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On Finding Jesus—A Review of the CNN Episodes

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.

By Paul N. Anderson

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For the second year in a row the set of six episodes, *Finding Jesus: Faith, Fact, Forgery*, is being shown on CNN in the run up to Easter. Expanding upon David Gibson's and Michael McKinley's new book by that title,^{[11](#)} this series offers an alternative to talking-head biblical scholars describing what scholars do and do not believe. In contrast to other approaches to the quest for Jesus of history, using primarily ancient texts (canonical or extracanonical), supplemented by comparative-religions, historical-critical, or social-sciences analyses, the approach of this series builds upon archaeological discoveries and other material-science clues to the Jesus of history making news in recent years.

While there can be no substitute for researching the contextual economic, political, religious, and sociological settings of the birth of the Jesus movement and his role within it, as portrayed by biblical and other texts, this approach has a good deal of graphic appeal. It draws connections between what we

know of Jesus in the Gospels with other discoveries and subjects of interest, which—if approached adequately—may lead to a deeper understanding of the Jesus of history as well as the Christ of faith. So, here's my take on the six episodes, as a scholar interested in both. Interestingly, the CNN series presents the subjects of the book in a different order than the book does, beginning and ending with some of the more speculative and sensational subjects, the Shroud of Turin and Mary Magdalene.^[2] This ordering seems designed to engage the viewer; here's one viewer's set of responses.

Episode 1: I Didn't Know Jesus Was Lost

In looking forward to the first CNN special in this series, "Finding Jesus: Faith, Fact, Forgery," I found myself musing: "I didn't know Jesus was lost...." Of course, this cable-television special builds upon the Gibson-McKinley approach, interested in material findings and evidence, and the first episode 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 of 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' story being somewhat 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.

Episode 2: Finding John the Baptist (And Jesus Too)

In the second episode of *Finding Jesus*, the CNN special based on the new book by David Gibson and Michael McKinley focuses on John the Baptist. That being the case, this episode might be termed: "Finding John the Baptist" (okay, and Jesus too). And, within the quest for Jesus, learning all one can about John the Baptist is a fine place to begin.

In all four canonical Gospels, John the Baptist is seen as a forerunner of Jesus' ministry, and in the Gospel of John, some of Jesus' first followers are presented as disciples of John who leave John in order to follow Jesus. In my view, this rather informal presentation seems more informative than more programmatic presentations of Jesus' calling twelve disciples in the Synoptics. They follow Jesus because of personal interest, providing also hints of connections between Jesus and John. The film furthers that link as it relates to Jesus' first followers and their allegiance to the Baptist and then to Jesus.

Jesus' connections with John the Baptist are well documented here, including the relationship between Mary and Elizabeth—mothers of Jesus and John—who were related to each other as kinfolk. Jesus' having been baptized by

John in the Jordan River also marks the beginning of his public ministry, and in that sense, understanding the ministry of Jesus receives a helpful assist by focusing first on the mission of John. He is presented in the Fourth Gospel as having come to point Jesus out, and declaring that Jesus must increase and that he must decrease features John's pivotal witness to Jesus (John 1:31; 3:30). John's portrayal in the Synoptics, however, shows the political side of his mission more clearly.

At this point, the film makes its strongest contributions historically—showing the mission of John as naming sins of his contemporaries and calling for repentance; this even applied to the ruler, Herod Antipas. As he had courted and married Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, John judged him harshly for transgressing Jewish religious and moral laws. Indeed, John rendered prophetic judgments, calling the populace and rulers alike to repent and to live in ways pleasing to God. This is what his baptizing work affirmed—repentance and turning one's back on duplicitous and compromised living. This is why Herodias devised a way to have him killed; John had embarrassed her and Herod publicly, and the head of John the Baptist on a platter became the request of her dancing daughter, who enticed Herod into an offer that led to John's death.

In these ways, the CNN special follows the biblical accounts quite suitably, especially elucidating the political realism of the Roman backdrop and the ire felt by leaders whose moral failures were called out by the prophetic witness of John. On this score, a bit more could have been done, in my view, regarding the realism of the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness. Yes, bread, kingdoms, and rescuing angels are presented in Matthew and Luke as temptations faced by Jesus, but such temptations as the desire to be relevant, powerful, and spectacular could have been connected more directly with messianic leaders of Jesus' day and the sorts of issues faced by aspiring

leaders in later generations—including today. After all, Josephus mentions several messianic leaders around the time of Jesus (described in further detail in *From Crisis to Christ*) as a help in understanding the political backdrop of John and Jesus and their ministries.

On this point, Josephus describes John the Baptist as a good and righteous man (*Antiquities* 18.5), who threatened Herod politically. This will also explain why Jesus was such a threat to political and religious leaders alike. If Jesus challenged the likes of Herod and Pilate, as well as Pharisees and Sadducees, in the name of God's truth and loving concern for others, one can understand the impact of his appeal. While the documentary does not go into this feature of John's ministry, his baptizing of the repentant in the free-flowing Jordan can be seen as a protest against outward religious symbols of purification in the name of authenticity and a commitment to right living. Jesus furthered that impetus with this cleansing the temple, his subversive teachings, and healing on the Sabbath; I imagine those features will likely follow in future episodes.

One further connection with the first episode is worthy of mention here—the testing of DNA in two ancient relics claiming to be fingers of John the Baptist. While the 5th-century box from the John-the-Baptist church in Bulgaria features a bone dating to the early-to-mid first century CE, the relic from the Kansas City collection is from a much later date. Therefore, while only one of these relics comes from the time of John the Baptist, lingering questions follow. If DNA samples of the blood on the Shroud of Turin could be tested, I wonder if the different bits are from the same person, and if so, might they be from the first century CE in the region of Palestine; and further, might they show any connection with samples from any of the hundreds of John-the-Baptist relics claimed as historic relics? After all, if Jesus and John were

cousins, a link could indeed be telling; if so, that would be a fascinating discovery, moving the inquiry further.

Whatever the case, this episode moves the viewer a bit closer to Jesus by finding out first a bit more about John the Baptist. Given that there are six episodes overall, and that a focus on Judas is next, one wonders if the next subject might move us closer to understanding the Jesus of history and his political-religious setting. Regarding Judas, was he a traitor from the start, or do good intentions sometimes go awry? By the end of the third episode I suppose we'll know, or at least we'll have a bit more to think about. For now, the venture of finding Jesus is furthered by finding out a bit more about his forerunner, John the Baptist.

Episode 3: Judas, Traitor or Hero?

The third episode of the CNN special, *Finding Jesus: Fact, Faith and Forgery*, focuses on the role of Judas among the twelve disciples, featuring the second-century Gospel of Judas. Translated from the Coptic in 2006, this recently discovered Gnostic gospel potentially sheds new light on the role of Judas among the disciples in ways that could inform our understanding of Jesus' ministry and how it was perceived in early Christianity. This episode raises the question centrally as to whether Judas was really a traitor, as portrayed in all four canonical Gospels, or whether he might better be seen as a hero. After all, if Jesus intended to die, perhaps Judas was an accomplice rather than a villain.

The episode develops first the presentation of Judas in the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John. These, of course, are produced a century or so before the Gospel of Judas and provide the earliest written memories of Judas and his actions. As such, focusing on Judas is a worthy subject of historical interest; like the role of John the Baptist, Judas and his actions are unlikely to

have been invented. According to the Gospels, Judas exposed Jesus to the religious authorities with an ironic kiss in the Garden of Gethsemane for thirty pieces of silver. On one hand, the gesture is innocent enough; the recompense for a slave who is gored by an ox is thirty silver shekels (Exodus 21:32); on the other hand, this amount offered to Zechariah is perceived as an underpaid insult in exchange for his services as a shepherd of Israel, leading him to throw the money down in the temple treasury (Zechariah 11:12-13). Judas does something similar in Matthew 27:5 before going out and hanging himself in regret for his deed. As Erwin McManus puts it, the tragic demise of Judas at the end of the day reflects "not the story of God's giving up on Judas, but Judas' giving up on himself."

