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What Came “After Jesus?” A Look at CNN’s Take on the Question

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Just in time for Christmas, the major news media regularly present magazine cover stories and prime-time television events that focus on the historical questions concerning the birth of Jesus Christ and the theological issues central to Christianity.

Like clockwork, the programs and articles appear — often following a predictable pattern. A question related to a Christian claim is raised and a panel of experts is asked to respond. This panel most often ranges across the theological spectrum, providing the appearance (and sometimes the reality) of a fair consideration. These are secular news magazines and networks, after all. The supposed interest of the media lies in the current relevance of the issues and the impact of these beliefs upon the world. We should not expect the secular media to serve as evangelists for the Christian Gospel. We are right to expect that the media should be fair in their consideration of these subjects.

Fairness does not mean that evangelicals should not expect to see non-evangelical and non-Christian viewpoints expressed. Liberal theologians and biblical scholars are to be expected among the sources cited or consulted. Fairness does suggest that the orthodox position and a representation of evangelical conviction should be present as well.

CNN presented a major news production Wednesday night as “[CNN Presents: After Jesus](#).” Narrated by actor Liam Neeson, the special program was described as an investigation of “how the earliest Christians spread their message, despite infighting over the faith and violent persecution by Rome.”

From the CNN Pressroom [release](#):

Immediately following Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, the first Christians were challenged to define their faith. Two of Jesus’ disciples – Peter, who preached that the followers of Jesus had to be Jewish, and Paul who argued that this new faith must be available to all – would emerge as Christianity’s first and most influential leaders. Their eventual consensus, that Christianity would be available to all through conversion, and their missionary zeal throughout the Roman Empire, helped the new faith to spread rapidly. But Christianity’s growing power was also a threat to the empire, so the Romans killed Peter and Paul and other early leaders. Christians were so brutally persecuted that Christianity’s survival was repeatedly in danger. That Christianity eventually became the world’s largest religion is perhaps the faith’s second biggest miracle.

In all, that paragraph is a good summary of the facts and the central question — how did Christianity grow from a band of frightened followers of Jesus into a world-changing force?

CNN described its program as “the story behind the greatest story ever told.” Mark Nelson of CNN explained: “The fundamental themes of challenge and resolution, power and struggle that we explore continue to be relevant in modern times.” So far, so good.

The teaser is found in this paragraph:

In telling this remarkable tale, viewers may be surprised to learn that followers of some early branches of Christianity believed in more than one god; that there were many more Gospels than those included in the New Testament; and that Christmas was originally a springtime celebration. There was also a group of Christians – the Gnostics – who believed that man’s existence on Earth was a mistake and that salvation required a mystical experience of self-discovery and self-realization. They wrote their own Gospels, and their power struggle with the orthodox Christians was a threat to the new faith.

That paragraph should stand as a reminder that theology and scholarship are not well reduced to press releases. In this case the teaser is indeed a tease.

The related [press materials](#) available at CNN’s website were a source of evangelical concern. The panelists chosen by CNN did not include an evangelical theologian, historian, or New Testament scholar. The network claimed to have consulted “the most renowned authorities on the ancient church,” but no evangelical scholar appeared. Given the issues and questions covered by the program, a fair observer would wonder about the absence of any scholar like Darrell Bock, D. A. Carson, or Bishop N. T. Wright — all of whom have internationally established reputations for scholarship in these areas, and all of whom have engaged extensively in print with these issues. None is a stranger to the media.

Instead, the [authorities featured](#) on the program included, among others, figures like Amy-Jill Levine, a Jewish scholar of the New Testament who teaches at Vanderbilt Divinity School; Judith Lieu, who teaches New Testament at King’s College London; Rabbi Richard Freund of the Greenberg Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Hartford; and Marvin Meyer, a specialist on Gnostic texts who teaches at Chapman University.

Most notable among the panelists was Bart Ehrman, a professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill who has published several books that cast doubt upon the New Testament canon and reject Christian orthodoxy. Ehrman, a former evangelical, often appears in the media as an opponent of evangelical faith. Yet, to his credit, Ehrman often criticizes the worst arguments of the sceptics as well.

