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The National Geographic Jesus – Is He Your Jesus? Part 2

Review By Warren Krug

The appearance of Jesus

“There is almost no written evidence of Jesus’ life before he turns 30. We can’t be sure what he did for a living, whether he was married or had children. We don’t even know what he looked like,” reports the narrator.

If the Bible mentions Jesus’ mother and siblings on a number of occasions, we certainly would expect the Scriptures to have mentioned his wife and children if he had any.

As for his appearance, that does remain a secret. Early Christian artists in the third century painted images of Jesus on the walls of catacombs, but Professor Jonathan L. Reed of the University of La Verne says they likely used Roman gods as templates. One picture of Jesus shows him with long hair but no beard.

It is also true that as Christianity spread, the appearance of Jesus changed with the location. Europeans, for instance, made Jesus look like a European.

Jesus, however, was a Galilean. According to Reed, he would likely have had dark hair, a stubby beard, and fairly dark skin from being out in the sun. Would Jesus have had long hair? St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:14-15 says, “Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory?” Draw your own conclusion.

Nazareth

Modern day Nazareth in northern Israel is the country’s largest Arab city with nearly 60,000 citizens, 2/3 Muslim, 1/3 Christian.

However, at the time of Jesus it probably was a very small and insignificant village. Reed says that the name doesn’t show up in the Bible until the Gospels. My search of a Bible concordance supports this statement.

Prof. Jodi Magness of the University of North Carolina thinks the Nazareth of Jesus’ day was probably agriculturally based and had only a few hundred residents.

The Church of the Annunciation in modern Nazareth is thought to have been built near the spot where Jesus’ family lived. A century ago monks excavated the church’s crypt and found the remains of an ancient village. They found water cisterns and grain silos cut into the bedrock. But not much was found to give an idea of the type of homes the first century citizens of Nazareth lived in.

Today archaeologists are exploring the remains of a nearby Galilean town that was abandoned in the first century but which offers clues to the nature of Galilean homes at the time.

According to Mordechai Aviam of the University of Rochester, these homes were built of rock and mud and covered with plaster outside and inside. Simple homes may have been covered with mud plaster.

The Jewish book, the Talmud, informs us that most men worked as shepherds or farmers while the women stayed at home baking bread, making and washing clothes, and generally doing maintenance tasks. The farmers probably had all they could do to provide enough olives, grain, and vegetables to keep their families fed.

Sepphoris

Sepphoris is a name that doesn't appear in the Scriptures, but it plays an important part in this National Geographic documentary.

Sepphoris was a city built by King Herod Antipas who was appointed king of Galilee by the Romans in 4 B.C. It lay just some 4 miles from Nazareth. Herod wanted it to become one of the finest cities in the empire. Called the "ornament of the Galilee", it was a center of economic and cultural life and the biggest city in Galilee at the time of Jesus.

Archaeologists have found no pig bones in the ruins of this city which means the inhabitants ate no pork and which also means it was a Jewish city. Still the influence of Greek and Roman culture here was strong.

The documentary imagines Jesus visiting "bustling Sepphoris" on occasion to look for work (if he was a common laborer) or to shop in the markets. Here he would have become familiar with the "mainstreams of Roman culture."

Reed says the construction of Sepphoris along with the port city of Tiberius was bad news for the lower classes, the peasants. The lower classes paid for building the two cities out of their own pockets. Herod Antipas sent his tax collectors throughout the region, stirring up considerable anger, as we well know from the Scriptures.

The Zealots, Sadducees, and Pharisees

The Zealots ("daggermen") were organized by a man named Judas of Hezekiah as an armed resistance movement. They wanted to stop the erosion of the traditional Jewish way of life. Their "first act was a tax revolt in Sepphoris." Although the revolt was crushed by Roman troops, the insurgency grew. By the time of Jesus, they were doing guerilla warfare and focused their attention on Jerusalem.

