3-2015

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Recommended Citation
 Posted on HuffingtonPost.com http://www.huffingtonpost.com/paul-n-anderson/i-didnt-know-jesus-was-lo_b_6781650.html

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I Didn't Know Jesus Was Lost

In looking forward to the CNN special this evening, "Finding Jesus: Faith, Fact, Forgery," I found myself musing: "I didn't know Jesus was lost..." Of course, this cable-television special builds upon David Gibson’s and Michael McKinley's new book by that title, and rather than being a special on what biblical scholars do and do not believe about Jesus of Nazareth, this special focuses on the Shroud of Turin and related inquiries. As such, a piece of cloth is held to bridge the gaps of time and space between modern audiences and the Jesus of the Gospels; but how well does it do so?

For modern audiences, relics going back to the days of Jesus and the apostles are less prominent in faith-producing ventures than they were in times past. Several periods featuring special interest in historical settings and artifacts of biblical days come to mind. First, after the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and decriminalized the religion in 313 CE, his mother, Helena, traveled to Palestine and documented historic biblical sites, upon which were built many shrines and churches. Over the next centuries, relics of Bible days came to be of great interest in Europe, as "wood from the cross" and bones of apostles and Christian martyrs were brought to Christian centers in Asia Minor and Europe.

Another period of interest was renewed during the Crusades (late 11th century and following), as knights from Europe and their companions brought back relics from the Holy Land -- some possessing historic links and others bearing more speculative claims. Intrigue has continued from the Reformation into the modern era, but in the late 19th century, the circulation of images and reports of the Shroud of Turin in Italy created new waves of interest. Examining the plausibility of the Shroud's being the very cloth in which the body of Jesus was wrapped and buried is the primary focus of the CNN special, and this is why aspects of faith, fact, and forgery are featured as components of the inquiry.

Along the lines of faith, if the Shroud represents the actual cloth in which Jesus was buried, this would document not only his crucifixion and death, but it might even betray evidence as to his resurrection -- perhaps a radiated image left on the cloth as a result of this wondrous event. In terms of fact, the cloth does appear to come from Palestine, and the markings on the Shroud bear an uncanny resemblance to the flesh-wounds of Jesus -- blood marks of his feet and wrists (more realistic than hand-wounds), side, brow, back (beatings), and right shoulder (smudged from carrying the cross) -- as well as a crown of thorns. In terms of forgery, the cloth itself dates from the 13th century using Carbon 14 measures, and blood marks could have been added as a means of seeking to replicate the biblical accounts of Jesus' suffering and death. In fact, they seem almost too close to the biblical accounts. Critics, of course, see the Shroud as a medieval attempt to produce something like what is narrated in the Gospel of John, which describes a head covering and a cloth accompanying Jesus' burial -- found by Peter and the Beloved Disciple as they discovered the empty tomb.
At this point, the documentary makes an interesting connection between the Sudarium of Oviedo in Spain -- a head covering with less obvious features of portraiture. Perhaps the most interesting feature of the film to this viewer is the similarity of the blood pattern between this older cloth (first mentioned in the 6th century) and the Shroud of Turin. Might they both have covered Jesus after the crucifixion, or might one cloth have formed a pattern for the other? Then again, Professor Nicholas Allen of the North West University of South Africa sees the Shroud of Turin as a Camera Obscura product created as an early photographic image in the medieval era. It thus represents an impressive replication of what is presented in the gospel narratives.

Interestingly, while neither the Shroud nor this documentary contributes anything beyond the presentation of Jesus’ suffering and death in the canonical Gospels, such may be the primary value of the new book and the CNN special. They point us back to reading the Gospels -- especially John -- inviting a fresh consideration of how Jesus lived and died, as presented in the gospel narratives. And, as I think of it, the very reason that skeptics suspect the Shroud of Turin of being a masterful replication of those narratives might also pose an insight regarding the historicity of those narratives, themselves. Might the distinctive features of John’s Gospel actually reflect an independent memory of Jesus and his ministry -- rendered alongside the other Gospels but not dependent on them? This can only be a question, but it’s not a bad one to ponder, especially as it challenges the tendency among modern scholars to disparage John’s historicity due to its distinctive features.

While the Shroud of Turin will be of little help in the finding of Jesus, personally or historically, the CNN documentary and the book behind it remind us of the problem of Jesus’ being relatively lost to recent modern audiences. On some levels, Jesus has been lost because the biblical texts have simply been forgotten or unexplored; people are uninformed about what the biblical texts actually say about Jesus -- a weakness to rectify. On other levels, historical quests for Jesus over the last couple of centuries have claimed to know more about what did and did not happen than did the first Christians -- analyses to appreciate, but not the end of the quest. With appreciation to my friends and acquaintances in this documentary (especially Mark Goodacre, Candida Moss, Ben Witherington III, David Gibson, and Obery Hendricks), I thought it was a balanced and helpful presentation and analysis of the issues.

Overall, though, this documentary reminds us that it is not the Gospels that point to the Shroud; it is the Shroud that points to the Gospels and their subject -- Jesus. So, if this documentary leads people back to reading the Gospels for themselves, that will have been its greatest value. And, therein lies the key to finding Jesus...however he may have been lost.