

Of Backstories and Epiphanies: A Formalist's Analysis of Dallas Jenkins' YouTube Series *The Chosen*

By Richard Logsdon

I. A cultural sensation?

Since its release on March 16th of 2021, the made-for-You tube series *The Chosen*, the first ever-multi-season show about Jesus, has enjoyed an unexpected popularity and has received numerous favorable reviews. For instance, film critic Meghan Basham of *World* has observed, "*The Chosen* is one of the most engaging Bible-inspired productions I've seen. Surprisingly funny and relatable, we continue watching episode after episode not because we feel obligated to support it as dutiful Christians, but because it's compelling." Adds Jasmine Blue of *TV Fanatic*, "The Chosen is a must-see even if you're not into Christian or historical programming. It's an extraordinarily created piece and labor of love in motion." Indeed, as plot and subplots merge as one unified whole, it is difficult not to see *The Chosen* as a work of art (Landry) that lends itself to a formalist analysis (1).

Attesting to this series' popularity, *The Chosen* has been downloaded more than 200,000,000 times in countries around the world ("Christmas with The Chosen."). Additionally, independently produced and financed mostly by contributions from its millions of viewers, the series is free and has been funded through a "Pay-It-Forward System." Commenting on the

success of this system, film critic Christian Toto has pointed out that the “massive crowdfunding campaign... earned a whopping \$13 million, far more than that any comparable effort.”

In addition to the “Pay-It-Forward-System,” other factors have contributed to this series’ popularity. One factor is the timing of the series’ release. On January 19th of 2020, the first case of Covid in the United States struck a man who had just returned to his home in Snohomish County Washington from Wuhan, China, where the first case of Covid was recorded on December 31st. 2019 (“First Confirmed Case”). The proximity of these two dates contributed not only to the panic that followed the early spread of the virus but to the despair that has been created by this seemingly unending Covid 19 crisis (Fottrell; Introcaso). Interestingly, however, this panic and despair have been countered by the hope and reassurance generated in many by a You-Tube series that tells the story of a savior Who was sent into the world to save it from a seemingly all-consuming darkness for which the pandemic certainly has become a metaphor (See John 1: 1-4). Other factors contributing the success of *The Chosen* series include the unique characterization of Jesus; the addition of backstories that give depth and dimension to some of Jesus’ followers; and finally, supportive of this last point, a seemingly randomly organized but nevertheless unified plot, one consisting of engaging subplots, most containing and supporting epiphanies—or sudden bursts of revelations—revealing what is surely the series’ theme and “informing principle,” that Jesus as the Son of God and the Son of Man is both God and man, and, as such, is surely capable of delivering the world from an ongoing pandemic and a current crisis that may lead to a world war.

Indeed, in contrast to previous cinematic depictions of Christ, the Jesus of *The Chosen* series is very laid back, totally unassuming, and, at times, so blends in with the group that He has

chosen to be with that He is not always immediately recognized. Too, because He is both God and Man, He quickly connect with those he meets on a spiritual and emotional level. Indeed, at first, He seems like a common man, just one of the gang, as He continues to practice his carpentry skills and as He teaches some of these skills to a group of children. At one point in the series, He even demonstrates that he knows how to fix the chassis of an acquaintance's broken-down wagon. Moreover, this Jesus has a sense of humor—He is witty and ironic at times—and is not above joking with those who have elected to follow him.

Another one of this Jesus' most appealing attributes, particularly in our current culture (in which most every action, every sport, every movie and TV show seems to have been politicized) is that He remains beyond the very divisive political conflicts that Israel 2000 years ago experienced and, accordingly, does not seem representative of either pole of the contemporary political groups, liberal or conservative, Democrat or Republican, that have contributed the current social and political unrest that our country has recently experienced. For example, in season two, he refuses to side with future-disciple Simon the Zealot, later a disciple. He even convinces Simon, assigned that evening to assassinate a high Roman official scheduled to visit Capernaum, to give up a view predicated on the belief that Israel must do whatever it takes to resist and overcome the Roman occupation of the country. In fact, in a private meeting with this Simon, Jesus asks to see the zealot's knife, one to be used in the upcoming assassination attempt. Given the weapon, Jesus tosses the knife into a body of water with the comment, "You won't be needing this." In short, the Jesus of *The Chosen* likely has some appeal to those many Americans who resent living in a culture that seems to demand a choosing of political sides.

