

TV Drama Series - 'The Chosen': Season 1 (www.angel.com/watch/the-chosen)

'Meet a fisherman struggling with debt, a woman wrestling with demons, and a gifted accountant ostracized 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 their 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 of the very first episode 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.'

The Chosen's American director and co-writer Dallas Jenkins has very purposefully 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 the appropriateness of inventing backstories and additional characters when retelling the Gospels' story. I also wondered whether the portrayal of biblical characters carrying out real-time daily tasks and conversations (preparing supper, talking about arrangements for a wedding, visiting a tavern etc) might reduce the emotional impact of the Gospels' story by turning it into a lower-key drama, akin to a soap opera. But in fact, the opposite was the case. Compared to films like 'The Greatest Story Ever Told' or 'Jesus of Nazareth'. The Chosen's gradually told, vividly detailed and carefully observed narrative has an immersive and accumulative effect on the viewer that plunges us into everyday life in 1st century Galilee and Judea. It is the modern-day equivalent of the practice encouraged by Saint Ignatius Loyola (in his Spiritual Exercises) of imagining yourself in a scene from the Bible, or in the presence of Jesus. It's an approach that engaged me immediately.

Additional factors in the show's success are that the script, sets and costumes are based on careful and sensitive 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.'

I fell in love with The Chosen from the very first episode of Season One. That 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 and suicidal ideation of 'Lilith'. She gives away the wooden doll her father made for her all those years ago. She rips up the piece of papyrus that was inside the doll and upon which her father had written the words of Isaiah. As episode 1 approaches its conclusion, we see 'Lilith' on the brink of self-destruction, in a dark tavern, at night, demanding wine. Then a stranger comes up behind her and quietly places his hand over the wine jug to prevent her drinking. She turns round angrily to see a man with kind, sad eyes and an expression of profound pity on his face. She shouts, 'leave me alone' and runs out of the tavern. She stops outside and turns round to see the same quiet stranger standing in the torchlight. The stranger 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". Atmospherically directed and beautifully acted, this climactic scene conjures a palpable sense of epiphany. I wept after watching it.

The actors who play Mary Magdalene (Elizabeth Tabish) and Jesus of Nazareth (Jonathan Roumie) are excellent throughout all the episodes of The Chosen. A particular delight is the kind, gentle Rabbinical sense of humour that Jonathan Roumie brings convincingly to his portrayal of Jesus. Great credit too must go to the scriptwriters, who quickly immerse us into the Jewish culture and mindset of the time of Jesus.

Further delights of script, casting and acting are the variety of characters amongst the Pharisees and the Romans. There is no stereotyping. Some Romans are cruel and harsh (Quintus) and others friendly and fair-minded (Gaius). Some Pharisees are shown to be humble and wise (Nicodemus and Yussif) and others not (Shmuel). Hearing that some fishermen are fishing on the Sabbath, Shmuel says, "Greed has overcome them!" and Yussif replies "Or they are just trying to feed their families".

Some of the characterisations of the apostles took me by surprise initially, and yet I found them delightful and quickly grew to love them. 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. And this is where the multi-season TV format comes into its own. It 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. (His utterly unguarded vulnerability and small nervous ticks are portrayed exquisitely by Paras Patel). There is a total honesty and naivety about Matthew that makes us simultaneously admire him and feel sorry for him. Even before he meets Jesus, he has an innocence that feels like a form of grace. The scene where Jesus calls Matthew to follow him is electrifying to watch.

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

wise and compassionate wellspring of the teachings of Jesus. The writers give Nicodemus some memorable lines, such as the scene where he gently challenges his wife's black-&-white thinking and religious self-righteousness by telling her to look into a poor-quality opaque mirror and to tell him what she sees. She replies that the mirror is poor and the image blurred. Nicodemus then tells his wife: "Sometimes I wonder if what we can know of Adonai and the Law is just as blurred. What if we're not seeing the whole picture? What if it's more beautiful and more strange than we can ever imagine?". Nicodemus's words are a spine-tingling anticipation of the words of Saint Paul (1 Corinthians 13:12) 'For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known'. The continuity between the teachings of the Prophets and the teaching of Jesus is picked up in Episode 7, when Jesus meets Nicodemus at night, and explains God's love for the world and his mission to redeem mankind from sin. A wonderstruck Nicodemus recognises that Jesus is the Son of God, and Jesus urges Nicodemus to join him. The script and the acting are deeply moving, not least because we know that Nicodemus tragically won't find the strength to follow Jesus, even though he has recognised who He is. Throughout the previous episodes we, the viewers, have come to admire and care about Nicodemus. And because we admire and empathise with Nicodemus, we recognise our own weakness in his weakness. It is a profoundly Lenten moment for us as viewers.

Other highlights of Season One include Jesus at the Sea of Galilee inviting Simon and Andrew to become fishers of men. The miracle of the prodigious haul of fish is thrillingly presented, and the writers cleverly choose to make Matthew a witness of the miracle. Episode 5 invites us into The Wedding Feast at Cana where we see the astonishing miracle of the water changing into wine. The scriptwriters skilfully place the disciple Thomas at this event and give us an early glimpse of his tendency to doubt. Episode 6 includes a breath-taking enactment of Jesus healing the paralytic man who was lowered through the roof by his friends so that Jesus might make him well again (Mark 2: 1-12).

The concluding episode of Season One shows us how God works in mysterious ways, as Jesus confounds the expectations and assumptions of his disciples by deciding to go to Samaria. We see the gospel (John 4: 4-30) brought to life as Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well, asks her for water and tells her everything she has done. She later tells everyone that Jesus is the Christ, and Jesus publicly launches his ministry. It is a perfect place to end Season One of The Chosen.

The producers of this remarkable television 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 www.angel.com/watch/the-chosen 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.