

The Chosen: And the Word Was Made Film



by [Jeff Plude](#) (January 2022)

We all gathered for the big event at church. It was a Saturday night a couple of weeks before Christmas, and some kids came dressed in their pajamas. There were free hotdogs, candy bars, soda, and popcorn made in one of those red machines with glass sides. The food, though basic, was far superior to the so-called movie, which was also free. But that wasn't quite true either.

Christmas With The Chosen: The Messengers didn't turn out to be a movie at all, though it was playing in theaters too. It was a mostly feature-length infomercial for the online TV-style series *The Chosen* and contemporary Christian music. After a brief intro from the auteur, who wore a hoodie with the series' logo and was flanked by merch for sale, the actual film didn't start until over an hour later. Instead we got one after another of worship songs lip-synched by various

evangelical pop stars, their musings on Christmas, and a handful of dramatic monologues by a few of the actors in the series.

I kept fish-eyeing my wife in the dark. I felt tricked and wanted to leave. But I had to see.

The Chosen is supposed to depict the life of Jesus Christ over a projected seven seasons; two years have been completed so far, or sixteen episodes of about a half hour to an hour each. Dallas Jenkins, who is forty-six, created the series and directs and cowrites the episodes, which first aired in spring 2019. Interestingly he's the son of Jerry Jenkins, coauthor of the *Left Behind* thrillers that became bestsellers from 1995 to 2007. Those books (sixteen in all) imagine events and characters in the Tribulation, or the end times foretold in the Book of Revelation, and the "rapture" of believers up to heaven as Jesus returns to vent his wrath on those left behind.

So now the filmmaking son has taken things up a notch, not only theologically but it seems financially too.

His series is free to watch on the web, through an app or on angelstudios.com, yet it has collected \$40 million in donations. The series' website says it's the largest crowdfunded media project in internet history, with an average donation of \$299 a viewer.

So what's not to like, since I'm a Christian? Before each episode a disclaimer duly tells us that though Dallas Jenkins has taken artistic license, the series is historically and biblically in "context." He reportedly has a trinity of experts—an evangelical pastor (of course), a Catholic priest, and a messianic Jew and former rabbi—to ensure this authenticity.

I suppose for a generation in which life is subsumed in video, this seems perfectly aboveboard. But in my view it's not. I

like movies like the next person, and films of Jesus are nothing new. As a teenager, I watched all four and a half hours over Palm and Easter Sundays in 1977 when *Jesus of Nazareth* ran on prime-time network TV. Anthony Burgess, the author of *A Clockwork Orange*, cowrote the screenplay, and Franco Zeffirelli of *Romeo and Juliet* fame directed. I liked it very much; I was technically Catholic but I wasn't, in retrospect, a true believer. When it was over I went right back to how I was living before.

At the same time John Lennon, of all people, was watching *Jesus of Nazareth* too (at home in the Dakota, the same building whose exterior served as the primary setting of *Rosemary's Baby*) and was apparently enthralled. This was the same man who once bragged that the Beatles were more popular than Jesus Christ and that Christianity would certainly die. But predictably Lennon's passion for Jesus was only eye deep—a short time later he'd rejected Christ and seemed to have remained an unbeliever to the end. When Bob Dylan released "Gotta Serve Somebody" ("It may be the devil or it may be the Lord") in 1979 during his own so-called born-again phase, Lennon tongue-lashed back with "Serve Yourself," which he recorded the same year he was shot to death outside the Dakota.

Neither Lennon nor I was converted by *Jesus of Nazareth*, which I think is much more coherent and compelling than what I've seen in the first two seasons of *The Chosen*. So what happened to us?

I think the answer lies in the apostle Paul's epistle to the Romans: "And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?... So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."

Hearing could also be construed as reading, and the Gospels were still being written during Paul's life. Words are the all-important ingredient. Yes, films contain speech, but it is

predominantly a visual medium. Dialogue in film is secondary. As Alfred Hitchcock said: "If it's a good movie, the sound could go off and the audience would still have a pretty clear idea of what was going on." Hyperbole perhaps, but I think his point is well made. Film has a way of swamping words and hypnotizing the mind, while at the same time depriving the parched viewer of the pure water of meaning and understanding that a hearer, and especially a reader, would enjoy to the fullest.