An equally significant factor contributing to the popularity of *The Chosen* is the incorporation of backstories. These backstories, while fictional, add considerable depth to Biblical characters about whom little is known apart from scripture's treatment of them and whose development in the Bible may seem flat and uninteresting. Again, intended as parts of a work of art inspired by biblical narrative and not as historical fact, these backstories carry with them the hope of possible redemption from a plague-like virus. The hope is largely generated by backstory narratives that reveal Christ's power and seemingly unlimited compassion through those who were closest to Him and, most significantly, through a series of divine revelations or epiphanies (1), most initiating spiritual transformations in the characters who experience them.

(2)

In the backstories from *The Chosen*, followers of Jesus whose life-changing epiphanies add most significantly to a composite picture of Jesus include Matthew, Simon Peter, and Mary Magdalene. Each character is originally a social outcast and unfit to be counted as a disciple of one who claimed to be the long-awaited Messiah. For example, in the Gospels, the tax-collector Matthew, a social pariah and parasite, is not developed in the depth that would make a life-changing epiphany at all plausible to the contemporary viewer. Consider the following biblical passage:

As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.

While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples (Matthew 9:9-10)

This shallow character development, somewhat typical of Biblical narratives, has provided the script writers of *The Chosen* with an opportunity not to add new scriptures to the Bible but to imaginatively recreate one of Jesus' disciples without noticeably departing from the scriptural fact that, as a tax collector, Matthew worked for the Roman government to collect money from his own Jewish people. Likely reviled for doing so, the historical Matthew was almost undoubtedly forced to seek social acceptance among "sinners"—probably social outcasts who occupied the bottom rung of society: prostitutes, thieves, smugglers, street fighters, tax-evaders, murderers, and those who suffered from physical disabilities often attributed to the demonic.

While giving Matthew considerable depth, the script writers have added a new dimension to this disciple: in *The Chosen*, Matthew is a young man with Asperger's. Because of this affliction, Matthew is noticeably unable to pick up on obvious social cues in the company of others (specifically his bullying Roman handler Gaius and the always sarcastic but somewhat cowardly Roman Praetor Quintus) and finds himself consistently caught between the extremes of anger and sorrow, apparently typical of one who suffers and so recognizes the social alienation that seems to accompany this affliction (Patel). Indeed, in his backstory, it takes a miracle for Matthew to break out of his isolation. And the miracle does come when Matthew experiences an unspoken epiphany when he watches, incredulously, as the roof of Peter's house is broken open to allow a paralytic to be lowered to Jesus. Before healing the paralytic—the story is recorded in the Bible—Jesus addresses the scribes and Pharisees witnessing the event and plotting to discredit most everything that Jesus says.

³ Some men came, bringing to him a paralyzed man.... ⁴ Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on. ⁵ When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”

⁶ Now some teachers of the law were thinking to themselves, ⁷ “Why does this fellow talk like that? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?”

⁸ Immediately Jesus knew... what they were thinking..., and he said to them, “Why are you thinking these things? ⁹ Which is easier: to say to this paralyzed man, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, take your mat and walk’? ¹⁰ But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.” So, he said to the man, ¹¹ “I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.” ¹² He got up, took up his mat and walked out in full view of them all. (Mark 2: 4-11)

