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“Jesus: His Life from the Perspectives of Mary Magdalene and the Apostle Peter” (Pt.4)

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The final two episodes of the History Channel’s “Jesus: His Life” focus on Jesus as viewed by Mary Magdalene and the Apostle Peter. As with the previous six episodes, this hybrid documentary focuses on the life of Jesus from the perspectives of particular individuals within the gospel narratives. Over and against more historical-critical and skepticism-privileging series a couple of decades ago,[1] this series largely follows the presentations of Jesus within the four canonical gospels, while still setting them within the contexts of first century Palestine under the Roman Empire. In so doing, the softer

view of New Testament historiography pioneered by James Dunn, “Jesus Remembered,” is applied effectively, as the life of Jesus is examined as it might have been perceived and remembered by different figures within the gospel narratives themselves.[2]

This more nuanced approach to gospel historiography allows scholars leeway in presenting not only what happened, but also sketching how key figures would have perceived and referenced particular events, including a diversity of understandings and viewpoints within and beyond the gospel witness.[3] That being the case, differences between the Gospels (especially between John and the Synoptics) can be accounted for more readily, rather than choosing sides in one direction over another. Likewise, aided by an overall theory of John’s relations to the other traditions, some of the reasons behind different perspectives within gospel traditions and their developments can also be explored more fully.[4] Like previous documentaries on the life of Jesus, however, first-rate scholars are involved in the production of the series. This allows for differences of opinion between historical-critical and traditional views to be noted side-by-side without having to resolve every issue along the way. The adding of pastoral insights here and there along the way also allows audiences to make personal connections with elements of the story, which is one of the main interests of narrative to begin with, historical and otherwise.

The Perspective of Mary

As each episode views the life of Jesus from the imagined viewpoint of a particular historical figure, one of the strengths of this approach is that the events in his ministry can be replayed from different perspectives. While the episodes follow the general progression of the life and ministry of Jesus, the introduction of each figure allows some review, going back to the featured person’s roles within the story, catching viewers up on what has been covered earlier. That being the case, the viewer is reminded of prior events, even if one might have missed some of the previous episodes. Thus, Mary Magdalene is introduced as having followed Jesus earlier in his ministry, and the passing reference in Luke 8:1-3, where she is introduced as the woman from whom Jesus had cast out seven demons, is connected with what may have been troubling her inwardly later. One can only imagine her inward turmoil as she witnessed the torture, humiliation, crucifixion, and death of Jesus; yet, she was still faithfully present at the cross, whereas many of her male counterparts were nowhere to be found.

Given that Mary of Migdal had found new meaning in life because of the liberation she had experienced in her relationship with Jesus, her solidarity with Jesus on the cross, alongside other women, portrays her deep empathy for the Master from Nazareth. This accounts also for her early visit the tomb the first day of the week, leading to her discovery of the empty tomb, whereby she quickly reports her discovery to Peter and the Beloved Disciple (John, in traditional memory, mentioned in passing by Mark Goodacre).[5] Building on the accounts in John 20, Mary encounters the risen Christ, whose recognition is given by the mere mention of her name—"Mary," to which she responds in Aramaic—"Rabbouni" (or "teacher"). She then becomes the apostle to the apostles (just as the woman at the well in John 4 becomes the apostle to the Samaritans, I might add), as she quickly goes and tells the disciples that she has seen the resurrected Lord. At this point, Father James Martin, SJ notes that Mary Magdalene would have comprised at this instance the entire membership the Church, as the first believer in the death and resurrection of Jesus as the Messiah/Christ—a bit overstated, but an intriguing noting of her significance.