That's why God provided the Word. John starts his Gospel by saying: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." And a little later, referring to Jesus: "And the word was made flesh, and dwelt among us ... full of grace and truth."

Now I know that some believers claim, as Jenkins himself does (and my own church's elders seem to think), that a video series like *The Chosen* will bring people to the Word. But I think that's wishful thinking at best, and self-serving at worst.

Together the four Gospels amount to about 65,000 words—as long as a short novel. The diction is simple and direct (and at times poetic and provocative), and I think the entire text can be read at a leisurely pace over a few days at most. Or in about the same time, or likely less, than it takes to binge-watch the first two seasons of *The Chosen*.

In the end I think that film and videos that are fictional, including those based on historical events, are primarily entertainment, some with more tinges of gravitas than others. They're by nature, I think, diffuse and lacking in depth compared to literary works. It's almost a cliché that the best and deepest books, for the most part, aren't satisfactorily filmable. In sharp contrast the Gospels are a historical account of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection, and the elucidation of his doctrine. The stories Jesus told to his

audience were didactic, most of them parables. He came to give humanity his precepts for eternal life, and then to die for humanity's sins as a substitute so that his followers could live with him forever. His purpose wasn't to titillate and amuse. He came to earth to heal and save—with his Word.

In short, the Gospel can't be captured as a film. And what's even worse, it often gives a skewed and even heretical sense of it.

So this is why neither Lennon nor I was converted. We were just along for the visual ride. When we got off, the movie faded in our memories and we went back to our old unsaved selves. It wasn't until I turned to the Word in earnest that I became a believer.

Unbelievers, even many Christians, may see no inherent harm in *The Chosen*. After all it's Christian—supposedly about the Gospel, no less. Films about extrabiblical Christians are fine with me, and I have watched my share. But for believers, Jesus should not be viewed as just some ordinary historical character whose life and words a novelist or filmmaker may rearrange with impunity. To his followers, he's supposed to be the Son of God. It makes no difference to me, for instance, that Shakespeare in *Julius Caesar* moved the opening scene of a triumph over Pompey from October to March to condense the timeline for his audience. Or in the sequel, *Antony and Cleopatra*, to re-create dialogue between the two treacherous lovers. Of course even some historians and secularists complain about this kind of thing in other contexts.

But for a film to take even the slightest liberty with the Bible is condemned by Scripture itself in several places. It says this most emphatically, I think, at the end of Revelation and the entire New Testament as Jesus speaks through the apostle John:

If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him

the plagues that are written in this book: and if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.

Despite all this, our new pastor has been raving about *The Chosen*. During one service he even showed a clip from the series. He's in his late thirties, and he's friendly and I like his preaching for the most part. He's an amateur cartoonist too, so that partly explains why he's been beguiled by the series. He regularly shows videos along with his sermon that add little to his message, I think, and in some cases even detract from it.

Then came the announcement that our church was going to host a showing of *Christmas With The Chosen: The Messengers*. Because it was playing in theaters, my wife and I (and I think many others in our congregation) believed we were going to see a full-fledged movie. And it wasn't exactly free for us either. The elders gently asked in an email to the members that if we felt moved to share the "burden" of offering the movie night that they would be grateful, since it had cost our church a "considerable" amount. I assume that they weren't talking about the snacks. So we all had donated to Jenkins and *The Chosen* already, since that fee was paid by our regular weekly contributions to the church.

Our millennial pastor and the rest of the elders, who are all at least fifty, billed it as a prime opportunity to witness to the "unchurched" (a word I hate). They even handed out business cards to us—business cards!—with our church's logo on one side and a still shot from *Christmas With The Chosen* and its logo on the other side, and urged us to give them to neighbors and friends who are unbelievers and invite them to come.

This is a kind of gimmick that runs contrary, I think, to what

the apostle Paul relates in his first epistle to the Corinthians about carrying out the Great Commission. He reminds them that when he was with them he didn't use "enticing words of man's wisdom," but instead relied on the "demonstration of the Spirit and of power." The Gospel doesn't need a speechwriter.