Unlike the scribes and Pharisees watching the miracle, Matthew certainly seems to realize that, with this verbal exchange, Jesus is revealing that He is the Son of God and God the Son (fully God fully man) omniscient and merciful and given authority on earth to forgive sins. Indeed, what draws Matthew to Jesus is the fact that he also witnesses and inwardly responds to Jesus’ unlimited compassion for those who suffer incurable afflictions (and who suffer social rejection because of it) and those outcasts who, again like Matthew, find themselves among society’s outcasts. In fact, adding this affliction to Matthew’s character has proved to be an insightful insertion. According to Andrew Abernathy, a writer who has long dealt with Asperger’s, “Seeing an autistic Matthew in *The Chosen* was a needed personal reminder of Christ’s heart to call

those with different abilities to bless others.” As characterized in *The Chosen*, Matthew becomes representative of an entire contemporary sub-culture of autistic people who have begun to receive much attention particularly through such movies as *Rain Man*, TV series like *The Big Bang Theory* (Sinclair) and several nationally as well as personally funded groups the intention of which has been to aid those suffering this affliction.

Also contributing to a “composite picture” of Jesus is the backstory-narrative focusing upon Simon Peter who, in the first two series of *The Chosen*, can hardly be regarded as a saint but who nevertheless later becomes one of the leaders of the early Christian church after Jesus’ resurrection (Hamilton). In fact, a backstory in the first two seasons of *The Chosen* and before Jesus’ crucifixion, Simon Peter frequents taverns to drink in the company of friends and acquaintances. Again, when the viewer first meets them, Simon Peter and his brother Andrew are making money on the side by participating in, fixing, and betting on bare-knuckled fights presumably with their own Jewish brethren. In one scene, after placing a bet on himself, Simon Peter allows himself to get knocked down by his wife Eden’s brother—only to get up, knock the brother silly, and win the bet. Significantly, characterized in a way clearly intended to broaden the series’ appeal, Peter and Andrew of *The Chosen* indulge in a brutal, money-making sport that finds in our own culture a parallel to the addictively popular sports of boxing and cage-fighting. Further, in the early episodes of *The Chosen*, this Peter is not entirely honest or reliable. Later, Simon Peter’s potentially duplicitous side emerges as he navigates a boatload of Roman soldiers to a spot on the Sea of Galilee where other Jewish fisherman supposedly fish and break the law by fishing on and therefore violating the Sabbath. Of course, he finally

decides not to betray the other fishermen. (Later, his duplicitous nature emerges as he becomes the first of the disciples to betray Jesus [Hamilton]).

Like Matthew, the Simon Peter of *The Chosen* experiences a life-changing epiphany and, consequently, accepts the invitation to follow Jesus. The key event is one of the most miraculous of the series, one in which special effects are used to stunning effect. In this scene, termed “The Miracle of the Fish” (Jenkins), Matthew and Andrew pull in two boat loads of fish but only after Jesus advises the brothers to throw their lines into the water on the other side of their boat.

5 **1** One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret,^[a] the people were crowding around him and listening to the word of God. **2** He saw at the water’s edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. **3** He got into [the boat] belonging to Simon and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.**4** When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.”**5** Simon answered, “Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.”**6** When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break.... **7** When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus’ knees and said, “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!”**9** Then Jesus said to Simon, “Don’t be afraid; from now on you will fish for people.” (Matthews 7: 1-9).

The moment of epiphany, or awakening, in both scripture and video, comes when Peter falls at Jesus’ knees and says, “Go away from me, Lord.; I am a sinful man.” First, Simon Peter’s

request seems to signal that he recognizes that Jesus is God and man. Too, it's a recognition certainly tempered by Peter's sudden awareness that his sin has separated him from God, that anyone who sees the face of God will not be allowed to live (Exodus 33:20), and that he needs redemption in the form of forgiveness for his sins. Too, his reaction raises the possibility that, for a split second, Peter may have caught a glimpse of the glorified Christ in all the majesty that so terrified the demon possessed when Jesus confronted them (3)

