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Jesus: His Life from the Perspectives of Mary and Caiaphas (Pt. 2)

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"Jesus: His Life from the Perspectives of Mary and Caiaphas" (Pt. 2)

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Following on the first two episodes of the History Channel's "Jesus: His Life," focusing on perspectives of Joseph and John the Baptist, the second installment continues the hybrid approach, reflecting on the life of Jesus from the perspectives of Mary and Caiaphas. The opening episode features Jesus visiting Jerusalem as a twelve-year old, as portrayed in Luke 2. Beginning with Mary and her memory of the infancy and childhood of Jesus, things move forward quickly into the story of his engaging the Jewish authorities in the temple. While nothing else is known about the childhood and early adulthood of Jesus, the memory of his engaging religious authorities in Jerusalem must have influenced Mary's impression of his mission and special calling in life.

The episode tracks with the traditional view that Joseph may have died before the ministry of Jesus began, which would have led to his working as a carpenter to support the family. Along these lines, several conjectures of tensions between Jesus and his brother are presented. First, his brothers may have resented his ministry-related departure—imposing on them to provide for the family's welfare. Second, when Jesus launched his healing and exorcising ministry in Capernaum, leading into a number of messianic expectations, this might have raised tensions within his family if they feared a backlash from the Romans. They had cracked down on messianic figures in the past, for sure; fear of further violence is likely. Third, the mother and siblings of Jesus might have felt betrayed when he extended family identity to partners in his mission, seemingly disparaging his family connections. That being the case, it seems odd that brothers of Jesus did not yet believe in him (John 7), as they wanted him to go to Jerusalem and demonstrate his signs. At this point, a bit of further conjecture is introduced; Mary is said to have understood Jesus's mission more authentically, and James came to believe in his brother later (alluding to 1 Cor 15:7), assuming leadership of the Jesus movement in Jerusalem after the death of Jesus. And, while sibling rivalry may have been involved, such inferences are added to the biblical texts rather than emerging from them directly.

One of the main themes of the third and fourth episodes involves the tensions between the powerful ministry of Jesus and the authority of religious and political leaders in the region. What might not be apparent to modern readers is the way that the miracles, actions, and teachings of Jesus may have threatened Jewish religious leaders as well as Roman authorities. For instance, if the first public miracle of Jesus involved the wedding miracle in Cana of Galilee (John 2), this would have raised notice of Jesus as a potential messianic Jewish leader among the populace. And, as a result of his exorcising and healing works in Capernaum performed on the Sabbath (Mark 1), this likely scandalized the Pharisees, who sought to obey Sabbath laws faithfully. Therefore, they attributed his power to Beelzebul (the prince of demons). Despite his inaugural sermon at the Nazareth Synagogue (Luke 4) proclaiming release to captives and recovery of sight to the blind (citing Isaiah 61), the rejection of Jesus in Nazareth (Mark 6) is explained as a factor of his offending religious leaders and fear of Roman retaliation if a messianic prophet were to gain political notoriety in the region. After all, the Roman general in Syria, Varus, had put down the revolt of Sepphoris in 4 BCE, just four miles from Nazareth, crucifying 2,000

Jews,[1] and Judas the Galilean had also brought a Roman backlash on the region in 6 CE as he opposed the leveraging of Roman monetary taxation.[2] As Otis Moss III, points out, though, Jesus's rejection by his own simply fulfills Scripture, as a prophet is not without honor, except in his own hometown (Mark 6:4; John 4:44).

At this point, Robert Cargill makes an important point—one of sympathy for the Pharisees and the priestly leaders. Rather than seeing them as malevolent, they were primarily seeking to adhere faithfully to the teachings of Jewish Scripture regarding Sabbath observance, preserving monotheism, and insuring proper temple practices. The actions and teachings of Jesus, however, broke a fair number of accepted codes, and one can appreciate how his ministry would have threatened religious and societal authorities. When Jesus came teaching the love of neighbor—including loving one's enemies and embracing untouchable lepers and blind folk—this stretched conventional views beyond their breaking points. As Jesus healed and welcomed the marginalized and those that were disrespected by Jews and Romans alike, the question is raised as to whether those around Jesus (including his family and associates) began to fear that his fate would become the same as that of John the Baptist. Therefore, the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7—the most important speech in the Bible) really turn things upside down. Declaring that the meek would inherit the earth and that the peacemakers would be blessed would certainly have threatened the ruling class, so one can appreciate their political consternation over Jesus and his revolutionary movement.

As the third episode makes a fair number of conjectures regarding how Mary would have perceived Jesus and his ministry, in the Gospel of John she is clearly present at the beginning and the end of his ministry. Thus, as Candida Moss points out, she must have felt conflicted regarding Jesus and his ministry. On one hand, she would not have wanted her son to be in danger; on the other hand, she would likely have sensed the spiritual thrust of his mission and would have wanted to support its furtherance. Susan Sparks also conjectures that Mary would have been something of a matriarch within her household, and while she had raised her son, she would also have to let him go.