About a hundred and twenty-five people were at the big event, according to our executive pastor, or a couple of dozen fewer than our whole congregation. The lights went down and the screen on the stage lit up ... And we sat there and watched music videos and interviews and monologues for seventy-five minutes!

When the thirty-five-minute "movie" started at long last, it was the dullest and most plodding depiction of the Nativity I have ever seen. We see perhaps five or more minutes of Mary and Joseph trudging along the road to Bethlehem to report for the Roman census, Mary heavy with child and riding a donkey and Joseph guiding them on foot. We get some pointless dialogue that is supposed to humanize and modernize the blessed couple. There's nothing about how Mary got pregnant—about how the archangel Gabriel told Mary that the Holy Spirit would "overshadow" her and she would conceive, making Jesus the actual Son of God. Mary and Joseph obliquely refer to the separate "messengers" who spoke to both of them, though Joseph's came to him in a dream. And we see Mary muttering, "My soul magnifies the Lord" (which, according to Luke's Gospel, she actually said when she visited John the Baptist's mother, Elizabeth) as she waits in the chaotic dusty street while her harried husband, who manages to deadpan a quip or two, asks about a place at the inn.

Then the scene shifts to A.D. 48! Mary Magdalene is smuggled past Roman guards at night to visit Jesus's mother as she's dying, who tells Magdalene that she's like a "daughter" to her, and duly dictates to her the actual details of the savior's birth. Then Magdalene snippily delivers it to Luke in

Rome.

The ubiquity of Mary Magdalene is one of the most annoying features of the series in general. I don't think there's one episode without her. She's like the thirteenth apostle, traveling with the other "students," who were all men, and would've been questionable in ancient Jewish culture. She also says the prayer at the Sabbath meal, and wants to read the Torah. She walks and sits around in each frame like a dreamy-eyed hippie chick with long dark hair. I'm not trying to diminish Magdalene's presence in the Gospel—she was the first to see Jesus after he rose from the dead at dawn—her portrayal in *The Chosen* is absurd. But it plays well to a woke, gender-addled America.

In my view, this is just another layer of icing on the seeker-friendly ecumenical cake. It may taste good at the moment, but later will ruin your spiritual digestion.

Each episode in *The Chosen* contains only a small fraction of Jesus's actual words, and the iconic stories are rearranged, conflated, condensed, extrapolated. Jesus himself is portrayed in a frivolous and disrespectful way, I believe. He was fully man, but he was also fully the Son of God—not the son of Joe Everyman.

The Chosen's Jesus is quite the comic too. I think this is a projection by an infotained generation because I see no evidence for it in the Gospels. On the contrary, Isaiah describes Jesus in his prophecy of the messiah as "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief."

In one episode, for example, Jesus and his disciples need a place to stay for the night in Samaria. The woman he met at Jacob's well and her "husband" offer their place. As Jesus and the rest file in the husband has a little fun with the rabbi.

Husband: "One of the rooms is haunted. By my dead grandmother."

Jesus: "Oh. I'll take that one."

Wife: "Do you know who he is? He's not afraid of ghosts."

Andrew (in half whisper): "I might be."

Much of the dialogue is equally sophomoric.

Speaking of Andrew, most of the storyline through the second season focuses on the apostles (including Magdalene) and their mostly apocryphal words and actions. While the Gospels give the flavor of some of their personalities, Jesus's disciples are very much in the background. In *The Chosen*, however, they are very much in the foreground.

Worst of all is the shameless and baseless portrayal of Matthew as an autistic, gaudily dressed eccentric (who looks very Indian and not at all Jewish). All because he was a tax collector and presumably good with numbers, and that he starts his Gospel with a detailed list of Jesus's genealogy? Peter can't stand him, and in one scene, John and James, "the Sons of Thunder," mock him. Again, this plays well to an America drowning in facile gestures of social justice.

At the Sunday service the day after *Christmas With The Chosen*, our executive pastor seemed to think it was a success. He proclaimed to our church: "It was a wonderful opportunity to share the Gospel." But my wife and I were glad we didn't bring anybody else with us, because there wouldn't have been much to share except how disappointed and embarrassed we were. When he led the congregation in prayer, he said: "We are people of the Word. We stand in your Word.... " If that's true, then why not skip *The Chosen* and tell somebody the good news instead?

[Table of Contents](#)

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