A third character to experience a life-changing epiphany is Mary Magdalene. While according to the Book of Luke Jesus cast seven demons out of Mary (Luke 8: 21), scholars have found no proof apart from this one reference that Mary Magdalene suffered from demonic possession or oppression. Indeed, for the past 2000 years, Mary Magdalene has been repeatedly recreated according to prevailing but always changing cultural norms. Carroll observes, "[I]n one age after another, her image was reinvented, from prostitute to Sibyll to mystic to celibate nun to passive helpmate to the feminist icon to the matriarch of divinity's secret dynasty." Add to this the fact that "the portrayal of Mary Magdalene as a prostitute began in 591 when Pope Gregory conflated Mary Magdalene, who was introduced in Luke 8:2 with Mary of Bethany (Luke 10:39) and the unnamed 'sinful woman' who anointed Jesus's feet in Luke 7:36-50. Gregory's Easter sermon resulted in a widespread belief that Mary Magdalene was either a repentant prostitute or a promiscuous woman," not both (Wikipedia).

According to the New Testament, Mary Magdalene was one of a group of women who followed Jesus during His three-year ministry, provided for his monetary needs, and apparently from a distance, watched and wept at Jesus' crucifixion (Mark 15:40). However, beyond this, accounts of what Mary saw and did at Jesus' tomb may seem contradictory, even muddled.

According to the Book of Mark, just after the sun had risen on the third day, she and Mary, the mother of James, and Salome brought spices to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus (16: 1-3). “They were saying to one another, ‘Who will roll away the stone for us...?’ Looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away.... [Entering the tomb] they saw a young man sitting at the right, wearing a white robe” (Mark 16:5). The young man, an angel I presume, told them that Jesus was risen and were instructed to tell his disciples and Peter to go to Galilee to meet Jesus. In another account, Mary seems to have encountered two angels, who told her the same thing (Luke24:1-5). Curiously, one account makes the point that the disciples did not believe her when she reported that Jesus’ body could not be found at the tomb. Yet another account reports that at least two of them—specifically, Simon Peter and John—not only believed her but raced each other to the empty tomb to find out if what Mary told them was true. Additionally, John reports that, after leaving the tomb, Mary was the first of Jesus’ followers to see the risen Christ (John 20:14). Curiously, John’s gospel is the only one to record this event.

Contributing to our own culture’s confused view of Mary Magdalene are several books and movies that provide a misleading depiction of both Jesus and Mary: *The Last Temptation of Christ*, in which Jesus takes Mary as his wife; *The Davinci Code*, in which Holy Grail expert Sir Leigh Teabing claims to have discovered that the Grail is in reality Mary Magdalene, who was not a prostitute but the wife of Jesus; and *Mary Magdalene*, in which Mary Magdalene, once a common prostitute, is finally accepted as a follower of St. Peter. Yet, this confusion over Mary Magdalene and what she did and saw before and after Jesus’ Resurrection has provided the script writers of *The Chosen* an opportunity to, once again, redefine Mary Magdalene whose

current characterization in *The Chosen* has led some within the church to accuse writer/director Dallas Jenkins of heresy and blasphemy.

This confusion over what happened at the tomb and what she said and did has provided an opening for the scriptwriters of *The Chosen* to reinvent parts of the story of Mary Magdalane. Accordingly, the first episode of the first season begins with a backstory that is clearly non-biblical. Presumably on the night of Christ's birth and after experiencing a possibly demonically induced nightmare, the four-or-five-year-old Mary tells her father that she cannot see the star probably intended to signal the birth of the Messiah. Seeking protection from her night terrors, she takes refuge in the arms of her father, who recites for her a passage attributed in the Bible to the coming Messiah and Savior:

But now thus says the LORD,
 he who created you, O Jacob,
 he who formed you, O Israel:
 "Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
 I have called you by name, you are mine. (*Isaiah* 43:1-3)