While Judas Iscariot is uniformly presented as a traitor in all four canonical Gospels, though, the question raised by this episode, as described by David Gibson, is not "*Whodone* it?" but "*Why* done it?" Answers to this question include such possibilities as: Judas was in it for the money (after all, he held the money bag according to John 13:29). Or, perhaps Judas sought to tip the hand of Jesus—hoping to precipitate a divinely empowered defeat of the Romans. Then again, if the betrayal of Jesus was part of a divine plan, perhaps it was simply a fulfillment of scripture (Acts 1:16). One thing this episode does not develop satisfactorily, in my view, is the implications of Judas' being the only disciple from the south—from the village of Kerioth (hence "Judas Iscariot")—perhaps implying sedition from the south, betraying the northern prophet from Galilee to the Judean authorities. The second-century pseudepigraphal Gospel of Judas, however, presents Judas in a more favorable light. Perhaps he was simply misunderstood. Either way, might a fuller understanding of Judas pose an assist in the larger interest of finding Jesus? Not a bad question.

Of course, the general content of the Gospel of Judas is not unknown in church history; Bishop Irenaeus (around 180 CE) describes it as a fictitious narrative styled after Judas—a Gnostic text purporting heretical views (*Against Heresies* 1.31.1). The group associated with this text called "Cainites" identified with the villains of Hebrew and Christian scriptures while also claiming to have received enlightened knowledge from *Sophia* and intermediary angels between heaven and earth. As the CNN episode develops further, the Gospel of Judas also portrays the disciples of Jesus as noncomprehending simpletons, and visions of heinous acts reflect this Gnostic sect's adversarial stance against institutional Christianity. While Elaine Pagels' explanation that second-century Gnosticism reflects an adverse reaction against institutional Christianity in the mid-to-late second century CE, this does not imply the group's virtue, let alone say anything about the historicity of its claims. The film could have made these points more clearly.

In short, the Gospel of Judas offers us absolutely nothing historical about the Jesus of history, or even the Judas of history. The same is true for other second- and third-century apocryphal writings claiming the names of apostles falsely, although the Gospel of Thomas includes some sayings rooted in Jesus-tradition alongside later, clearly Gnostic teachings. Therefore, one wonders what value there could be in focusing on a second-century Gnostic text, seeing Judas either as a thirteenth fallen angel (as April DeConick speculates), or a thirteenth aeon or kingdom (as Marvin Meyer argues) contributes to the historical quest for Jesus of Nazareth. What the Gospel of Judas does convey is some of the speculation within second-century Gentile Christianity, deemed as heretical by the mainstream church.

That being the case, the question is left hanging as to whether Judas was primarily a traitor or a hero. Perhaps he was a bit of both. Clearly, his primary association among the canonical Gospels is that of being a traitor, although

the "handing over" of Jesus to the authorities is not necessarily to be rendered as a "betrayal" in the Greek. And, it could be that the intentions of Judas were more positive than the Gospel accounts convey. What is clear, from the Gospel writers' perspectives, is that God also used the betrayal from among Jesus' band of closest followers to accomplish the saving-revealing work of Christ on the cross. And, once more, the strongest historical evidence along these lines emerges from the canonical Gospels themselves, rather than later, apocryphal texts. On that score, this episode seeks to make sense of the canonical narratives rather than trying to improve upon them, and such is a worthy place to begin.

Therefore, the central point of the Judas element within the larger story of Jesus might not be irony but paradox. Indeed, it is ironic that one of Jesus' closest followers should betray him with a kiss. And, the taking of blood money ironically led to Judas' taking his own life, in bitter remorse. Paradoxically, though, the murder of an innocent man, whether intended by humans for ill or for good, is used by God to bring about the redemption of the world. As Martin Luther King, Jr. has reminded us, undeserved suffering is always redemptive. In the undeserved death of Jesus, even as facilitated by Judas, the Romans were not destroyed, but the threat of death itself is overcome. Thus, whether or not Judas is to be envisioned as a traitor or a hero, a larger story is here involved, and that brings us back to the central interest at hand: finding Jesus, the heart of the story.

