

During Holy Week, History Channel takes look at Jesus, his times

During Holy Week, television often features biblical dramatizations. But this year, cable's History Channel offers four documentaries on what archaeology tells us about Jesus and his times. The carefully researched programs are enhanced by handsome visuals and well-paced scripts.

The episodes:
Tuesday: "The Lost Youth of Jesus" (birth and childhood).

Wednesday: "From Galilee to Jerusalem" (Jesus' travels as an adult).

Thursday: "The Way of the Cross" (Holy Week events).

April 18: "Mysteries of Golgotha" (Crucifixion and Resurrection sites).

The final segment on Good Friday sifts the problematic evidence for

Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulchre as the place where Jesus was entombed and rose bodily from the grave on Easter.

The best aspect of the series is the thoughtful treatments of Bible controversies, which employ an ideologically mixed, international cast of scholars.

For instance, John Dominic Crossan of DePaul University, a Chicago Roman Catholic school, contends that Jesus never celebrated the Last Supper and that the early church "created" the event. Then Jerome Murphy-

O'Connor of Jerusalem's Ecole Biblique says there's no evidence for that claim.

Such balance contrasts with major documentaries on New Testament history from ABC News in 2000 and from PBS in 1998 and again this year, which have leaned toward the skeptical left.

The series slips up only once, saying the Gospel of Thomas, which does not mention Jesus' miracles, Crucifixion or Resurrection, "is old enough to have been included in the New Testament" alongside the standard Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

That's highly debatable. The surviving Thomas text was written in the fourth century but it is quoted in third-century works, and many think it dates from at least the second century. But there's no scholarly consensus



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putting Thomas as early as the first century, when experts agree the Gospels in the New Testament were written.

The documentaries show how research can provide context for Jesus' actions and sayings.

For example, in Mark 12:1, Jesus tells a parable about a winemaker who built a tower at his vineyard. Some scholars, looking backward 20 centuries, have considered that an obvious mistake Jesus wouldn't have made. They figure some later writer made up the words.

But a recent excavation at Jesus' hometown, Nazareth, found three towers at a grape field dating from Jesus' time, apparently used to watch out for grape thieves.

On the Holy Sepulchre debate, we know that in A.D. 326 local Christians identi-

fied the site to Helena, the 80-year-old mother of Constantine, the first Christian emperor. She then had a church built there. The church and traditional tomb of Jesus were obliterated by Muslim conquerors in 1009, adding difficulties for modern researchers.

The program concludes that it's possible the tomb was located at the church, owned by Orthodox and Catholic groups, or nearby. Experts discount the rival "Garden Tomb" north of the city walls, a claimed burial site long preferred by Protestants and Anglicans.

We're on more solid ground with the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, the traditional site of Jesus' birth, thanks to the Roman Emperor Hadrian. He built a pagan temple to Aphrodite to

supplant the Christian holy site, so we know the spot local Christians identified as of A.D. 132.

Summing up, Jonathan Reed of California's University of LaVerne tells viewers, "In general, archaeology paints a picture that is very much in line with what you find in the Gospels," but believing Christians want external proofs for things scientists will never find.

"In the end," the suave narrator Keith David intones, "neither archaeology nor any other science can prove or disprove" the events of "the world-transforming years when Jesus walked the Galilee."

Did Jesus really perform miracles or rise from the grave on the third day?

"It is, and always has been, a matter of faith."