Ben Witherington III then points out that it is unlikely that this sequence of events would have been concocted. If the corpse of Jesus could have been found, either by the Romans or the religious leaders, it certainly would have been produced. And, if reports of a noteworthy eyewitness were to have been fabricated, they certainly would not have chosen a woman to convey the news. Whatever the case, the lives of the once-cowering disciples are now transformed, as Jesus appears to them behind closed doors, showing them the flesh wounds in his hands and feet. Nicola Denzey Lewis points out that the disciples' encounter here is not simply an apparition or a vision; it involved seeing, touching, and beholding the physical presence of Jesus as the resurrected Lord. Michael Peppard also notes that even the resurrected body of Jesus bears within itself the scars of the crucifixion, connecting the realism of suffering with the hope of the resurrection for believers. These sorts of asides invite viewers to connect with the events in the story personally, however they might have transpired or have been reported.

A further point worth noting is the ways that the seventh episode clarifies the identity and role of Mary Magdalene. Contrary to the somewhat common belief that Mary Magdalene was an adulteress (according to Susan Sparks, a view going back to Pope Gregory the Great, who in 591 AD preached a sermon on the seven vices of Mary Magdalene), there is no reference in the Bible to her having had a checkered past,

morally. Rather, she was likely known as a respected figure within her town of Migdal, which was a center of Galilee's fishing industry, near Tiberias. Thus, she might have even been a benefactor and sponsor of the Jesus movement.

Despite this helpful setting of the record straight, however, it strikes one as strange and historically problematic to present Mary's hands as bleeding (showing the stigmata—bleeding holes like the nail-holes in the hands of Jesus), as there is no reference to such in either the Bible or any of the ancient Christian texts. Indeed, she likely identified with her crucified Lord, but the legend of stigmata goes back to Mary Magdalen dei Pazzi, a Carmelite nun, who is remembered as identifying with the Passion and suffering of Christ to the extent that she received the stigmata as well as a crown of thorns (1585). While she was later deemed a saint within the Catholic Church, the episode's presenting the first-century Mary of Migdal as bleeding from her palms is more imaginative than historical, and thus a bit of a distraction, in my view. Most importantly, Mary should be seen as the first apostle (Christina Cleveland), or in my language, “the Apostle to the Apostles,” thus leading the way into the new era of the post-resurrection Jesus movement.

The Perspective of Peter

Backing up into the calling of the disciples, the eighth episode views the ministry of Jesus from the perspective of Peter, often regarded as “chief among the apostles” (Matt 10:1). At this point, however, the episode conflates the calling narratives of Matthew 10, John 1, and Luke 5 in ways that seem a bit jumbled, especially if one views these scenarios as referencing different events among a more complex set of developments related to the emergence of Jesus as a leader who is then joined by his followers. Thus, according to John 1:35-51, Jesus does not call Peter first among the Twelve; rather, Andrew, his brother, introduces Peter to Jesus, and they (along with Philip and an unnamed disciple) forsake their following of John the Baptist and become followers of Jesus.

Several other calling instances follow (for instance, the calling of Levi in Mark 2:13-14 and the calling of the fishermen in Matt 4:18-22), but the full calling of the Twelve is narrated in Mark 3:13-19 (followed by Matthew 10:1-4). The great catch of fish, however, found only in Luke 5:1-11 and John 21:1-11, reflects, in my judgment, one of the six dozen instances where Luke departs from Mark and sides with John.[6] Thus, calling Peter and the sons of Zebedee to abandon their nets and to follow Jesus, who will

make them fishers of women and men, is enough without needing to include the great catch of fish at the first calling of Peter rather than his re-calling in John 21. Further, the numbering of 153 fish (John 21:11) without breaking the nets seems to allude to the capacity of the church to embrace different people groups (without breaking), and that thrust fits better with threefold reinstatement of Peter and his pastoral ministry, following his threefold denial of the Lord—both events happening around a charcoal fire (John 18:18; 21:9). Thus, I would have preferred the great catch of fish to have been placed at the end of this episode rather than at the beginning.

With a good bit of irony in play, Peter the “rock” is also shown to have been more like rubble, despite Jesus giving him the nickname, *Kēphas*, which means “rock” in Aramaic (Cargill). Likewise, *Petros* means “rock” in Greek. While Peter is referred to in the episode as the foundation stone upon which Christianity is founded, it would be more accurate to quote Peter in Acts 4:11 and 1 Peter 2:6 (see also Mark 12:10—perhaps Peter’s preaching *did* provide content for Mark’s story of Jesus) as referring to Jesus as the building block, ironically rejected by the builders, which has become the cornerstone of the whole new world (Psalm 118:22). If during his own ministry Peter referred to Jesus as the cornerstone foundation of the new age, it may also be understandable why he is associated with the “rock” upon which the church is built, according to Matthew 16:17-19. Of course, debates rage as to whether the “rock” was Peter the Apostle (the Catholic view), or whether it was his confession of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God (the Reformers’ view), or whether it was inspiration itself—not revealed by flesh and blood, but by the self-disclosing work of the heavenly Father (the Charismatic view).

Whatever the case, Peter certainly came to play a role as the bridge between Jewish followers of Jesus and Gentile believers in Christ, so his role was indeed pivotal in the early Christian era. Along these lines, the final episode focuses on the psychological self-doubt that Peter must have faced, given that he had promised to never deny the Lord at the Last Supper, while then collapsing into betrayal in the courtyard of Caiaphas, where he denied Jesus three times before the cock crew. Of course, the situation was danger-filled, as the arrest and trials of Jesus could easily have spread to rounding up his followers—especially Peter. And, Peter’s Galilean accent was a dead giveaway to the bystanders (Mark 14:70). If Peter felt he would be the truly faithful disciple, defending

Jesus until the end—unlike Judas the traitor—he must have been devastated at the Lord’s word coming true. He also could not have imagined that Jesus would die at the hands of the Romans, so this may also account for his absence at the crucifixion.

In the presentation of the crucifixion, several aspects of realism are here included. First, Robert Cargill reminds us that nails were driven through the wrists of the victim (not the hands) so as to support the person’s weight. Second, as death was by suffocation, victims would languish for hours, or days, before they died. Given that the Sabbath was approaching at dusk, the deaths of the victims needed to be hastened. Third, the legs of the other two victims were broken so as to hasten their deaths, but Jesus was already dead. Thus, the piercing of his side with a spear, which would have assured the victim’s death. This is mentioned only in the Gospel of John (19:37), as are the nails, which fulfill the Scripture from Zachariah 12:3, “They shall look upon the one they have pierced.” Interestingly (in my view), the main thrust of the eyewitness attestation in John 19:34-35 is not to the divinity of Jesus, but to his humanity—water and blood flowed from his side—Jesus really did suffer and die. This detail may also would have confronted the teachings of traveling ministers in John’s audience later on, given that some of them denied that Jesus came in the flesh, implying that if Jesus did not suffer, they need not either, even under the reign of Domitian, who required emperor laud (81-96 AD, 1 John 4:1-3).

Following the crucifixion, the episode features several redemptive narratives. Despite Mary Magdalene’s fear and self-doubt, she bears witness to the risen Lord. Despite Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus perhaps having remained silent or voiceless when Jesus was condemned by the Sanhedrin, they request from Pilate permission to bury the body of Jesus in a respectable (unused) tomb (John 19:41; Luke 23:53). And, despite having denied Jesus three times, Peter is given the opportunity to affirm him thrice, where Jesus recommissions him, saying, “feed my lambs; tend my sheep; feed my sheep” (Witherington). At this point, the narrated events in John 21:1-17 lead into a prophecy about the demise of Peter (vv. 18-23), who, according to tradition declared being unworthy to be crucified as was his Lord. No matter, he reportedly was thus crucified upside down, in Rome, during the reign of Nero (ca. 64-68 AD), and purportedly buried where Saint Peter’s Basilica stands to this day.

During both of my trips to the Vatican, our groups were allowed to view the recently discovered bones of a mesomorphic male, middle aged and robust, buried under the chapel where Christians had worshiped since the third and fourth centuries. The main testimony to the contribution of Peter, Mary, John, and other followers of Jesus, however, is that the movement grew to over 10,000 within a decade, and to over a million within a century or two. Thus, when the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in the early fourth century, the movement Jesus started was well on its way to becoming the official religion of the Holy Roman Empire, now comprising the largest religion in the world. Of course, huge diversity abounds within the movement Jesus started, and sometimes his followers have failed miserably at following the loving and forgiving way of Jesus. However, if the perspectives of those who knew and observed him tell us anything about the prophetic leader from Nazareth, his memory continues to provoke, inspire, and embolden. And, as he declared to Peter and others at the lakeshore and on the dusty roads of Galilee, he invites seekers today and in every generation: "Follow me."

