

I Wish Religious Critics Would Stop Bashing “The Chosen”

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I’m not a big TV fan. I’ve never watched “Game of Thrones” or “Stranger Things.” Last year when I looked at the list of 2022 Emmy Award winners, I realized I’d never seen any of the nominated shows. Aside from reruns of “Everybody Loves Raymond” (I own every episode), I pretty much surf for movies, football or news programs when I control the remote.

All that changed when “The Chosen” began airing in 2019, thanks to donors who loved it after seeing the first episode. Now in its third season, the show is the most successful crowdfunded TV program in history. Viewers have given more than \$50 million to support it.

And director Dallas Jenkins is just getting started. “The Chosen” is the only serialized dramatization of the life of Jesus ever produced. Jenkins said early on in his project that his goal is to get people to binge-watch the gospel. As of the end of 2022, 413 million viewers have already seen at least part of it—and we have four more seasons to go.

I’ll admit I’m hooked. I’ve never been a fan of Christian movies, which are often embarrassingly preachy. That’s not “The Chosen.” Never in Hollywood history has anyone captured so much of the heart of the gospel like Jenkins and his cast and crew have with this masterpiece. The casting is superb, the sets are amazing and historians and religious scholars from both Christian and Jewish backgrounds have offered input to the script.

The best part is that the show is just getting started. In Episode 5 of Season 3, which aired last Sunday, we saw the healing of the bleeding woman and the raising of Jarius’

daughter. But “The Chosen” isn’t in a hurry to rush Jesus to the cross. This is not an Easter-week miniseries. The narrative takes many detours, giving us the imagined backstory on multiple biblical characters and offering flashbacks from Old Testament scenes.

It even provides a few moments for Jesus (played perfectly by actor Jonathan Roumie) to roughhouse with his disciples during a swim in the Sea of Galilee.

I guess I shouldn’t be surprised that a segment of the Christian community is dead-set against “The Chosen.” A growing group of frowning fundamentalists (I’m not going to name names) are blasting the show because Jenkins is supposedly “adding to Scripture” (their words) or outright distorting the gospel. Some pastors have even blasted the series from the pulpit. And, of course, armchair critics on YouTube are dissecting every scene of the show and accusing Jenkins of being a pawn of the devil. It’s sad how we Christians treat each other.

It’s true that “The Chosen” uses creative license to explore the possibilities of the biblical narrative. All religious films do this—from “Ben-Hur” to “The Robe” to “The Ten Commandments” to “The Passion of the Christ.” No dramatic depiction of the story of Jesus can rely on the Bible alone, because we don’t know all the disciples’ previous occupations, how many of them were married or what Nathaniel was doing when he was under the sycamore tree.

“The Chosen” tries to fill in those blanks with possibilities. Peter (Shahar Isaac) relates to his wife at their home in Capernaum, and—don’t be shocked!—they don’t always get along. The man who caters the wedding at Cana, and worries about running out of wine, turns out to be the disciple Thomas (Joey Vahedi). The Pharisee, Nicodemus (Erick Avari), unsuccessfully tries to cast demons out of Mary Magdalene—and this leads to his meeting with Jesus. And Matthew (Paras Patel) is briefly

disowned by his Jewish father because he's a tax collector.

None of this is in the Bible. It's simply creative storytelling. "The Chosen" takes its liberties to help make the story relatable. That doesn't make it heretical, any more than John Bunyan's allegory Pilgrim's Progress is blasphemous. This kind of art makes the gospel easier to understand. And not once has Jenkins' literary license changed the core meaning of the gospel story.

What excites me most about "The Chosen" is that young viewers are watching it, and many are discovering the gospel for the first time as a result.

Last year Jenkins and his team showed episodes 1 and 2 to a group of young adults, and all of them were a bit cynical toward Christianity. Yet many of them cried while watching certain scenes. By the end of the screening, all of these GenX viewers admitted being more open to the gospel—and at least one of the women started attending church. Another of the young viewers said: "I'm serious, this show made me want to be Jesus' friend."

Imagine what could happen if this amazing television phenomenon triggers that kind of reaction on a massive scale.

Instead of bashing "The Chosen" or nitpicking every detail, please watch it, support it and pray for it. God is using this TV series to spread the gospel to people who are too skeptical to visit a church, but who are happy to hear about a Savior who loves them.

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