The divisions in Jewish society caused by groups such as the Zealots "must have influenced Jesus." It is surprising the program didn't mention that Jesus chose a member of this rebel group to be his disciple, Simon the Zealot. (Matthew 10:4; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13)

One of the Jewish groups that stirred up the anger of the Zealots was the group of temple authorities known as the Sadducees. Borg says they were "native collaborators who worked with the Roman empire to make sure that the taxes, the tribute to Rome was paid." The Zealots often "targeted high priests for assassination" for allowing foreign interference in the sacred Temple.

Then there were the Pharisees, "the lay sages...who left us the Talmud and the Jewish rabbinic tradition", according to Prof. Lawrence H. Schiffman of New York University.

The Pharisees “encouraged stricter observance of Jewish law. This was the world that Jesus knew and saw in Nazareth and in Sepphoris. These competing religious strands must have been woven into his head and mind.”

“But the Bible does not say Jesus went to any of these groups,” this program informs us. On the contrary, we do know from the Scriptures that the Sadducees and Pharisees were frequently denounced by Jesus and also by John the Baptist. See Matthew 3:7, Matthew 16:6, Matthew 16:12, Matthew 22:34; Matthew 3:7; and Matthew 23:13 for examples.

Thus, if Jesus was influenced by the Sadducees and Pharisees, it was only to point out how they had strayed from God’s truth.

The Mikvah

Now back to the question of why Jesus came to John the Baptist to be baptized. Not satisfied with the answer Jesus gave to John in Matthew 3:15, the theologians and archaeologists behind this National Geographic production looked for a different answer more pleasing to them.

Much is made of the ritual baths of the Jews called mikvahs. In fact, the Jerusalem Temple was surrounded by pools of water thought to be mikvahs. Magness tells us, “the pilgrims entering the Temple first would have needed to immerse themselves in order to be ritually pure.” Bodily secretions, touching dead bodies, or even certain reptiles would make one impure and in need of a ritual bath.

It is possible, Magness says, that Jesus could have gone through this ritual whenever he would make his annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem at Passover. And “Jesus had probably immersed in a mikvah several times in his youth.”

So what drove Jesus to be baptized by John? The program presents some possible evidence that a certain cave about 8 miles west of Jerusalem near where legend has it that John the Baptist was born may have been used by John for the purification rites.

“These rituals of inner purification could be what drove Jesus to come to John.” In other words, Jesus came to John to be purified! But purified of what?

The National Geographic Channel concludes this portion of the documentary with the following statement: “The Bible paints John as someone who simply prepared the way for Jesus, but the real connection between them may not have been what’s written in the Bible.” That statement gives us a good clue as to how to evaluate the whole program.

In Summary

So, was Jesus a mere mortal easily influenced by the events of his day and the people around him?

First, remember Jesus is the “holy one” (Luke 1:35), “a lamb without blemish or defect.” (1 Peter 1:19) Any influence upon Jesus during the “lost years” would not have caused him to even think about sinning.

Second, we are told in Luke 2:52 that the young Jesus “grew in wisdom and stature.” This means that in his state of humiliation He did not always make use of his divine omniscience

but increased his knowledge over time just like any other young man. Thus, anything Jesus had to learn from his experiences as a young adult does not detract from his standing as the one and only God-man.

Third, Jesus' mission was stated to Joseph right before his birth. Jesus came "to save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21) or, as he said, "to seek and to save what was lost." (Luke 19:10) No influence upon Jesus during the "lost years" would have caused him to reconsider for one moment why he came down to Earth. No event or sinful human could have succeeded in doing what Satan had failed to accomplish. (Matthew 4)

The real Jesus is a far more beloved and impressive Jesus than the one portrayed by the National Geographic documentary. The National Geographic Jesus could never have come down from heaven to suffer and to die for our sins and to open heaven's gate to us. Thanks be to God that we know the authentic Jesus Christ! *LSI*