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Scholar panel gives thumbs down in review of Frontline series

By Mark Wingfield

WILMORE, Ky. (ABP) -- Jesus is coming to national TV April 6, but the story may sound different from what you learned in Sunday school, according to four scholars who reviewed the program.

The PBS documentary series Frontline will air a four-hour program during Holy Week called "From Jesus to Christ: The First Christians." The program will air on PBS April 6-7 at 9 p.m. Eastern time.

The series attempts to trace the formation of the early Christian church by making a case that the Jesus of history did not become the Christ of Christian faith until the time of Constantine in the third century.

The Kentucky Baptist newspaper Western Recorder enlisted four Bible scholars to review the program. Overall, the panel found the series lacking, saying it downplays supernatural elements of the gospel story and presents only one point of view.

Perhaps the greatest irony of the series airing the week prior to Easter is that it entirely misses the significance of Easter, noted Ben Witherington, professor of New Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Ky.

"The question of Easter is left in abeyance," he noted. The program, conducted in interview style, instead makes a case that the early church formed because there was somehow prestige in joining a small Jewish sectarian group.

That notion didn't sit well with Witherington and the other scholars enlisted to critically review the PBS series. Other reviewers included Joel Green, also a New Testament professor at Asbury Seminary; Marty Soards, New Testament professor at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary; and Carey Newman, a New Testament scholar who directs the Institute for the Study of Christian Origins. The Kentucky scholars represent Baptist, Presbyterian and Methodist traditions.

By ignoring the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection, no sufficient motivation is left for the early church to have formed, the reviewing scholars said.

"This is a resurrectionless explanation of Christianity," Newman said. "If you take the resurrection out of our texts and out of our theology, you get what they have."

Soards pushed the point further: Without taking into account the power of the resurrection, why would the early Christians have been motivated to advance the gospel and form the churches they did, risking their own lives and facing martyrdom? "Would anyone have died for this?"

Indeed, the first hour of the PBS series ends with Jesus dying on the cross and then skips in the opening of the second hour to the Apostle Paul arriving in Corinth in 51 A.D. No mention is made of the resurrection until later. And nowhere does the series mention Paul's history as a persecutor of Christians or his conversion on the Damascus road.

Only in one brief segment, the scholars address the resurrection as something Jesus' followers believed. But they never directly address the question of whether Jesus actually was raised from the dead.

Commenting on the disciples' report of Jesus appearing to them after the resurrection, Paula Fredrikson of Boston University comments: "As a historian, this doesn't tell me anything about whether Jesus himself was actually raised. But what it does give me an amazing insight into is his followers and therefore, indirectly, into the leader who had forged these people into such a committed community."

Such an analysis represents a major flaw of the Frontline program, noted Asbury Seminary's Witherington. "They're saying, 'Here's history, and here's theology on top of that.' They're keeping them separate. Yet the New Testament is arguing that history is theological in nature because of the incarnation."

Such scholarship doesn't grapple with the full biblical text, Witherington added. "It's one thing to say they thought they saw Jesus. It's another to say what the text says, 'He appeared... .' That's making a historical claim."

Anyone viewing the Frontline program should understand that the scholars featured in it are interested in their own version of history and not in theology, said Presbyterian Seminary's Soards. "There's no notion of theology. It's not on the radar screen."

"They don't see literary development driven by theological conviction," he added. "This is a minimalist historical framework."

In areas where hard historical evidence is missing, the Frontline scholars "discount Christian tradition and in face of silence speculate creatively," Soards said.

The Frontline scholars display "an allergic reaction to theology," Witherington agreed. "They fail to come to grips with whether there is a theological substance to history."

Asbury's Green found one of the program's opening lines descriptive of the problems he found throughout the series. Within the opening minutes of the first hour, Holland Hendrix of Union Theological Seminary offers this explanation of what is to come: "The historian's task in understanding Jesus and the Jesus movement and early Christianity is a lot like the archaeologists' task in excavating a tell. You peel back layer after layer after layer of interpretation. And what you always find is a plurality of Jesuses."

Green said such a perspective assumes that there is no truth in those layers of tradition, and that truth is found only when the person doing the peeling arrives at a layer that suits his preconceived goal.

Further, understanding the layers of history and tradition related to Jesus and the early church is more like peeling back layers of an onion, Green said. "You peel away layers of an onion only to find the layers are the onion."

The biggest difficulty the Kentucky scholars found with the Frontline series is its lack of diversity or balance among those interviewed as sources.

All 12 of the scholars presented on the four-hour series either teach at Harvard Divinity School or Yale Divinity School or have links to those two institutions which are considered among the nation's most liberal in religious studies.

Although the program presents the 12 as representative of all North American New Testament scholars, "there is no theological spectrum here," explained Green of Asbury.

"The voices that act as experts here actually represent a fairly narrow band," added Newman.

Some of the scholars used on the program have ties to the Jesus Seminar, the controversial group that meets periodically to vote on what parts of the Bible actually are true. A Frontline website connected to this Holy Week series includes a link to the Jesus Seminar's website.

The scholars who reviewed the series represent a spectrum of evangelical and mainline traditions. They see the Frontline series as the far left reacting to the far right.

"What this really is about is distancing ourselves and distancing theology as far as we can away from fundamentalism," Witherington explained.

In the process, however, the views of the majority of American New Testament scholars -- and the views taught in most Christian churches across America -- are ignored, the Kentuckians said.

The driving force behind the Frontline project was a Yale graduate, Michael White, director of the religious studies program at the University of Texas at Austin.