Why no evangelical scholar? Only CNN can answer that question.

Nevertheless, when the entire program is reviewed, I would judge the project to be more even-handed and responsible than I had at first expected. My main criticisms would have to do with some of the claims made in the program and especially with the teasers used for the program as a whole and its individual segments.

The production was visually engaging, fast-paced, and respectful in tone. Liam Neeson brought his vocal skills and theatrical experience to the narration.

The program began with good historical background material—the context of the Roman Empire in the first century, the political unrest and messianic expectation of Jerusalem, and so on. The problems emerge when the program explains Jesus and his mission. As Neeson narrates:

Into this powder keg walks Jesus of Nazareth. His protests against the Romans make him a popular hero. To some, he is the messiah. But to the Romans, he is political trouble. So they crucify him.

This is just not an accurate representation of the events and the New Testament texts. Where in the New Testament is Jesus portrayed as leading “protests against the Romans?” Nowhere. The program blames the Romans alone for the crucifixion of Jesus, studiously avoiding any suggestion that the Jews rejected Jesus and demanded his crucifixion. The program is left with an account that is politically correct but demonstrates little resemblance to the New Testament. Pilate, you might remember, is presented in the New Testament as very reluctant to crucify Jesus. Political correctness simply trumped historical accuracy.

The program’s treatment of the earliest experiences of the church and the first Christians contains much good and even fascinating material.

Why would Jesus become a focus of Christian worship? Lawrence H. Shiffman, who teaches Hebrew and Judaic studies at New York University, argued this way:



So the problem is not in the belief that Jesus is the messiah. The problem is when the belief is moving from messiah to a kind of deified messiah and as this begins to be understood by the Jews, then opposition to this movement is no longer a political thing. It's a very strong religious thing.



The problem with this statement is the fact that it presses the recognition of the deity of Christ to a later development after the resurrection. The New Testament claims that it was Jesus' claims to deity that were, at least in part, what led some Jews to demand his crucifixion.

Neeson does a good job of explaining the transformation of Saul the persecutor of the church into Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles. "Saul of Tarsus, who never met Jesus in the flesh, never traveled or supped with him, and who wanted to kill his followers, becomes the greatest defender of the Jesus faith, known to the world by the Greek version of his name, Paul." Further: "People listened to Paul because he was the perfect man for the job, able to speak to both Jews and Gentiles in their own language."

The program also provided a rather fair explanation of the roles played by the apostles James, Peter, and Paul. The Jerusalem council is presented as the "first apostolic council" and Professor Levine rightly explains:

Paul argues that the Holy Spirit had descended upon the Gentiles apart from the Law of Moses. Therefore, there was no reason to insist that those Gentiles be converted first to Judaism in order to be a member of the church, and James, the brother of Jesus, presiding over this Jerusalem council, agrees with Paul.

Levine, a Jewish professor of New Testament studies, also offers keen insight into the mission of the Apostle Paul:

I can picture him just trying to convert the entire Praetorian guard. The early Christians, particularly the evangelists, the apostles, were politically problematic. They were proclaiming a son of God, a god from God, a savior; but those happened to be titles that the Roman emperor arrogated to himself.



The program presents the next great crisis of the faith as the deaths of James, Peter, and Paul. This argument has significant theological and historical merit. Interestingly, the program assumes the traditional (but non-scriptural) explanations of the deaths of James and Peter. It is clear from the New Testament that James was executed in Jerusalem and that Peter was martyred as well, most likely in Rome. However, the specifics ascribed in the program to the martyrdom of James are from only two historical sources (Josephus and Hegesippus as cited by Eusebius), and the upside-down crucifixion of Peter is likewise attributed only to later tradition.

What makes these observations relevant is the fact that so many authorities seem willing to accept such details on scant evidence when they often cast doubt upon the much more substantial evidence offered in the New Testament text.

The program also did well in describing the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem (the great crisis of Judaism) and the rise of Roman persecution of the Christians.

The portion of the program perhaps most vulnerable to controversy had to do with the emergence of the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) as the authoritative historical texts concerning the life and ministry of Jesus.

Neeson points to the controversies in this statement: "At the end of the first century, Christian leaders decided they needed a new holy scripture. They started writing down what Jesus had said and done. And now Christianity would take a new direction, a religion based on the word of the written gospels, a religion that would guide them far into an uncertain future."

Further:

The core of Christian belief is the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, as told in the four gospels, the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, named after the evangelists said to have written them.

At this point Bart Ehrman appears to make this claim:

I think most people imagine that after Jesus died, the Church just emerged suddenly and that you had Christians confessing the Nicene Creed, reading the canon of the 27 books of the New Testament, and that it was all in place right after Jesus' death. And, in fact, it took centuries for these things to fall into place.

Fair enough. It did take centuries for *all* that to “fall into place.” But the insinuation of the program is that Christianity was in tremendous flux at this time. Interestingly, the authorities cited in the program take the view that the Gospels were all written before the end of the first century — a fact well established in modern scholarship but denied by many liberal scholars just a few decades ago.

The program then turned to the conflict of early Christianity with Gnosticism. Neeson dramatically narrated that “By the start of the second century, Christianity was at a crossroads.”

Further:

After the crucifixion of Jesus, around 30 A.D., the New Testament recounts how the faith he started took on a new life. Inspired by the leadership of the apostles Peter and Paul, the message of the resurrected Jesus spread into the heart of the Roman empire. But success brought persecution and death. As Christianity's early leaders began to die out, it was critical to keep the story of Jesus alive. So, they compiled sacred books about his life, what we know today as the New Testament. But to the south, in the desert sands of Egypt, a group of Christian monks and mystics were writing their own gospels with a very different version of the life of Jesus, one that launched a battle for the very heart of Christianity. Of all the threats to Christianity over the past 2,000 years, perhaps the greatest came in 1945, near the village of Nag Hammadi in southern Egypt, where the waters of the Nile dry up into desert sands.

This is hyperbole made for television. The Christian faith was hardly shaken by the discovery of Gnostic texts at Nag Hammadi. Gnosticism is a perennial heresy and a powerful competitor to orthodox Christianity in the early centuries of the church. But the undeniable fact, left unacknowledged by many current controversialists and popularizers, is that the church effectively denounced the Gnostics and their texts.



The program presented the core beliefs of the Gnostics fairly well. Professor Meyer explained:

The word “Gnostic” comes from the Greek “gnosis,” which means knowledge, but it's not the kind of knowledge that you simply get out of books, but, rather, it is mystical knowledge. It is insight into the true nature of — of who you are, and what is your relationship to God, and is there an essence, a spark, a bit of the light of God within your own self.

Neeson rightly commented: “The Gnostic message was very seductive: a mix of Greek philosophy, Egyptian religion, and Eastern mysticism, all very contemporary in its spirituality.”

Meyer pointed right to the key distinction between the canonical Gospels and the Gnostic texts:

The New Testament Gospels are gospels of the cross. The Gnostic gospels are gospels of wisdom. The New Testament Gospels care about salvation from sin. The Gnostic gospels care about salvation from ignorance. The New Testament Gospels look to stimulate faith. The Gnostic gospels look to stimulate knowledge and insight.

That statement is worth filing away for future use. He got it just right.

The program was less sure-footed when it tried to present Gnostic variants as more friendly to feminist concerns. Meyer claimed: “It was the Gnostics that thought that the role of the female as an image and the role of women within the church should be advanced, so that God is not only male; God is also female. There are not only male leaders; there are female leaders. There are not only male priests; there are female priests. And, in this way, there is a kind of gender balance found in these texts.”



Well, as long as you look at the texts that fit that characterization. Neeson quickly commented: “That balance is not

found in the Gnostic gospel of Thomas, where Peter asks Jesus to send Mary Magdalene on her way, for women aren't worthy of apostolic life." Ehrman further explains: "And Jesus replies, "Leave her alone, for I shall make her a male, for every woman who becomes a male will enter the kingdom of God." That statement will not go over well where feminist theologians gather. It is also a rejection of New Testament Christianity. As Ehrman notes, "This isn't a very liberating view of women, and not one I think that people probably want to latch on to today."

The panelists helpfully rejected the most hysterical suggestions of recent days, including the claim popularized by *The DaVinci Code* that Jesus married Mary Magdalene and had children with her. Further, Neeson also noted: "Perhaps the biggest problem with the Gnostic gospels is that they were written decades, and even centuries, after the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. For some historians, that passage of time raises serious questions of authenticity." Indeed.

In the end, the program was more fair than the advertising materials would have indicated. The most ideological portion of the program came when claims were presented to the effect that early Christianity was "completely egalitarian." This is irresponsible. It is not true to the Gospels, much less to the remainder of the New Testament. The program insinuated or claimed that the development of church offices, the restriction of the teaching office to men, and the development of the New Testament canon were basically due to political concerns rather than theological imperatives.

Ehrman went so far as to claim: "Eventually, Christianity came to oppress women and to silence women. And, so, throughout history, of course, Christianity has been known as a male religion, in that only the leader — only the men can be leaders of the churches. Only men can be the priests or the pastors or the pope."



Finally, the program attempted to explain the transformation of Christianity from a movement oppressed to the point of martyrdom by Rome into a faith officially recognized by the Emperor. In the course of this consideration, the program turned to the Council of Nicea, called by the authority of Emperor Constantine in 325. The program got the theological judgment right, but confused the context.

Neeson explained:

In the year 325 AD, Constantine called the world's bishops to the small town of Nicea outside the imperial city of Byzantium to grapple with the essence of Christian belief. . . . And the heart of the Nicean Creed and Christian faith is that Jesus was both God and man.

Ehrman commented:

The Council of Nicea was not called in order to decide whether Jesus was divine. It was called in order to decide in what way is Jesus divine. Is Jesus a secondary deity, a subordinate deity or, in fact, is he equal with God the Father. And the side that won out was the side that declared that Jesus was equal with God the Father, that he had always been God.

Further:

Constantine declared Christianity a legal religion and he stopped the persecution. But it's not correct to say that Constantine made Christianity the official Roman religion. In fact, he didn't make it the official religion. He did make it a favored religion and he started giving lands to Christian bishops and supplying funds for the building of churches and so forth. This made it a very popular thing to become a Christian, especially to become a Christian leader. So from going, from being a persecuted small sect, it turned into an important religion that was favored by the emperor.

The program concluded by repeating the current claim that early Christianity was a diversity of belief systems and conceptions of the faith. The point of all that was made clear by Meyer's claim: "The struggle regarding orthodoxy and heresy never comes to an end and these battles about truth and inclusion and exclusion are with us to the present day."

To this day, yes. But this does not mean that there is no recognized orthodoxy – no standard and classical expression of the Christian faith. That standard was already in view when Jude instructed the church to contend for the faith – the faith once for all delivered to the church.

Programs like "[After Jesus](#)" can cause some Christians to wonder about the very foundations of the faith. But, in the

beginning and in the end, the church must learn to trust the New Testament as the only authority for defining Christian faith and practice. The discovery and publication of “other gospels” should only serve to remind Christians how thankful we must be for the four New Testament Gospels given by divine inspiration to the Church.

Christians should not be shaken by the recognition that centuries of development stand between, for example, the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry and the adoption of the Nicean creed, along with the canonization of the New Testament. The orthodox faith was already defended and the truth about Jesus Christ was already confessed long before the Council of Nicea. Indeed, even as the New Testament books were already recognized, the true Gospel was already defended.

Christianity has nothing to fear from an honest investigation of the facts. Next time, let’s hope that CNN invites some evangelical scholars to join their team of authorities.

But remember this – it is not the job of CNN to defend the Christian faith and share the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That is the job of the church. Let’s get to it.

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