Episode 4: On Bone Boxes and the Brother of Jesus

As with the other episodes of the CNN special on *Finding Jesus*, "The Secret Brother of Jesus" builds an understanding of Jesus and his ministry on the basis of recent archaeological finds and known historical facts. In this case, an ossuary (a bone box) discovered in Jerusalem several decades ago bears

a remarkable inscription: "James the son of Joseph, brother of Jesus" carved in Aramaic. Archaeologists have determined that the ossuary is authentic, but how about the inscription? Does it also go back to the first century, or was it (or part of it) added later? Inquiring minds want to know!

In 2002, I was present at the national Society of Biblical Literature meetings in Toronto, when the James Ossuary was on display and discussed by leading scholars. At the time, the judgment was that the inscription could have been authentic, but it might also have been carved later—in particular the last reference, "brother of Jesus," seems to be a bit different: a shallower form of engraving. The patina shows no signs of alteration, though, and it could be that the slight difference in style simply reflects the right hand, carving from right to left (as is done in Semitic languages), having gotten tired. That, however, was not the end of the debate.

As explained in the CNN special, the court case levied against Oded Golan by the Israeli Antiquities Authority, accusing him of forging the inscription, was finally unsuccessful after nearly a decade of litigation. Therefore, while it has not been proven that the inscription is a forgery, it also cannot be proven that it is authentic. Nonetheless, the James Ossuary is a first-century artifact reportedly discovered in the Kidron Valley—the site traditionally associated with the location of James' burial before his bones were moved to the site on which the church in his memory was later built.

While the historic identity of the James Ossuary remains unconfirmed, however, discussions around James the brother of Jesus over the last decade and a half have catapulted his memory to the forefront of inquiries into the history of early Christianity and the first two decades of the Jesus movement. That being the case, the following points made by the fourth CNN episode are worth noting.

First, Jesus was one of several siblings; the New Testament mentions James, Joses, Jude, and Simon as well as sisters. This is an important acknowledgment (as Ben Witherington points out), as Catholic teachings on the perpetual virginity of Mary have led to the viewing of these persons as alleged step-siblings. Given that Domitian (emperor from 81-96 CE) threatened to kill two grand-nephews of Jesus (grandsons of Jude) for fear that they might be related to David's lineage—potential instigators of a Jewish uprising—the lineage of Jesus' family was known beyond the biblical witnesses. Upon interviewing them in Rome, however, Domitian found them to be common folk, unlikely to be a threat, and released them.

A second interest is the transition from unbelief to faith among the family members of Jesus. When Jesus' family comes asking for him, and when Peter complains about itinerant ministry, Jesus extends family membership to all who are willing to partner with him in healing, delivering, and preaching ministries (Mark 3:32-35; 10:28-31). As Bruce Chilton puts it well, Jesus may have brought dishonor to his family by leaving home and launching into itinerant ministry; that report seems to bear an echo of realism. And, given that the brothers of Jesus are reported as not yet believing in him (John 7:5), it is striking that James comes to serve as the head of the Jerusalem church. In Paul's view, this transition might be explained as a factor of the risen Lord having appeared to James as well as Peter, the apostles, Paul, and five hundred others (1 Corinthians 15:3-8). As suggested by Mark Goodacre, the conversion of James thus bears indirect witness to the post-resurrection consciousness of early believers, not just the earthly ministry of Jesus.

A third contribution to understanding Jesus of Nazareth made by James the Just, as he was called, is that he was respected in Jerusalem among the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem following the death of Jesus. Luke even claims that some of the priests in Jerusalem came to believe in Jesus as the Messiah (Acts 6:7);

James likely maintained some connection with that part of the community. Here the leadership of the Jesus movement is presenting as something of a caliphate—more of a headship than an institutional model of leadership developed following the deaths of the apostles. James also played a pivotal role in the most important council meeting in the history of early Christianity, as it was decided that believers need not become outwardly Jewish in order to become followers of Jesus. This Jerusalem council meeting in Acts 15 led to Christianity becoming a distinctive faith tradition rather than a sub-movement within Judaism.