Almost thirty years later, again according to her backstory, Mary has become a "demon-oppressed" prostitute who lives in the "red district" of Capernaum and who, recognizing her capacity for evil, has renamed herself Lillith, according to ancient Jewish text the second wife of Adam and the primordial she-demon ("Lillith"). Indeed, when we see her again as a prostitute in the back streets of Capernaum, Mary's demonic side has emerged: she has just knifed one of her customers, who escapes her dark lodging and, to anyone who will listen, proclaims the woman mad. Fearful that the demon(s) oppressing her is (are) driving her towards insanity and

even greater darkness she considers ending her life by jumping into the sea. In response to the flight of a crow (an occult symbol?) she returns to Capernaum and goes to a bar where the bartender gives her a cordial to help her cope with her spiritual/ emotional torment. Just as Mary grabs the drink, Jesus enters the tavern as a stranger and prevents her from taking the drink while commenting, "This is not for you." Seemingly incensed, drink in hand, Mary rushes from the bar. Jesus follows and calls May by her real name, Mary of Magdala, one with which the people living in Capernaum are not acquainted. Mary stops dead in her tracks as she hears Jesus recite for her the same lines that her father spoke to calm her down on the nights that she had bad dreams:

But now thus says the LORD,

he who created you, O Jacob,

he who formed you, O Israel:

"Fear not, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine.

Intuitively, she realizes that God is speaking to her and turns to face Jesus. In possibly the most powerful scene of season one, Jesus takes Mary's head in his hands, freeing her of her demons and initiating the transformation of her character. From this point on in the series, Mary becomes a new person, regenerated by her contact with Jesus. Later she meets the Jewish teacher and prominent member of the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus, who in an earlier scene tries unsuccessfully to rid Mary of the demon (s) oppressing/possessing her. When he asks her what has happened to her, she kindly replies that for all she knows, "I was one way, and now I am completely different." She is now no longer Lillith.

In addition to the already mentioned factors contributing to this series' popularity, one other element—one that approaches the ineffable and may be a response to the epiphanies in *The Chosen*—may have contributed to the success of this series. Dallas Jenkins labels this element/effect “transcendent.” That is, the ultimate impact of this series is “beyond or above the range of normal or merely physical” or “surpassing the merely ordinary” (*Oxford Languages*). Another writer who explains the appeal of this series in similar terms is Father Hugh Barbour, a Catholic priest from England. In his essay, Father Barbour touches upon the something he refers to as “efficacious grace” (or “irresistible grace”) according to which the entire series, backstories included and moving from epiphany to epiphany, takes on the dimension of a gift of grace, one given freely by God to a world reeling from a seemingly endless pandemic. Further, the notion of “efficacious grace” refers to the belief, held by some denominations associated with the Christian church, that God chooses who is going to be reshaped by His irresistible grace, a process that—again according to Barbour—brings delight to God and, theoretically, delight to the viewer, the recipient of God's grace. Sharing Barbour's enthusiasm for this powerful series is author and former-Anglican-clerk-turned Catholic theologian Andrew Petripin, whose essay “‘The Chosen’: Getting Jesus the God-Man Right” is available on a blog titled *Word of Fire*. Petripin comments,

And while casual viewers should be cautioned not to think that Christians can just make up Bible stories and peddle them as truth, *The Chosen* knows how to create peripheral, hypothetical situations that intensify rather than obscure what the Scripture already says.

In other words, backstories written by the scriptwriters for *The Chosen* as well as the epiphanies woven into these stories do not represent attempts to add to the already established scriptures, though some have seen them as such. From Petiprin's perspective—as well as Barbour's and Jenkins'—the backstories breathe new life into already existing scripture and offer old insights in new ways. For instance, in another backstory, Jesus' willingness to forgive Mary Magdalene for abandoning her fellow Christians (i.e. the church) and returning to the darkened, addictive life that she led as a prostitute in Capernaum (S2; E 5) seems to be a demonstration of the promise given in 1 John, that God, "Who is faithful and just, will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." This very controversial backstory is clearly intended to deepen the viewers' understanding of a merciful and compassionate Jesus; too, this backstory anecdote, in which Jesus forgives Mary for returning to her dark origins, likely appeals to many viewers on a powerful emotional level because it provides assurance to some, particularly those who have left the church, that their struggle with their own conflicted natures does not invalidate their salvation or their standing with God (See *Rotten Tomatoes*).

