

A Review of 'The Chosen'

(by Paul Matheson – and published in the month's OPEN HOUSE magazine)

'Meet a fisherman struggling with debt, a woman wrestling with demons, and a gifted accountant ostracised from his family and people. See how Jesus changes lives, works His first miracles, and embarks on His ministry to change the world. See Jesus through the eyes of those who knew Him.'

These are the words that Angel Studios use to promote the television series about Jesus and his followers. The Chosen is the first-ever multi-season series about the life of Jesus, and it is the biggest crowd-funded TV series project of all time.

The opening credits explain that The Chosen is based on the true stories of the gospels of Jesus Christ: 'some locations and timelines have been combined or condensed. Backstories and some characters or dialogue have been added. However, all biblical and historical context and any artistic imagination are designed to support the truth and intention of the Scriptures. Viewers are encouraged to read the gospels'

American director and co-writer Dallas Jenkins has sought to take viewers deeper into the gospel stories, and to present Jesus through the eyes of the people who knew him. The addition of backstories, dialogue and some new characters are all tools to achieve that aim.

Before I started watching The Chosen, I was uncertain about inventing backstories and additional characters. I also wondered whether the portrayal of biblical characters carrying out real-time daily tasks and might turn it into a lower-key drama, akin to a soap opera. But the opposite was the case. The Chosen's gradually told, vividly detailed and carefully observed narrative has an immersive and accumulative effect that plunges us into everyday life in first century Galilee and Judea. It is the modern-day equivalent of the practice encouraged by Saint Ignatius Loyola of imagining yourself in a scene from the Bible, or in the presence of Jesus. It's an approach that engaged me immediately.

The script, sets and costumes are based on careful biblical research, drawing on the advice of a panel of biblical scholars and religious experts. The acting is convincing and emotionally gripping. The multicultural casting is excellent. Jenkins explains that 'this is a show that's set in the Middle East, and we want to accurately reflect that. The area where we set the show, Capernaum, was a trade route. And so there were many different ethnicities and countries reflected. On the spiritual level, I think it's a great opportunity to showcase all the barriers that Jesus broke down.'

The opening episode ('I have called you by your name') begins with a frightened little Jewish girl being comforted by her kind and loving father who teaches her the consoling words of Isaiah 43:1 'Thus saith the Lord who created you, He who formed you, Fear not, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by your name, you are mine'.

The scene then cuts to a strikingly handsome, mature woman awakening unhappily from that dream of her early life as a little girl. We are shown the woman's emotional and spiritual distress. We see on the shelf of her squalid lodging the worn wooden doll that is her only remaining connection to the safety and love of her childhood. We learn that this is 'Lilith' who lives and works in the disreputable 'Red Quarter'. We come to understand that there is harrowing trauma in her past, and that she sometimes has terrifying psychological crises that the Pharisees regard as demonic possession. We are shown an attempted exorcism by the well-meaning Pharisee Nicodemus. We see the growing despair of 'Lilith'. As episode one approaches its conclusion, we see her on the brink of self-destruction.

Then a stranger arrives. He gently says to her: "Mary. Mary of Magdala. Thus saith the Lord who created you, He who formed you, Fear not, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by your name, you are mine".

The actors who play Mary Magdalene (Elizabeth Tabish) and Jesus of Nazareth (Jonathan Roumie) are excellent. Jonathan Roumie brings a kind, gentle Rabbinical sense of humour to his portrayal of Jesus. Great credit must go to the scriptwriters, who immerse us in the culture and mindset of the time of Jesus.

Some of the characterisations of the apostles took me by surprise. When we first meet him, Simon Peter (played by Shahar Isaac) is portrayed as an impetuous cocksure young man who pursues life with gusto and an extrovert swagger. But then he meets Jesus and follows him. Multi-season TV format allows the writers to gradually develop the characters over multiple episodes, and we see Simon Peter's personality slowly begin to change through his relationship with Jesus and the other apostles.

Matthew (the tax collector and disciple) is portrayed as a beautiful, shy, wide-eyed, endlessly curious and highly intelligent young man who lacks social skills and intuition. He is totally without guile or pretense. Today we would say he has Asperger's syndrome.

The character of Nicodemus the Pharisee is a tour-de-force, superbly well-acted by Erick Avari. In Nicodemus we see the Law and the Jewish tradition as the wellspring of the teachings of Jesus.

The producers of this remarkable series have made it free-to-watch, using a pay-it-forward model for viewers to contribute funding if they so choose, to help fund future seasons: seven seasons are planned. You can watch every episode of The Chosen free of charge on the [Angel Studios website](#) where it can be viewed on Smart TV, computer, tablet or mobile phone.

Season 1 of The Chosen can also be found on Netflix and Amazon Prime Video.

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