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News and Interpretations on the Bible and Ancient Near East History.

“Jesus: His Life—Perspectives of Joseph and John the Baptist” (Pt. 1)

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As the calendar approaches Easter, made-for-television movies and documentaries appear on the History Channel, CNN, the National Geographic Channel, and other venues; and, why not? Christianity is the largest religion in the world, and there's a great deal of interest within society at large, as well as among the believing faithful. As Robert Cargill points out in the introit to *Jesus: His Life*, “The Story of Jesus is the greatest story ever told.” Or, as Ben Witherington III notes, “If we want to understand western civilization at all, we must understand the story of Jesus.” In that sense, this eight-part series on Jesus and his life is of interest both to believers and others, and the series produced by Nutopia for the History Channel the four Monday evenings before Easter is certainly worth taking in. As the series claims for itself,[1]

“Jesus: His Life” explores the story of Jesus Christ through a unique lens: the people in his life who were closest to him. Each of the eight chapters is told from the perspective of different biblical figures, all of whom played a pivotal role in Jesus' life including Joseph, John the Baptist, Mary Mother of Jesus, Caiaphas, Judas Iscariot, Pontius Pilate, Mary Magdalene and Peter.

While Nutopia produced a similar series two years ago, this series differs from “Finding Jesus. Fact. Faith. Forgery” in several ways.[2] First, it focuses on the life of Jesus itself, as the primary focus of the episodes. Second, it draws in a combination of seasoned scholars and noted ministers in ways that connect historical-critical inquiry with meaningful applications of the story. Third, this series highlights political, economic, and sociological contexts that illumine the work of Jesus and his followers in ways sure to speak to today's issues. In that sense, this series will appeal to audiences interested in spirituality and social concerns alike. By walking into the story of Jesus and his life from the perspectives of leading figures within the story, new insights emerge, informed by the latest of historical research integrated with meaningful biblical interpretation.

With double episodes aired each of the four evenings, the first two addressed “Joseph: The Nativity” and “John the Baptist: The Mission.” At the outset, I'll take exception to Brian Lowrey's CNN Entertainment faint-praise review, which judges that the series adds “a mediocre wrinkle to the greatest story ever told.”[3] One of the impressive features of the series is the fact of its intentional hybridity. While megachurch pastor Joel Osteen served as the Executive Producer of the series, the contributions of such first-rate biblical scholars as Robert Cargill, Mark Goodacre, Nicola Denzey Lewis, and Michael Peppard give this series a robust reasoned gravitas, including also the pastoral insights of such ministerial standouts as Pastor Susan Parks, Reverend Otis Moss, III, Father James Martin, SJ, and Bishop Michael Curry. The hybridity works well, and the making of meaning is well founded, based upon solid historical-critical research and inferences.

A particular dialectic between historical-critical skepticism and what I call second criticality (the critical challenging of skepticism as well as traditionalism) comes out nicely between Robert Cargill and Ben Witherington. Cargill, for instance, points out that the census referenced by Luke was a decade or so after the birth of Jesus according to Josephus; Witherington notes that there may have been other reasons for Joseph and Mary to travel to Bethlehem. Another tension is nuanced regarding the Massacre of the Innocents in Matthew. Cargill explains the view that as there is no external evidence corroborating Herod's killing of infants, the event is unlikely to

have happened. Witherington, however, notes that as Herod killed his own family members, this is not an unlikely thing for him to have done. Thus, the viewer is left with a good feel for the tension within scholarship itself, keeping in view both sides of traditional and critical perspectives alike.

One of the things this series does well is to connect incidental insights with meaningful inferences. For instance, Cargill points out that Joseph is not necessarily a carpenter; the Greek references him as a *tekton*—which simply means a builder. Thus, he was a construction worker, and Otis Moss thus reminds us that God uses ordinary people. Likewise, Cargill notes that the birthplace of Jesus might not have been a stable; rather, it more likely may have been the lower level of an inn, which would have been used to shelter animals. Thus, the first episode challenges some of the conventional nativity-scene lore with more realistic scenarios of how things might have been, including the perplexed feelings of Joseph and family members over Mary's untimely pregnancy. At this point, the representation of the angel Gabriel as Anthony Kaye makes a striking diversity-friendly statement, as historian Simon Sebag Montefiore reminds us of Gabriel's revelatory work and the messenger function of an angel in Hebrew thought.

In addition to broadening viewers' thinking as to more compelling realism behind the gospel narratives of the birth and early ministry of Jesus, the first two episodes effectively convey some of the political and societal tensions in play within the contexts into which John the Baptist and Jesus came ministering. Indeed, John's challenging of Herod led to his being perceived as a political and personal threat, especially his adulterous marriage to his brother's wife, Herodias. One can thus understand why she (and her daughter Salome) wanted John killed; for Herod to have repented of adultery would have meant a worsening of their lot for sure. On the other hand, I'm not so sure that John pivoted from his baptizing ministry to the challenging of political leaders toward the end of his ministry. I believe he was challenging corruption, injustice, and moral compromise from the beginning—calling people to authentic repentance and not just resorting to ritual purification as an escape from culpability—which is why his ministry was morally compelling among the masses. [4] Baptism in the muddy Jordan as practiced by John was not an induction into a religion from the lack thereof; it was a direct protest against ritual means of purification if leaders and populace alike were excusing moral compromise in the guise of religiosity. This is why Jesus submitted to John's baptism. He joined in the protest, challenging also money-changing exploitation in the temple, legalistic approaches to sabbath observance, and the marginalization of the religiously impure.

At this point, the series makes a creative attempt to reconcile the Gospel of John with the beginnings of Jesus's ministry in the Synoptics. Indeed, John declares that the reason he has come baptizing dawns on him as he recognizes the mission of Jesus and points his followers toward his successor (John 1:19-42). A bit of creative license is taken as the events in John 3:22-30 are harmonized with the imprisonment and death of John in the Synoptics. Here Andrew is presented as informing John, imprisoned in Machaerus, of the ministries of Jesus, whereby John confesses that Jesus must become greater and he must become less. At this point, another creative leap is made, connecting Luke's account of the Lord's Prayer with the disciples of Jesus asking him to teach them to pray just as John had done with his followers. This brings the beginning of Jesus's ministry to a solid platform, whereby he comes into his own, as a second revolutionary, schooled and inspired by the prophetic work of John the Baptist.

Overall, the first two episodes have launched the eight-part series successfully. Given the backdrop of the oppressive imperial Roman presence, the plight of the Jewish populace in Galilee and Judea is palpably sketched. In hailing from Nazareth, while fulfilling hopes of a Davidic messianic lineage, the place of Jesus among prophetic leaders of his day is well set. And yet, in his association with John the Baptist, the moral and political thrust of his ministry is also well contextualized, bringing to bear the best of recent scholarship and ministerial insight along the way.

In addition to other historical treatments of Jesus and his life, the value of this project is that it seeks to further a set of dialogues between different disciplines and approaches to biblical texts in historical perspective, showing both sides of debated issues while allowing viewers to come to their own conclusions. Thus, the Gospel of John is given a place alongside the Synoptic Gospels, and in the first two episodes diverse perspectives are integrated in a thoughtful and nuanced way. If the remaining episodes are as good as the first two, this new series will have made a contribution, not only for this year but also for years to come.

[1] Airing the four Mondays before Easter 2019 (3/25, 4/2, 4/8, 4/15) on the History Channel, the website notes:

