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National Geographic’s "Jesus the Man"—A Review

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Several times in December the National Geographic Channel has presented *Jesus the Man* (produced by Erik Nelson, 2005), coinciding with religious interests leading up to Christmas. As one of the dozen episodes in its “Mysteries of the Bible” series, half of which are on Jesus, this documentary promises to go beyond the gospels to find a man who was not a carpenter, seeking to cast new light on the time between Jesus’ childhood and his public ministry. The summary on the website declares:

“He was born in a manger, died on a cross, created a new religion and became the most famous man of his age, but his life remains shrouded in mystery. History and archaeology shed light on the early experiences and forces that shaped Jesus’ young life.”

Overall the episode is interesting and worthy of watching. Building on the contributions of first-rate biblical scholars, archaeologists, and historians (including Carolyn Osiek, Jonathan Reed, Jodi Magness, Mordecai Aviam, Stephen J. Patterson, Marcus Borg, Lawrence Schiffman, and Shimon Gibson) it endeavors to set a few things straight about Jesus’ background, identity, and ministry. In doing so, this series seeks not to only engage traditional views about Jesus; it also seeks to challenge, albeit modestly, some of the understandings of modern scholarship. This episode addresses the following themes.

1) First, *Jesus the boy* is treated, including his family, their livelihood, and his experiences. According to Jonathan Reed, Nazareth is not mentioned in Jewish literature until the gospels, so it was a fairly insignificant town. Jodi Magness estimates it to have had at most two or three hundred inhabitants in the first century. By contrast, Sepphoris (just a few miles away) was built during the days of Herod the Great, and around the time of Jesus’ childhood it would have been a bustling cosmopolitan center.

As scholars have recently noted, the word usually translated “carpenter” (*tekton*) can also mean someone who worked with his hands, or a stone worker. As Joseph may have done stonework and manual labor rather than being a craftsman with wood, this would have put him in the lowest of the lower class. Therefore, the family Jesus grew up in would not
have owned land, but they would have been subsistence farmers accustomed to menial labor. According to Stephen Patterson, the family of Jesus was a step below the normal peasant. This being the case, neither Joseph nor Jesus was a carpenter; they were more likely workers with stone and general manual labor.

In contrast to the Catholic teaching that Jesus was a lone child, the clear teachings of the gospels refer to his brothers and sisters. So, Jesus was likely the first of several children within his family. Marcus Borg’s reference to the high mortality rate of children at the time bolsters the likelihood that Jesus would have had siblings. A day in the life of young Jesus would have begun with his mother’s getting household chores going and preparing a meal of olives and baked bread. Therefore, over and against some popular assumptions, the man who became the most important figure of his time came from the lowest of socioeconomic strata, was one of several children, and likely followed in his father’s footsteps as a stone worker and manual laborer rather than a carpenter.

2) Second, the hidden years of Jesus are investigated promising to cast new light on their imagined history. This part of the film was somewhat disappointing, although this is not the filmmakers’ fault; it is a factor of there being no solid basis for even conjectural inferences as to what Jesus did between his 12-year-old appearance in the temple (Luke 2) and the beginning of his ministry around his 30th year.

Assuming that Jesus too was a tekton (a manual laborer) like Joseph, the producers infer that during his early adulthood Jesus traveled the countryside looking for work. Therefore, he probably found work in Sepphoris, which would have availed a multicultural perspective on matters economic, religious, and political. Here he would have encountered Greco-Roman influence and culture, as he would also have found in Tiberias, with thriving markets and employment opportunities.

It is further inferred that Jesus would have been a wandering laborer, traveling among the local cities in the region looking for work. Therefore, our images of his humble and backwater origins should be corrected by a view of a Jesus who was multicultural in his exposure and engagement. It also sets the socioeconomic backdrop for Jesus’ radically spiritual teachings on the kingdom of God, which should be read as having a decisively political slant.

As land and resources were consolidated under Roman occupation, the rich became
richer and the poor poorer. Tax gatherers worked for the Romans, demanding a cut from the modest earnings of the poor and creating intense resentment among the populace. As Judas the Galilean had led a revolt in Galilee against the Roman presence and its influence three decades earlier, the ministry of John the Baptist should be understood as a striking protest on several levels.

3) Third, the relation between Jesus and John the Baptist is elucidated. The episode claims several times that John was a radical preacher, declaring God’s judgment against the compromised behavior of Israel’s leaders—including Herod Antipas, the temple priesthood, and the Jewish religious leadership. Just as the Essenes of Qumran had declared judgment on the Jerusalem priests and their assimilating with Rome, John also preached that the axe was laid at the root of the tree and that Israel must purify itself to escape the wrath of God.

Therefore, the baptismal ministry of John was highly political and ethical in its thrust—if anything, a protest against ritual means of purification rather than an alternative form of it. The reference to his work by Josephus (Antiquities 18.5.2) supports such a view, and it also explains the widespread appeal of John’s radical ministry. The film correctly notes the extensive ministry of John—ranging from Transjordan Bethabara (citing correctly the earlier manuscript renderings of Jn. 1:28—not the scribal conjecture, Bethany) to Aenon near Salim (Jn. 3:23) to the Galilean region. Herod was apparently threatened by John’s popularity, and his having him killed is understandable, on several levels.

As Jesus was baptized by John, this is signaled the beginning of his ministry. The film illumines the religious and social issues underlying Jewish rites of purification within mikva’ot, or cleansing pools. John linked purification to repentance and challenged leaders who were religiously clean but unrepentant otherwise. The prophetic ministry of Jesus should thus be understood as following in the radical trajectory of John's. Shimon Gibson shows his find of what may have been the cave of John the Baptist—at least it was an early Christian site where baptisms and foot anointing were performed. The program asserts that John’s proclamations of judgment did not come to pass, although the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in 70 CE would certainly have been regarded as a fulfillment of the preaching of John and that of Jesus.

4) Fourth, mundane considerations about Jesus challenge the portraiture traditionally associated with his appearance. As Paul describes the value of men’s hair being short (1 Corinthians 11:14) the assumption is made that Jesus had short hair rather than long hair.
Given that Jesus was a native of Palestine, he obviously would not have looked European but would have had a darker complexion. Rather than sporting colorful garments, he would have worn plain clothing as a member of the working class.

The value of this larger series, and this episode in particular, is that they cast valuable archaeological and historical light on the story of Jesus presented in the gospels. The correctives to some supposed knowledge are helpful in that they create new understandings of Jesus—the realism of his engaging Greco-Roman society, the ethical-political thrust of John’s ministry, economic and social backdrops of Jesus’ teachings on the Kingdom of God. The peasant-class status of Jesus and his family helps contextualize Jesus’ ministry, and imagining a worker with stone helps some of his teachings in the gospels come alive, including (I might add) later references to Jesus’ being referred to as the stone the builders rejected, which ironically became the cornerstone of the new household of God (Ac. 4:11; 1 Pet. 2:1-10).

Limitations of the episode are several. First, while tekton may have involved stone instead of wood, it cannot rule out carpentry altogether; nor does it rule out skilled labor rather than menial labor, as some stone masons would have been skilled. Second, Jesus’ working in Sepphoris and Tiberias is a likely inference, but knowing anything for certain about the hidden years of Jesus is impossible; there is no real information on it, solid or suggestive. Third, while the connections with the Baptist are clear, the episode could have done more with implications for understanding the political and religious ministry and teachings of Jesus as well; perhaps that will follow in other episodes. Fourth, while we might infer that Jesus dressed in plain ways and had short hair, this is an inference with some likelihood rather than an established fact. So, most of the challenges to conventional understandings are helpful as plausible inferences rather than to be taken as conclusive certainties.

Nonetheless, this episode is well worth watching, and more than once, especially if it provides a backdrop for reading the most historically informative reports of the ministry and teachings of Jesus—the gospels. Indeed, Jesus the Man helps the gospels come alive, and the reverse is also true. I recommend viewers read through the gospels one at a time (starting with Mark, and then John, and then Luke and Matthew, followed by coming back to John again), watching episode between readings. Noting the economic, religious, and political features of all four gospels within their historic Jewish and Hellenistic contexts will undoubtedly lead to new insights and further inquiry.