Others making an appearance in the series include Harold Attridge, New Testament professor at Yale; Allen Callahan, New Testament professor at Harvard; Elizabeth Cark, religion professor at Duke University; Shaye J.D. Cohen, religious studies professor at Brown University; John Dominic Crossan, religious studies professor at DePaul University; Paula Fredrikson, professor of appreciation of Scripture at Boston University; Holland Hendrix, president of the faculty at Union Theological Seminary; Helmut Koester, New Testament studies professor at Harvard; Wayne Meeks, biblical studies professor at Yale; Eric Meyers, religion and archaeology professor at Duke; and Elaine Pagels, religion professor at Princeton.

"From Jesus to Christ" was produced by Frontline with funding from PBS stations and the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations.

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Reviewers suggest caution while viewing Frontline series

WILMORE, Ky. (ABP) -- Should evangelical Christians watch the PBS series Frontline when it airs a four-hour series on the early church next week?

Only if the series is watched with a good dose of skepticism and a highly critical eye, warn four evangelical New Testament scholars who reviewed the series for the Western Recorder.

"From Jesus to Christ: The Early Christians" will air on public television April 6-7 at 9 p.m. Eastern time.

"This is the kind of show that actually worries me," said Joel Green, New Testament professor at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Ky. "When I read in the paper that the Jesus Seminar voted that Jesus didn't really say the Lord's Prayer, I sneeze at that. But this is deceptive enough that people could be misled."

Green and the three other Bible scholars who reviewed the program noted it is attractively presented and contains many soundbites with which they would agree. But the liberal presuppositions of the series -- particularly the unlinking of history and theology -- filter potentially confusing elements throughout the four-hour presentation, they said.

"The danger is, if you say it enough, some people will believe it," Green explained.

"We live in such a biblically illiterate climate. That's why this is so dangerous," added Ben Witherington, also of Asbury Seminary.

Witherington and Green both said they would not advise average lay people to watch the series, unless they have someone on hand to help critique it or are committed to research the Bible themselves to find truth.

That sentiment was shared to a degree by Marty Soards, professor of New Testament at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary, and Carey Newman, a Baptist scholar who heads the Institute for the Study of Christian Origins.

"If you view it, realize this is simply one of many ways in which scholars explain Christian origins," Newman advised. "The people who act as authority figures here simply are not representative of the spectrum of scholarship. Good conservative and centrist scholarship is not represented."

Nevertheless, "people who view this can still pick up their own copies of the Bible and get a trustworthy understanding of who Jesus was and is," Newman said.

The scholars offered some guidelines for viewers by raising several points of contention:

-- Multiple vision. The series asserts there was never a single authentic strand of Christianity in the first century. Instead, there were many brands of Christianities, some cherishing views which later Christians deemed heresy. While conservative and centrist scholars do not want to unfairly homogenize Christian history, they would say early Christian communities had a more unified message from the start.

-- Where did he live? The series asserts that Jesus was not actually born in Bethlehem as the Bible reports, but probably was born and raised in Nazareth. At the same time, the series asserts that Nazareth was not a sleepy, out-of-the-way village as traditionally thought, but actually was a satellite town of a larger metropolitan area called Sepphoris. Conservative and centrist New Testament scholars, while not ruling out Jesus' potential association with Sepphoris, find no credible evidence to link Jesus with Sepphoris.

-- Inconsistencies. The series sends mixed messages on several points, including assertions on the one hand that Jesus was not raised as a peasant but in a higher social class, while later referring to Jesus as growing up in a peasant-class family. Other scholars still contend that Jesus was raised in Nazareth as the son of a carpenter, which would not have placed him in an upper-class arena.

-- The last straw. The series contends that Jesus' cleansing of the temple is what led to his death. Conservative and centrist scholars see that incident as one part of a larger pattern of Jesus presenting a threat to the establishment.

-- What's the motive? The scholars represented in the series do not ascribe faith-based motives to the early Christians and ignore supernatural intervention as a possible motivator. For example, the narrator at one point asserts: "Paul felt that the time was right for these Jews to bring the Gentiles into their movement." Conservative and centrist scholars do not begin their study of Christian origins by ruling out supernatural events.

-- Mixed images. While the series is illustrated with many pictures of early Christian icons and art, the Kentucky scholars who reviewed the program noted that the images shown do not always match the period or place being talked about.

-- Crucifixion as punishment. The series asserts that crucifixion was not a Jewish form of capital punishment. The Kentucky scholars disagreed, arguing that Jews had adopted the Roman practice decades before the death of Jesus.

-- Paul's conversion. The series omits any mention of Paul's conversion to Christianity after being one of the chief Jewish persecutors of Christians. Conservative and centrist scholars see Paul's conversion as a pivotal point in Christian history and a primary factor in understanding his zeal to spread the Christian faith.

-- Origin of Gospels. The series asserts that the four Gospels were written as an attempt by the followers of Jesus to "cope" with the loss of the first Jewish revolt against the Romans in 66 A.D. Conservative and centrist scholars acknowledge the influence of the failed revolt but maintain the Gospels primarily were written by four followers of Jesus who authentically wanted to record the basic story of Christianity.

-- Questions about Q. The series presents as historical fact the existence of a biblical source scholars have referred to as Q. Some scholars have speculated that the sayings of Jesus common to Matthew and Luke (but not Mark) actually were drawn from this Q source. The series presents quotations of Jesus while citing chapter and verse of Q, as though it were a published volume. Conservative and centrist scholars agree there is evidence such a source may have existed, but point out such a document never has been found. The Kentucky scholars reviewing the series said this cavalier treatment of Q is indicative of problems in the entire series.