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The last of the six CNN episodes on Finding Jesus: Faith. Fact. Forgery deals with Mary Magdalene and her relationship with Jesus. Like the other episodes and the book by David Gibson and Michael McKinley on which the series is based, glimpses of Jesus are garnered through the lenses of artifacts, including archaeological and manuscript discoveries ranging from over a millennium ago to recent decades. The final episode focuses on Mary Magdalene. According to the Gospels, she was a faithful follower of Jesus, but might she have been more than that -- perhaps even a lover, or Jesus' wife? Inquiring minds want to know.

Of course, speculation about the relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene abounds--the stuff of fictive novels, including The DaVinci Code by Dan Brown. In all-too-predictable flourishes of sensationalism, speculations about Jesus' having been married, perhaps to Mary Magdalene, have exploded onto the popular scene. As Candida Moss points out, the implications are also just as fantastic. If Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married, might secret gifted offspring have descended from their union? Or, regarding the Catholic Church's stance on celibacy for its clergy, might such a possibility invite a reconsideration of that long-held stand? Indeed, the stakes are high, even if the chances might be low.

Of course, as the episode points out, there is absolutely no reference to Jesus having been married in the entire New Testament era, so such speculations are totally without historical evidence. That being the case, any imagined detail might just as well be asserted if historical evidence is removed as a reasoned expectation of historicity. And, such moves are critically flawed. Some second--and third-century Gnostic gospels do make several connections, however, which show some later speculation regarding Jesus and Mary among unorthodox Christian groups. Some of these writings were found in the Nag Hammadi Library seven decades ago, and while these thirteen writings might not illumine much about the New Testament era, they do contribute insights as to the emerging diversity of the early church.

For instance, the Gospel of Thomas cites Jesus as declaring that Mary can become worthy of eternal life by becoming male -- not the sort of thing likely to have gone back to Jesus' teaching, but evidence of later views of some Gnostic Christians. The Gospel of Philip references Jesus as having kissed Mary (although the particulars are unclear), and he is accused of loving her more than his other followers. The Gospel of Mary cites Peter as being jealous of Mary and her relationship with Jesus, and she becomes his instructor and that of the apostles because of a vision received from the Lord. While these later presentations of Mary do convey inferences of close relationship with Jesus, they also served the function of challenging institutional leadership within the church associated with Peter. Thus, interests in challenging emerging structural, male leadership in the church may have been their origin rather than historical memory going back to the Jesus of history.
In the special’s refusing to see second and third-century Gnostic texts as having much to contribute to reconstructions of the first-century ministry of Jesus, nearly all serious biblical scholars would agree. In that sense, the special appropriately dampens undue speculation about anything too serious going on between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, and they really should be divorced from each other instead of inferring too much between them. Then again, the content in the canonical Gospels regarding Mary Magdalene has been largely overlooked and at times misunderstood. Clarifying some of those textual facts is thus one of the strongest services this episode provides.

First, we are reminded that Jesus ministered alongside women, and Mary Magdalene is presented as traveling with him in his ministry, along with Joanna, Suzanna, and others. It could even be that Mary was a business woman from Migdal (hence, "Magdalene’), a town with a harbor just north of the imperial city, Tiberias and three miles south of Capernaum, where Jesus’ ministry began. As fishing was the primary business venture in the area, it could even be that she was connected to the family of Zebedee, for whom Peter, Andrew and Zebedee’s sons worked. Whatever the case, women are presented as accompanying Jesus in his ministry, and a reasonable inference is that they felt included in his band of followers and accepted as full partners in his ministry. This is made pointedly clear in the Gospel presentations of the crucifixion. While the men are absent at the cross (save the beloved disciple in John 19), the women are present. Paul Raushenbush correctly notes how this would have been an encouragement to Jesus during his time of sorest need. In that sense, it is not just Jesus who ministers to Mary, but she also ministers to him.

