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The National Geographic Jesus – Is He Your Jesus? Part 1

Review By Warren Krug

Jesus was a mere mortal, easily influenced by the people around him and the events of his time. He didn't become Son of God until he was baptized. He may have been an important figure in his day, but he was the Christ only in the minds of his followers. He was like everyone else—in need of purification.

This is the Jesus of the National Geographic Channel. Some time ago this cable channel presented "Science of the Bible: The Lost Years of Jesus", a documentary which sought to investigate what the years between his birth and the beginning of his public ministry were like, years about which the Bible is basically silent.

As might be expected from a TV show associated with a secular and pro-evolution magazine, the Jesus the National Geographic Channel presents is not the Jesus Bible-believing Christians can recognize. The theologians and scientists interviewed during the 60-minute production all seem to be of the religious liberal persuasion. Still, there were a few points made in the program with which we might agree, and a certain amount of respect is given to the Scriptures regarding geographical and historical matters. Other than verses from the Bible (quoted here from the NIV), mostly all the quotations that follow are verbatim from the show.

Introduction

Jesus' young life is a total mystery, we are told, but he became "the most famous man of his age." Most famous man of his age? That surely is a gross understatement.

"Now we go beyond the Gospels...to paint a shocking new portrait of a boy who had brothers and sisters, of a man who was not a carpenter, and we uncover new archaeological evidence of a ritual that lets us see into the mind of Jesus." See into the mind of Jesus?

The narrator says Jesus was "born in a manger." Actually, Jesus was born in a *stable* and laid in a manger. "He died on a cross. He created a new religion but most of his life remains shrouded in mystery." In the sense that Christianity is a fulfillment of the Old Testament, it is *not* a new religion. And everything we need to know about the life of Jesus is plainly stated in the Bible.

The Baptism of Jesus

John the Baptist is given almost as much attention in this production as is Jesus. He was a "radical preacher" whose name would have been long forgotten were it not for his baptism of Jesus. But John's baptism of Jesus was important because it "was the spiritual turning point in Jesus' life."

"(John's baptism of Jesus) is the moment when Christians believe Jesus became Christ, the Anointed One," claims Prof Carolyn Osiek of the Brite Divinity School. "It was the beginning of Jesus' relationship to God as son, as Son of God."

This is the only time in the program in which Jesus is called Christ and it is, of course, qualified by the phrase "Christians believe." And this is the only time Jesus is referred to as God or Son of God, but it appears that Prof. Osiek hardly means the *divine* Son of God.

As for the baptism being the beginning of Jesus' relationship to God as Son of God, Prof. Osiek probably gets this idea from Matthew 3:17 in which the Father called Jesus "my Son, whom I love." However, while Jesus may have begun his public ministry when he was baptized, John 1:1 tells us, "In the beginning was the Word (Son of God), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Jesus is and always has been the One and Only Son of God (John 3:16).

It is interesting that the National Geographic program mentions the Spirit descending on Jesus at his baptism in the form of a dove. However, neither Osiek nor the narrator quotes or refers to Matthew 3:17, John 3:16 or any of the many other verses which establish Jesus' divinity.

Why did Jesus come to John the Baptist to be baptized? The narrator says, "The Bible gives us no clue."

For some reason, John's "draw must have been strong enough to pull Jesus from a distant village in Galilee," says Prof. Jonathan L. Reed of the University of La Verne.

"If we can understand what John was preaching, perhaps we can discover why Jesus came to his pivotal decision to be baptized." So states Prof. Stephen Patterson of Eden Theological Seminary.

However, the Bible does give the reason why Jesus came to John to be baptized. When John out of humility tried to discourage Jesus from being baptized by John, Jesus said, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." (Matthew 3:15)

Albrecht and Albrecht (*The People's Bible: Matthew*) explain Jesus' answer: "Jesus was simply saying that this was what the Father wanted them to do, and that was enough explanation for John."

John's Relationship to Jesus

The documentary has no problem accepting the Bible's description of John the Baptist as a rugged individual living in the wilderness, dressed in camel's hair, and eating locusts and wild honey.

But it pictures John as very much a revolutionary man, the creator of a radical new sect of Judaism, and someone who may have had a lot to do with forming Jesus' philosophy. However, can we accept the suggestion that Jesus sent by His heavenly Father to become our Savior would base his ideas and teaching on anything that John was preaching?

The book of John says about the Baptist, "He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light." (John 1:7-8)

Still, Osiek thinks that Jesus prior to beginning his own ministry may have sought out John the Baptist and become his disciple.

Patterson contends it is most certainly a “Christian invention” to think that John saw himself as a precursor to Jesus although he offers no evidence for thinking as he does.

However, the Bible plainly says in referring to John, “A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’” (Matthew 3:3, Isaiah 40:3) And in Matthew 3:11 John says to the Pharisees, “But after me will come one who is more powerful than I.”

John recognized he was nowhere near the equal of Jesus. Besides feeling that he needed to be baptized by Jesus more so than the other way around, John also said about Jesus, “He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.” (John 1:15)

The Boy Jesus

Admittedly the Bible says little about the boyhood of Jesus, other than his presentation in the Temple on the 8th day and his trip to Jerusalem when he was 12. (Luke 2)

We could agree it’s likely that Joseph’s family was low on the social scale. Joseph is called a *tekton* in Greek which is usually translated as “carpenter.”

However, Reed says that a *tekton* is simply a person who works with his hands. While Joseph and Jesus may at times have worked with wood, they more likely, he claims, to have shaped stone, repaired houses, or even worked in the fields.

Patterson says that being a *tekton* means Joseph owned no land and was a step below that of a normal peasant.

We do know Jesus was born in a very humble abode and lived in poverty as an adult, at least after starting his ministry. “The Son of Man has no place to lay his head,” Jesus says in Matthew 8:20.

Jesus grew up in a fairly sizeable family. He had brothers and sisters. (Mark 6:3, Galatians 1:19, Matthew 12:46, Mark 3:31, John 2:12) The fact that he had brothers and sisters is not a problem for Lutherans and Protestants, but, as the program indicates, it is a problem for Catholics. The Catholic Church, which believes Mary never lost her virginity, argues that “brother” and “sister” do not necessarily imply blood relations.

Having large families was necessary, according to Prof. Marcus J. Borg of Oregon State University, because of the high death rate. He says roughly 40% of peasant children died by the age of 5. *LSI*