

Jesus of Nazareth

co-written and directed by Franco Zeffirelli

Study Guide Hour Three

Hour three makes clear how Zeffirelli is going to depict the ministry of Jesus; namely, he will continue to weave together all four gospel accounts. Weaving together Matthew, Mark, and Luke, is easy enough. Both Matthew and Luke are dependent literarily on Mark. Matthew's gospel, for example, contains ninety percent of Mark's gospel verbatim. With John, it's a different story. John is the maverick gospel. Ninety percent of John is not present in the other three gospels. John stands alone. His harmonization manages to be very successful.

Zeffirelli also, for the sake of dramatization, adds content not present in the gospels. This material is imaginative but remains true to the spirit of the gospels. There are two ways to interpret the Bible. The first is called eisegesis. Eisegesis involves an interpreter imposing an agenda upon the Bible. For example, some feminist scholars believe the Bible is essentially a depiction of male oppression. The second is called Exegesis. Exegesis is honest interpretation. It involves an interpreter endeavoring to discover what the Bible actually means to convey. Another way to understand it is that eisegesis is highly subjective. Exegesis is highly objective. Zeffirelli's Jesus of Nazareth is definitely exegetical, even if it adds content. You can trust it.

Minutes 2:00 - 2:05 continue to depict Jesus continuing to call his disciples. John and Andrew introduce Jesus to James and Peter. Now the "big four" are assembled and in play. Aside from Judas, the other disciples, at least according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke, are merely nominal. They are intended to round out the number to twelve, and represent the culmination of the people of Israel, who were of twelve tribes.

Minutes 2:05-2:14 set up Jesus' miraculous cure of a paralyzed man. (Read Mark 2:1-12) Interspersed with this miracle is an account of the call of Matthew/Levi, another of Jesus' disciples. (Read Mark 2:13-17) He is a tax collector for the Romans, which would have made him very unpopular with the Jews and accounts for his tension with the fiery Peter. Also interspersed with this miracle is some teaching of Jesus about the Kingdom of Heaven. The Kingdom of Heaven is Matthew's nomenclature. Mark and Luke call the same thing the Kingdom of God. But what is it? The Kingdom of Heaven is the central theme of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It references the fulfillment of the history of Israel when God inbreaks history through Jesus Christ to inaugurate his kingdom on earth. It is an actual, ontological event. The gospels declared that Jesus changed history in a very real way.

Minutes 2:14-2:25 depict Jesus dining with various sinners. During dinner he tells one of his most famous parables, The Prodigal Son. There are many interpretations of this parable, but here it underscores God's compassion for sinners even if they turn to him late in the day. Jesus throughout the gospels cannily points up as Paul declares, that all people sin and fall short of the glory of God. He exposes the sin of those who deem themselves righteous and lord their righteousness over the heads of overt sinners.

Minutes 2:25-32 depict the death of John the Baptist. Though these words are not in the Bible, John paraphrases one of its central themes, "Before kingdoms change, men must change." The Bible is not about political movements or parties. It is about the hearts of men. It is about their redemption.

Minutes 2:32 record Jesus' teaching that he brings a sword of division. What he means to convey is that allegiance to the Kingdom of Heaven is the highest allegiance, and will necessitate divisions within races, genders, and even families.

Minutes 2:36-39 record the miraculous revival of Jairus' daughter, and in it evidence of Zeffirelli's weaving of John's gospel with the other three. The disciple Thomas is introduced. Thomas does not appear in the other three gospels, only John's, and he is the key disciple. John's gospel is not about the Kingdom of Heaven. It is about belief in Jesus Christ which imparts true spiritual life. Thomas is the key disciple because of his doubt. He is a stand in for the reader, who is not to doubt.

Minutes 2:39-44 give examples of Zeffirelli's imaginative content used for the sake of dramatization. Peter and Matthew's conversation is not in the gospels, nor is there a call of Thomas.

Minutes 2:44-53 record the death of John the Baptist. John was such a popular figure, that by the end of the first century he had more followers than Jesus. This is why, in the gospel of John, he is careful to order John as subordinate to Jesus. The Zealots continue to appear, deluded that Jesus will align with their mission to expel Rome from their homeland.

Minutes 2:53-58 introduce Mary Magdalene. She is barely mentioned in Luke's gospel as one from whom Jesus exorcises many demons. She, however, is one of the stars in John's gospel. Early tradition recalls her as a prostitute, but there is no evidence of this in the gospels.

I hope by now you're hooked.