Therefore, the contribution of James to the Jesus movement is highly significant. Given that Paul's mission to the Gentiles extended the promise of blessing to the children of Abraham beyond hereditary and traditional Judaism to any who received the gift of grace through faith, James played a vital role in maintaining the perception of orthodoxy among the religious leaders of Jerusalem. And yet, it finally was not enough, as the welcoming of Gentiles into the Jesus movement, without having become Jewish outwardly via circumcision and adhering to other Jewish customs, was too much. According to Hegesippus, around 62 CE James was pushed off the wall of the Jerusalem temple and was stoned to death on the pavement below.

While some scholars question James' being the author of the epistle bearing his name in the New Testament, those five chapters associated with the brother of the Lord offer a rich sense of Jewish wisdom as how to make sense of suffering, how to walk in faith, and how to care for the poor. They also bear a striking resemblance to the Sermon on the Mount and other material in Matthew, even though that Gospel was likely finalized in the late first century CE. Such themes as let your yes be yes and your no be no, a tree is known by its fruit, and mercy triumphs over judgment are found in these two sources of early Christianity, suggesting some sort of contact between them. Whatever

the case, reflecting on James the Just as the first leader of the Jerusalem church grants us glimpses into the Jewish ethos of the Jesus movement and his earlier ministry. Whatever sort of a family they were raised in, Jesus and James offer a compelling sense of Jewish wisdom that continues to speak across the boundaries of time and space.

Episode 5: The Quest for the True Cross of Jesus

This fifth episode of CNN's *Finding Jesus* special focuses on the Byzantine era, three centuries after the ministry of Jesus, when Helena, the mother of Constantine, traveled to Palestine to find "the true cross of Jesus," as well as other artifacts that might be valued as relics. Before Constantine became Emperor, Christians were somewhat unevenly persecuted by the Romans, especially during the reign of Diocletian (284-305 CE). During Constantine's reign (306-337 CE), however, he converted to Christianity and lifted the ban against the Christian faith in 313 CE. The location of many Christian sites in the Holy Land is thus a consequence of Constantine's conversion to Christianity and especially his mother's travel to Israel in 327 CE, connecting traditional sites with the story of Jesus' life and work.

In building on Helena's quest for the true cross of Jesus, this episode focuses on the traditional site of the crucifixion and burial of Jesus. Since the fourth century, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher has marked these historic sites, chosen because of the Roman shrine built there by Emperor Hadrian (117-138 CE) as a means of co-opting the place of Christian memorializing of Jesus death and burial. According to legend, Helena dug with her own hands on that site until she found three crosses, assuming these were the ones used on Golgotha. She then chopped up the wood and brought fragments of the wood of the cross back to Europe. In so doing, she took an interest in sending out

fragments of the cross to others as a means of connecting the historical events in the ministry of Jesus with later audiences at a distance.

In seeking to test whether some of the relics boasting to be fragments of the True Cross of Jesus, a fragment was taken from a cross-fragment relic, which had been given to the king of Ireland by the Pope some seven centuries later. When the test was conducted at Oxford, however, Georges Kazan and Tom Higham reported that the relic dates from the 11th century CE, so it cannot have been a part of the original. Of course, the proving of one relic as dating from a millennium later does not prove that all are that late. Then again, even if Carbon 14 dating were to confirm one or more relics as dating from the early first century CE, that would by no means prove that such was a fragment from the actual cross of Jesus. Therefore, the use of relics as a means of seeking the Jesus of history is extremely elusive, and critical scholars understandably employ other methods in their research.