A second point about Mary Magdalene is one that deserves correction. Despite medieval conjectures that she was a prostitute or a restored fallen woman, nothing of that sort is mentioned explicitly in the biblical text. She is described as having been delivered from seven demons in Luke 8, but no light is shed on the particulars of her condition. While other speculation may have been involved, the series attributes the reference to Mary Magdalene as a fallen woman to the sermonizing work of Pope Gregory in the 6th century. And, the pejorative association has thrived since then. This connection might even be due to the fact that in his seventh chapter Luke adds to the anointing of Jesus the parable of the woman who is much grateful because she has much to be forgiven. Mary Magdalene is introduced in the next chapter (along with the other ministry-supporting women), and even though the scene change is clear, one can also understand how the association might have been made, though not implied in the text.

In my own research, I see Luke's changing a head anointing (as it is presented in Matthew and Mark) to a foot anointing (as it is in John) as evidence that Luke had access to John’s tradition (probably in its oral stages). After all, Luke includes Johannine features over and against the narrative in Mark no fewer than six dozen times. It could even be that Luke has heard the name "Mary" spoken in the Johannine tradition in association with the anointing of Jesus. At the beginning of John 11, Mary the sister of Martha is specified as the woman
anointing Jesus feet, even though the event is not reported until John 12. This may have led Luke to infer it was another Mary, as the two were easily confused. Whatever the case, the point is well made that Mary Magdalene should not be seen as a fallen woman on the basis of the biblical presentations, themselves. And, this fact may help clarify what her relationship with Jesus might have been -- and, more importantly, what it was not.

A third point made by the episode is to note the leadership of Mary Magdalene among the first followers of Jesus. After all, she is the first person to whom the risen Lord is revealed, according to John 20, and she thus becomes the apostle to the apostles later in the chapter. Therefore, one can understand why Peter’s relationship with her might have been construed as tense. If she served as the link between the risen Lord and the apostles, this might have jeopardized his role among the twelve. Further, her recognition of the risen Lord’s presence is given simply upon the hearing of her name: "Mary," to which she responds (in Aramaic), "Rabbouni!" (Master!). As a result, Mary Magdalene points the way forward for other would-be followers of Jesus. As Mark Goodacre points out, "Jesus calls his disciples to follow him, but the one time they should have -- at the cross -- they failed, but Mary was faithful." And, that example poses a worthy example to be followed by other would-be followers of Jesus in every generation since.

In reflecting on the Finding Jesus series overall, I was impressed by the articulate and thoughtful comments made by strong biblical scholars and religious leaders alike. As a distinctive path into the modern quest for Jesus, this series and its foundational text do some interesting things. They build on recent archaeology and manuscript discoveries as a means of exploring biblical texts more fully. That being the case, nothing much new is contributed to what is already presented in the canonical Gospels, but they provide interesting lenses through which to view the biblical Jesus more effectively. As such, the series takes less of a skeptical view of the biblical texts themselves than 19th century German scholarship has done, including its recent instantiations by the Jesus Seminar and the first three critical quests for Jesus of Nazareth. Most interesting to me as a Johannine scholar, however, is the fact that many of the texts central to details facilitating the finding of Jesus are found in the Gospel of John -- rejected by many scholars (wrongly, I believe) over the last century and a half. Perhaps we need a fourth quest for Jesus -- one that includes John instead of leaving it out.

Whatever the case, the writers and producers of this series are to be commended for an engaging and informative series. As a good many distinctions are clarified regarding what is fact and forgery, it is also a fact that embracing a good deal about the Jesus of history as presented in the Gospels involves both the exercise of faith and of critical judgment. And, while Carbon 14 can only prove so much about the manuscripts, artifacts and relics, the series reminds us of the importance of looking again at the earliest texts informing us of Jesus’ life and work -- pointing us back to the New Testament and its evolving context. If that happens, for skeptics and believers alike, the series will have served an important function. In an age when Jesus is largely lost as a factor of biblical illiteracy and ignorance,
perhaps this series will enhance interest in the ancient texts whence contemporary discoveries still emerge.