Overall, the third episode of "Jesus: His Life" does a good job of integrating the beginnings of Jesus's ministry as recounted in the Synoptics and the Gospel of John, viewing things from the perspective of Mary. A good deal of conjecture is involved in guessing what Mary might have felt or thought about things, but that goes with the territory within any historical reconstruction. I might take issue with the rejection of Jesus at Nazareth being a factor of his offending invested parties; it could also be the case that people familiar with a hometown figure would have been reticent to claim him as a messianic contender. Familiarity breeds modest appraisals, at times. Nonetheless, John 4 sets the record straight, over and against the Markan rendering; even the Samaritans received him, as did the Galileans of Capernaum. Thus, in bi-optic perspective, a more textured appreciation for the starts and stops in the early ministry of Jesus contributes to the political realism of the gospel accounts.[3]

The fourth episode of "Jesus: His Life" shifts now to a focus on the ministry of Jesus as perceived by Caiaphas, the high priest during the ministry of Jesus, including events around Lazarus of Bethany. Again, interpreting the ministry of Jesus in bi-optic perspective, seeing John and the Synoptics as representing dual accounts of the ministry of Jesus, his itinerary in John includes a number of visits to Jerusalem over and against the single-visit presented by Mark, followed by Matthew and Luke.[4] Therefore, the fourth episode features the third visit of Jesus to Jerusalem as coinciding with the Festival of Tabernacles (John 7), and again a number of insightful inferences are introduced. Given Mark Leuchter's point, that the Festival of Tabernacles would have featured the importance of water, it is striking that Jesus invites all thirsty people (John 7:37-39) to come unto him for refreshment—receiving living water welling up from within—a reference to the Holy Spirit. Again, this is not simply a spiritual invitation that is being made; it plausibly threatened Caiaphas, who would have been at the center of these events. Or, to put it in Cargill's terms, if Jesus is understood to be saying that rituals are not important, but that he is the one who gives life, this would have threatened the entire temple system in Jerusalem that was headed up by Caiaphas, the high priest.

The consternation of Jerusalem authorities is further raised as Jesus performs a second healing on the Sabbath in Jerusalem, this time on the man born blind (John 9). People question whose sin it was that this man was born blind; Nicola Denzey Lewis points out that people in that day took illness as a sign that God had been angered. Here, though, Jesus declares that it was no one's sin that was to blame, but that God's glory might be displayed. As Jesus spit on the ground, made mud, and put it on the man's eyes, instructing him

to go and wash in the Pool of Siloam, Mark Goodacre points out that this was a common remedy used by healers of that day. The blind man and his parents are then interrogated by the Jerusalem authorities, who were charged with declaring a healed person clean and ready to be restored to societal inclusion. However, they are offended at Jesus's having healed the man on the Sabbath, and they are scandalized by the notion that a "sinner" would have been able to perform such miraculous signs. A bit more could have been done here regarding the second Pool of Siloam discovered near the temple area in 2004. This was a purification pool, which people bathed in before entering the temple, and coins were found in it dating before the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE.[5] Thus, if blindness was considered an impure condition, the blind man's recovery of sight would have required official recognition by the priests, so a good deal of critical realism is also evident behind the healing in John 9.

At this point, the episode draws in the tenuous relationship between Pilate and the Jewish leadership. As Pilate had offended Jewish leaders several years earlier by building an aqueduct bringing water into Jerusalem and paying for it with monies from the temple treasuries, Pilate put down Jewish protests with violent force.[6] Therefore, Caiaphas would have wanted to keep things calm in Jerusalem, seeking to mitigate the likelihood of another Roman crackdown on the populace. Cargill also notes that Caiaphas would have been mindful of the Romans having crucified 2,000 Jews during his childhood, so he would have sought to insure that there was no reason for Rome to be alarmed over the Galilean prophet's activities in Jerusalem. By now Jesus was accused of blasphemy, having spoken of God as his Father, and the penalty for blasphemy, according to Jewish law, was death. When Jesus escaped capture, however, Caiaphas ordered he be arrested the next time he entered the city. After fleeing to the Judean countryside, Jesus is reported in John 10 to have returned to the place where John was baptizing—across the Jordan. It is there that he learns that his friend, Lazarus of Bethany, was ill, near death's door.

Addressing the question of why Jesus waited before traveling to Bethany, the danger of returning to the Jerusalem is mentioned, although Lazarus' having been dead for four days also insures that the miracle would be a resurrection, not simply a resuscitation. Here the views of Ben Witherington, III come into play, as the connections between Jesus and the family of Lazarus are impressive in John 11. The point is that Jesus not only had Galilean followers; he also had Judean followers. Further, some of his followers were women—the first report of such in Jewish history. The love of Jesus for Lazarus and his sisters reminds us of Jesus's humanity (Joel Olsteen), and it is noteworthy that both Mary and Martha declare to Jesus at different times, "If you would have been here, our brother would not have died." Jesus wept as he came to the tomb of Lazarus, and while Martha had made a confession of belief in the final resurrection, she apparently did not imagine that Lazarus would indeed come forth from the grave. At this point, a pastoral point could have been made: Jesus calls Lazarus forth from the tomb, but he leaves to his followers to unbind him and free him from his burial clothes.

