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The Quest for the True Cross of Jesus

This fifth episode of CNN’s *Finding Jesus* special focuses on the Byzantine era, three centuries after the ministry of Jesus, when Helena, the mother of Constantine, traveled to Palestine to find "the true cross of Jesus," as well as other artifacts that might be valued as relics. Before Constantine became Emperor, Christians were somewhat unevenly persecuted by the Romans, especially during the reign of Diocletian (284-305 CE). During Constantine’s reign (306-337 CE), however, he converted to Christianity and lifted the ban against the Christian faith in 313 CE. The location of many Christian sites in the Holy Land is thus a consequence of Constantine’s conversion to Christianity and especially his mother’s travel to Israel in 327 CE, connecting traditional sites with the story of Jesus’ life and work. In building on Helena’s quest for the true cross of Jesus, this episode focuses on the traditional site of the crucifixion and burial of Jesus. Since the fourth century, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher has marked these historic sites, chosen because of the Roman shrine built there by Emperor Hadrian (117-138 CE) as a means of co-opting the place of Christian memorializing of Jesus death and burial. According to legend, Helena dug with her own hands on that site until she found three crosses, assuming these were the ones used on Golgotha. She then chopped up the wood and brought fragments of the wood of the cross back to Europe. In so doing, she took an interest in sending out fragments of the cross to others as a means of connecting the historical events in the ministry of Jesus with other audiences at a distance.

In seeking to test whether some of the relics boasting to be fragments of the True Cross of Jesus, a fragment was taken from a cross-fragment relic, which had been given to the king of Ireland by the Pope some seven centuries later. When the test was conducted at Oxford, however, Georges Kazan and Tom Higham reported that the relic dates from the 11th century CE, so it cannot have been a part of the original. Of course, the proving of one relic as dating from a millennium later does not prove that all are that late. Then again, even if Carbon 14 dating were to confirm one or more relics as dating from the early first century CE, that would by no means prove that such was a fragment from the actual cross of Jesus. Therefore, the use of relics as a means of seeking the Jesus of history is extremely elusive, and most scholars employ other methods in their research.

Therefore, this episode overall proves very little about the Jesus of history. What it does do, however, is point people to the cross of Jesus as a central feature in his mission and also the theology of the church. Ironically, the instrument of Jesus’ torture and death, rather than signaling the defeat of Christianity, represent its victory. Paradoxically, it is because of the death of Jesus that the resurrection provides hope for believers and a sign of God’s ultimate triumph over life’s ultimate adversary -- death itself. And yet, the quest for the true cross of Jesus can never be limited to the touching of a piece of wood or an archaeological marker. Rather, it is a reality that can only be appropriated personally -- connecting the sacrifice of
Jesus on the cross with the life of the believer -- an invitation of faith rather than a fostering of proof. And, the quest for the true cross of Jesus can only be fulfilled when one takes up one's own cross, as Jesus invited long ago, and follows him.