he must decrease features John's pivotal witness to Jesus (John 1:31; 3:30). John's portrayal in the Synoptics, however, shows the political side of his mission more clearly.

At this point, the film makes its strongest contributions historically -- showing the mission of John as naming sins of his contemporaries and calling for repentance; this even applied to the ruler, Herod Antipas. As he had courted and married Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, John judged him harshly for transgressing Jewish religious and moral laws. Indeed,

John rendered prophetic judgments, calling the populace and rulers alike to repent and to live in ways pleasing to God. This is what his baptizing work affirmed -- repentance and turning one's back on duplicitous and compromised living. This is why Herodias devised a way to have him killed; John had embarrassed her and Herod publicly, and the head of John the Baptist on a platter became the request of her dancing daughter, who enticed Herod into an offer that led to John's death.

In these ways, the CNN special follows the biblical accounts quite suitably, especially elucidating the political realism of the Roman backdrop and the ire felt by leaders whose moral failures were called out by the prophetic witness of John. On this score, a bit more could have been done, in my view, regarding the realism of the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness. Yes, bread, kingdoms, and rescuing angels are presented in Matthew and Luke as temptations faced by Jesus, but such temptations as the desire to be relevant, powerful, and spectacular could have been connected more directly with messianic leaders of Jesus' day and the sorts of issues faced by aspiring leaders in later generations -- including today. After all, Josephus mentions several messianic leaders around the time of Jesus (described in further detail in *From Crisis to Christ*) as a help in understanding the political backdrop of John and Jesus and their ministries.

On this point, Josephus describes John the Baptist as a good and righteous man (*Antiquities* 18.5), who threatened Herod politically. This will also explain why Jesus was such a threat to political and religious leaders alike. If Jesus challenged the likes of Herod and Pilate, as well as Pharisees and Sadducees, in the name of God's truth and loving concern for others, one can understand the impact of his appeal. While the documentary does not go into this feature of John's ministry, his baptizing of the repentant in the free-flowing Jordan can be seen as a protest against outward religious symbols of purification in the name of authenticity and a commitment to right living. Jesus furthered that impetus with this cleansing the temple, his subversive teachings, and healing on the Sabbath; I imagine those features will likely follow in future episodes.

One further connection with the first episode is worthy of mention here -- the testing of DNA in two ancient relics claiming to be fingers of John the Baptist. While the 5th-century box from the John-the-Baptist church in Bulgaria features a bone dating to the early-to-mid first century CE, the relic from the Kansas City collection is from a much later date.

Therefore, while only one of these relics comes from the time of John the Baptist, lingering questions follow. If DNA samples of the blood on the Shroud of Turin could be tested, I wonder if the different bits are from the same person, and if so, might they be from the first century CE in the region of Palestine, and further, might they show any connection with samples from any of the hundreds of John-the-Baptist relics claimed as historic relics? After all, if Jesus and John were cousins, a link could indeed be telling... inquiring minds might like to know.

Whatever the case, this episode moves the viewer a bit closer to Jesus by finding out first a bit more about John the Baptist. I understand there are six episodes overall, and that a focus on Judas is next. That being the case, was he a traitor from the start, or do good intentions sometimes go awry? Next week I suppose we'll know, or at least have a bit more to think about. For now, finding Jesus is furthered by finding out a bit more about his forerunner, John the Baptist.