Here the episode closes with a return to the consternation of Caiaphas over the sign-wielding messianic figure from Nazareth. If he does nothing, Rome might indeed step in and put down with violent force a perceived messianic uprising around the prophet from Galilee. Therefore, having called together the Sanhedrin, the plot to do away with Jesus comes together in its final form. In Mark Leuchter's terms, to silence one man is a small price to pay to avoid a Roman onslaught against the Jewish people. At this point, the producers could have done more with the ironic presentation of Caiaphas, who "sacrifices" Jesus out of political concerns, while the Johannine narrator sees this as an unwitting prophecy, given that he was the high priest at the time. Thus, Jesus died not only for the Jewish nation, but for the entire world—a sacrifice bringing redemption to all, not simply a rescue from a potential Roman backlash (John 11:49-52).

In reflecting on the third and fourth episodes of "Jesus: His Life," the scholars, pastors, and producers of the series have done an excellent job of interpreting the ministry of Jesus through the eyes of Mary and Caiaphas, harmonizing presentations in John and the Synoptics in ways that work fairly well. Of course, not everything can be included, but the selection works well, even if the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10 is superimposed upon Jesus's discussions with Mary and Martha in John 11—a bit of a stretch. Then again, I might see Luke's departures from Mark in Johannine directions as reflecting familiarity with the Johannine tradition, so some sort of intertraditional connection there is not impossible to imagine. Especially helpful are the inferences of religious authorization and political realism palpable within the texts, and described also by Josephus. While imaginations of what Mary might have been feeling and thinking are a bit extended, the ways that the decisive words and delivering deeds of Jesus threatened religious and political leaders offers many a helpful insight as to the uneven reception of Jesus and his ministry within his Galilean and Judean

settings alike. That being the case, the ministry of Jesus, as interpreted in later generations, bears within itself the seeds of societal transformation as well as spiritual renewal. Such, in my view, is the most valuable contribution of Episodes 3 and 4 of “Jesus: His Life,” presented by the History Channel.

[1] Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.10.10; *Wars* 2.5.2.

[2] Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.5. See more on the Roman presence in Palestine, including their crackdowns on first-century messianic pretenders: Paul N. Anderson, *From Crisis to Christ: A Contextual Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2014), vii-ix, 28-38, 52-55.

[3] For an overall view of John’s relations to the Synoptic Gospels and an integrated approach to the life and ministry of Jesus as presented in all four Gospels, see Paul N. Anderson, “Excursus I: A Bi-Optic Hypothesis—A Theory of Gospel Relations” and “Excursus II: The Historical Quest for Jesus,” *From Crisis to Christ: A Contextual Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2014), 102-126 and 168-176.

[4] In considering the historical riddles of the Fourth Gospel, see Paul N. Anderson, *The Riddles of the Fourth Gospel: An Introduction to John* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 45-66.

[5] See Urban C. von Wahlde, “The Pool of Siloam: The Importance of the New Discoveries for our Understanding of Ritual Immersion in Late Second Temple Judaism and in the Gospel of John,” *John, Jesus, and History, Vol. 2: Aspects of History in the Fourth Gospel*, eds. Paul N. Anderson, Felix Just, S.J., and Tom Thatcher, SBL Symposium Series 44 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2009), 155-174.

[6] Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.3.2.

Article Comments

Submitted by Ben Wiebe on Sat, 04/06/2019 - 08:22

Permalink (/comment/500#comment-500)

Good to see this piece Paul. I want to see this series. Appreciate the way you are working to integrate the witness of the four gospels in seeking to understand Jesus. Makes me want to read more of your studies. Thanks. Ben Wiebe

Reply (/comment/reply/node/1259/field_article_comments/500)

Submitted by Paul N Anderson on Mon, 04/08/2019 - 09:42

Permalink (/comment/501#comment-501)

Thanks, Ben, great to be in touch! I have several essays posted on The Bible and Interpretation web page, which you can access on this link:

<https://cse.google.com/cse?cx=008113086239118527003%3Avvh8gj-y4iu&i...> (https://cse.google.com/cse?cx=008113086239118527003%3Avvh8gj-y4iu&ie=UTF-8&q=Paul+N+Anderson&sa=Search&siteurl=www.bibleinterp.com%2Farticles_index.shtml&ref=&ss=3531j127)

Do also check my Academia page for over fifty Johannine and Jesus essays as well as my Amazon author's page.

<https://georgefox.academia.edu/PaulAnderson> (<https://georgefox.academia.edu/PaulAnderson>)

Let's be in touch,

Paul N. Anderson

Reply (/comment/reply/node/1259/field_article_comments/501)

Submitted by pooja khare on Wed, 07/10/2019 - 08:49

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thanks for sharing this information

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