Too, this and other backstories included in *The Chosen* seem intended to broaden this series' appeal by making some of Jesus' followers representative of various groups that have long been social outcasts: those suffering from unusual afflictions, like Matthew; those, like Simon Peter and his brother Andrew, who at one point in their lives were drawn to the seedier side of life; and those women, like Mary Magdalene, who were and have been abused by the existing culture's patriarchy, who have ruined themselves through addiction to drugs and alcohol, who suffer a mental illness (possibly verging on schizophrenia), who have consequently

been pushed into prostitution or sex trafficking to make a living and who, nonetheless, are somehow chosen by Christ for inclusion in His kingdom.

II. A possibly thought-provoking conclusion

Despite the series' popularity, particularly among churchgoers, a problem of possibly critical proportions, has emerged. Outraged by the so-called liberties Dallas Jenkins has taken with the standard Bible, several critics from within the church have labeled Dallas Jenkins "heretic," "blasphemer," "cult leader," and "false teacher," and have even gone so far as to accuse Jenkins of writing a script that represents an attempt to construct a theology the so-called truths of which are not in line with the standard Bible (Bonifield).

This is a rather serious matter, for what should most concern us here is the vitriol that has been directed toward Dallas Jenkins. Even though he uses backstories that are mostly fictional, Jenkins never questions or contradicts or omits from his script the Bible stories that many know quite well. In fact, the storm of theological fury that Jenkins' script has ignited may be (and probably is) reflective of deeper cultural issues that are gnawing away at Christian America's innards. One issue may be that, in our western culture, the world view that once permeated the church, the Judeo-Christian paradigm, has for more than a century and a half been withering under attack by those seeking to discredit Holy Scripture and deny that Jesus even existed. Indeed, it seems that what the hard-liners most fear is continuation of the compromises with the larger progressive culture that the Christian church has made in the 20th and 21st centuries and will probably continue to make.

1. “Formalist criticism is defined as an approach... which provides readers with a way to understand and enjoy a work for its own inherent value as a piece of literary art. Formalist critics spend a great deal of time analyzing irony, paradox, imagery, and metaphor. They are also interested in a work’s setting, characters, symbols, and point of view” (*The Mindsmith*). Formalist criticism is often predicated upon the assumptions that the selection and arrangement of parts—irony, imagery, metaphor and the like—in most every literary work has been determined and shaped by a unifying, “constructive” principle (Crane, 82).
2. Epiphany is a Christian holiday primarily commemorating the [Magi’s](#) visit to the baby [Jesus](#) and the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. Eastern traditions, which we usually call the holiday Theophany, focus on Jesus’ baptism, seen as the manifestation of Christ as both fully human and fully divine. Western traditions focus on the Magi’s visit, seen as the first manifestation of Christ as savior of Gentiles as well as Jews. Epiphany is among the church’s oldest and most important feasts. In this series, an epiphany is a moment of awakening marked by the sudden realization that Jesus is, at once, both man and God (Mena).
3. In fact, the use of “backstories” to give more substance to Biblical characters, including Jesus, is not new. According to Scottish biblical scholar, F. F. Bruce, comments, “Some writers [have made up] for the lack of detailed information about the first thirty years of the life of Jesus by imaginative reconstruction. This kind of reconstruction has a very ancient lineage; the earliest of it are the apocryphal gospels” (34).
4. According to late 17th century English preacher John Owen, “In fact the light of faith is given to us chiefly to enable us to behold the glory of God in Christ (2 Cor. 4:6). If we do

not have this light which is given to believers by the power of God, we must be strangers to the whole mystery of the Gospel" (22). Also, see Luke 4: 31-35; 8: 26-39.

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