Therefore, this episode overall proves very little about the Jesus of history. What it does do, however, is point people to the cross of Jesus as a central feature in his mission and also the theology of the church. Ironically, the instrument of Jesus' torture and death, rather than signaling the defeat of Christianity, represent its victory. Paradoxically, it is because of the death of Jesus that the resurrection provides hope for believers and a sign of God's ultimate triumph over life's ultimate adversary—death itself. And yet, the quest for the true cross of Jesus can never be limited to the touching of a piece of wood or an archaeological marker. Rather, it is a reality that can only be appropriated personally—connecting the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross with the life of the believer—an invitation of faith rather than a fostering of proof. And, the quest for the true cross of Jesus can only be fulfilled when one takes up one's own cross, as Jesus invited long ago, and follows him.^[31]

Episode 6: On Finding Jesus...and Divorcing Mary Magdalene

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? Again, 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 recently 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, canonically or otherwise, 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 reflect 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 some two centuries after this historic ministry of Jesus.

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 reflections 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. Such a critique of hierarchical leadership, of course, is already found within the canonical Gospels, as John's presentation of a fluid and Spirit-based view of leadership seems to be posed as a corrective to rising institutionalism within the late first-century Christian situation. [\[41\]](#)

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 of 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 or her story. 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).^[5] 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 instance 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.^[6]

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 true 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.

Concluding Reflections

While my approach to an inclusive quest for the Jesus of history engages the venture with a narrower focus on ancient texts and archaeological corollaries, several recent findings invite Jesus questers to consider several trajectories that at least influence our discussions if not our findings. Especially from social-sciences and religious-political analyses of the times, new insights emerge, casting light on our understandings of the teachings and ministry of Jesus. While few if any relics or physical objects can be said with certainty to provide proof of the historical ministry of Jesus, they at least reflect an interest in the enterprise, with some of them going back a millennium or more. While some of them do represent forgeries, the ancient texts of the Gospels themselves actually do cohere with many facts and things we know about the days of Jesus, with implications for faith, curiosity, or both.

In what is arguably the most difficult and challenging set of critical problems in modern biblical studies—the quest for the Jesus of history over and against the Christ of faith, the similarities and differences between the Gospels, the place of the Fourth Gospel within those issues, and the history of the emerging Christianity—the continuing quest for Jesus deserves to make use of all resources, not simply the Synoptic Gospels. Such a quest must find a way to include the Gospel of John, despite its many riddles.¹⁷¹ This book and film series stimulates interest in the sorts of things scholars continue to work on

in their quest for Jesus, leading to new answers and even more questions. So, engage the book and the series, but more importantly, read the Gospels; and, who knows? New discoveries about Jesus of Nazareth might yet emerge.

Notes

- [1] David Gibson and Michael McKinley, *Finding Jesus: Fact. Faith. Forgery. Six Holy Objects that Tell the Remarkable Story of the Gospels*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015. Earlier drafts of the six episode reviews were posted on the *Huffington Post* Religion page between March 3 and April 6, 2015: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/paul-n-anderson/>.
- [2] The order of subjects in the book, by contrast, moves from the more certain to the more speculative: John the Baptist, the James ossuary, Mary Magdalene, the Gospel of Judas, relics of the Cross, and the Shroud of Turin.
- [3] On the invitation to faithfulness, cf. Paul N. Anderson, *Following Jesus: The Heart of Faith and Practice*. Newberg, OR: Barclay Press, 2013.
- [4] Cf. Paul N. Anderson, *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel: Its Unity and Disunity in the Light of John 6*. Third printing with a new introduction and epilogue, Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010, pp. 221-250.
- [5] Paul N. Anderson, *From Crisis to Christ: A Contextual Introduction to the New Testament*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2014, pp. 102-126.
- [6] Paul N. Anderson, *The Fourth Gospel and the Quest for Jesus: Modern Foundations Reconsidered*. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2006.
- [7] Thus, take note of the John, Jesus, and History Project, now in its fifteenth year. Rather than being an obstacle to Jesus and Gospel studies, the Gospel of John may actually provide a key to making sense of these complex sets of issues if understood correctly. For the latest stage in that international scholarly project, cf. Paul N. Anderson and Jaime Clark-Soles, "Glimpses of

Jesus Through the Johannine Lens—An Introduction and Overview of John, Jesus, and History, Volume 3," *The Bible and Interpretation*, December 2015: <http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/2015/12/and398021.shtml>.