[1] See, for instance, the excellent 1998 PBS Frontline series, built upon the book of Paula Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of New Testament Images of Christ* ([1988] 2nd edn. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), by the same title (<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/> (<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/>)). See also the ABC series by Peter Jennings (in 2000), *The Search for Jesus* (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0251391/> (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0251391/>)).

[2] See the first of his three volumes on *The Makings of Christianity, Jesus Remembered* by James D. G. Dunn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

[3] See, for instance the critiques of modern historiography by Hayden White, whose question, "Whose history?" has invited metahistorical considerations into studies of historical memory and perspective: *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination of 19th Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

[4] See, for instance, Paul N. Anderson, *The Fourth Gospel and the Quest for Jesus: Modern Foundations Reconsidered*, LNTS 321 (London: T&T Clark, 2006). In my own approach to these issues, I see John and Mark as "the Bi-Optic Gospels," having different perspectives on Jesus and his ministry from day one. Thus, Matthew and Luke built *upon* Mark, whereas John built *around* Mark. Thus, John is different on purpose, filling in a few

gaps and adding five miracles not present in Mark (in its first edition), whereas John's later material harmonizes its story of Jesus with the Synoptic Gospels overall. For an overview of a Bi-Optic Hypothesis, see Excursus I in Paul N. Anderson, *From Crisis to Christ: A Contextual Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2014) 102-126 (https://www.academia.edu/17748712/_Excursus_I_A_Bi-Optic_Hypothesis--A_Theory_of_Gospel_Relations_ (https://www.academia.edu/17748712/_Excursus_I_A_Bi-Optic_Hypothesis--A_Theory_of_Gospel_Relations_)).

[5] The identity of the Beloved Disciple in the Gospel of John has been one of the most contested issues in the history of modern biblical scholarship. Indeed, multiple problems abound with the traditional view that the link here is with John the Apostle, and the fact of the differences between the Gospel of John and the Synoptics make this a problematic riddle (see Paul N. Anderson, *The Riddles of the Fourth Gospel: An Introduction to John*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011). Nonetheless, every other hypothesis of whom the Beloved Disciple might have been (Lazarus, Thomas, John the Elder, Mary Magdalene, an anonymous eyewitness, etc.) has a new set of even greater problems, calling into question certainties regarding John's purported non-authorship. Give an overlooked first-century clue to John's authorship (see Paul N. Anderson, *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel: Its Unity and Disunity in the Light of John 6*, (1996, 1997] 3rd edn. Eugene: Cascade Books, 2010, Appendix VIII, pp. 274-277), Goodacre's passing reference might not be too far off from the perspective of what I might call Second Criticality (<http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/2015/05/and398019.shtml> (<http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/2015/05/and398019.shtml>)).

[6] Or, at least Luke coincides with John's order and inclusion numerous times over and against his use of Mark. Following the lead of Lamar Cribbs and Mark Matson, see Paul N. Anderson, "Acts 4:19-20—An Overlooked First-Century Clue to Johannine Authorship and Luke's Dependence upon the Johannine Tradition," *The Bible and Interpretation* (September 2010, <http://www.bibleinterp.com/opeds/acts357920.shtml> (<http://www.bibleinterp.com/opeds/acts357920.shtml>)). F. Lamar Cribbs, "A Study of the Contacts That Exist Between St. Luke and St. John," *Society of Biblical Literature: 1973 Seminar Papers* (ed. George MacRae, Vol. 2; Cambridge: Society of Biblical Literature, 1973) 1-93; Mark A. Matson, *In Dialogue with Another Gospel?* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001).