
REIMAGINING BIBLICAL NARRATIVES: A READING OF SELECTED STORIES FROM THE BIBLE AND EPISODES FROM *THE CHOSEN*

DR. NITHYA MARIAM JOHN

Assistant Professor & Research Guide,
P G Department of English & Research Centre,
Bishop Chulaparambil Memorial College, Kottayam, Kerala

Abstract: The Bible is a repertoire of stories and songs with ample scope for adaptation. The TV series titled *The Chosen*, with many of its episodes available on *The Chosen App* and on Netflix, is a portrait of Jesus' life, imagined and narrated in such a way that the viewers encounter a laughing, singing, and dancing Jesus who is more human than he is, as depicted in the Bible. On screen, many characters including Mary, mother of Jesus, Lazarus, Zacchaeus, and disciples of Jesus exhibit a versatile life, as against the limited readings available in writings. The series also opens the spectator's eyes to the socio-political context of his times in a more elaborate, visual narrative context. *The Chosen* has over 200 million viewers and enjoys success in theatres after its season 5 release. The paper tries to outline select examples from selected episodes of *The Chosen* and stories from the Bible to show how the tales narrated and re-narrated on screen reshape biblical imagination today.

Keywords: Bible, *The Chosen*, digital Bible, TV series, Jesus narratives

The life of Jesus which was adapted to movies including titles like *Jesus*, *Life of Jesus*, *The Last Temptation*, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, *The King of Kings*, *The Robe*, and *The Story of Jesus* had drawn inspiration from the four gospels in the Bible. *The Passion of Christ* grossed \$600 million worldwide. The story of this young man from Nazareth has been told and retold over the years. In the digital era, there is a wider possibility for an increase in the number of viewers, with a rise in the number of OTT platforms and digital resources. *The Chosen* series, now available on Netflix and on *The Chosen App*, directed by Dallas Jenkins, holds a pinch of difference when it comes to portraying Jesus' life. Philip K. Gladden in "Between Text and Sermon: Portrayals of Christ in Film" says that each Jesus-movie portrays a different "Christ-figure" (254). *The Chosen* marks its difference by presenting a more humane Jesus, the plot so far spanning across five episodes and many series, and offering ample space for representation of major and minor characters associated with Jesus in the gospel narratives. Maybe that was why when the series' fifth episode *The Last Supper* arrived on 28 March 2025, it crossed \$40 million at the U.S. box office, as recorded by Samantha Masunga in her article "This TV Series about Jesus Is Making Millions." *The Chosen* is one of the most viewed, crowdfunded entertainment programmes with its makers saying that during its first four

episodes, almost \$100 million in production expenses was raised by viewer support alone. Today it is being streamed on an app, and also selected episodes are on OTT platforms. Dallas Jenkins, in an interview with Emma Jones at the BBC, says, “We like to say that we’re taking Jesus down from statues and stained-glass windows.” This paper tries to look at how *The Chosen* has won its popularity, and how on a digital platform including *The Chosen* App, it has made a huge connection with the audience, believers and non-believers.

The presence of the Bible in contemporary fiction and media proves that the Bible relates to the present context, and speaks to the reader in his or her time and place. It is a text which has manifold possibilities for interpretations. Anthony C. Thiselton, in *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, says, “... texts may enlarge the horizons of readers. When this occurs horizons move and become new horizons ... reading biblical texts can also become eventful as transforming biblical reading” (1). He implies that both the text and the reader participate with each other in the reading, and thereby widen the horizons of both. It shows that the Bible can be interpreted through the experiences of the readers. Letty M. Russell, in “Authority and the Challenge of Feminist Interpretation,” calls for “authority as partnership” rather than “authority as domination” (144). Consideration of the Bible as a religious text should not hinder the participation of different voices and interpretations. No interpretation must dominate over the rest, and a participation of different readings is necessary. The barriers between “biblical” or “theological” and “other readings” must be erased so that differences in readings help humanity as a whole. As Russell argues, “When difference is valued and respected, those who have found themselves marginal to church or society begin to discover their own worth as human beings” (144). Interpretations of the divine and the human must converse with the readers who belong to all walks of life.

Ronald Rolheiser, in “Why We Feel Better about Jesus in *The Chosen* Than Anywhere Else,” says that though Jesus is seen in other movies, it is usually an image that is “generally lacking in human warmth, is distant, stern, other-worldly, over-pious ... and is also humourless.” Dallas Jenkins, in an interview with Glynda Alves of *The Economic Times*, said that he was not surprised that the Indian audience has received *The Chosen* well. He opined, “I think the Indian audience is responding to the passion and humanity of the story. Typically, Jesus projects are emotionally distant and formal, which is not very much Indian audience.” *The Chosen* has brought Jesus closer to the viewers, so much so that on Instagram you find many reels where people resonate with the moods and emotions of Jesus as played by the actor Jonathan Roumie. Jenkins continues in his interview with Alves that he has had many responses from non-Christians. He says, “And what we keep hearing over and over is, ‘I don’t go to church ... But this is a great story, and I love seeing a Jesus that laughs with his friends at weddings and dances and tells jokes and has a lot of human experiences that we do.’”

The series follows the story in the gospel but also adds imagination to the brief narratives in the Bible. The result is that many flat characters in the New Testament are developed into round ones on screen. The characters who remain nameless in the gospels receive names in *The Chosen*, which helps to see them as round and developed personalities. Such imaginative renderings also help us to devote more attention to the other characters, and also to the political and social settings of Jesus' times. For instance, the followers of Jesus get a wider-angle representation in *The Chosen*. Each episode, sometimes more than one, narrates how the man or the woman encounters Jesus and decides to be part of the Jesus movement.

Digitizing the story of Jesus in five episodes has a tremendous impact on the way in which common people understand stories and their contexts. For instance, an entire episode (Season 1, Episode 5) is devoted to the wedding at Cana, where Jesus performs his first miracle by turning water into wine. The episode offers a peep into the traditions and customs of Jewish weddings—the banquet, seating arrangement of the guests, a *chuppa* (a traditional Jewish wedding canopy), the importance of feasting and dancing during the event, the shame which a family would face if the guests are not provided with enough food and drink. It is also about how the act of turning water into wine was not only a miracle, as is often interpreted in Christian literature and traditional Jesus-movies, but also an act of affirmation by Jesus to dedicate his work and life for the poor and the downtrodden. It is the first instance in the series where you see Jesus dancing and laughing with his friends.

Though there are mentions of a few non-Jewish characters in the Bible, seldom have we visualised them on a larger scale as in the series. The story of the healing of a paralysed man highlights the multicultural spaces during Jesus' times under the Roman government. In Season 1, Episode 6, we have the story of a paralysed man who is carried by his friends to Jesus at Capernaum. The same story can be read in the Bible. However, Dallas Jenkins introduces a woman in the story—a beautiful Ethiopian woman wearing dazzling, traditional jewellery. She is named Tamar and is one of the friends of this paralysed man, Ethan. Later she becomes one of Jesus' followers. We are also introduced to the different houses and their interiors during Jesus' times—the rich ones like Matthew's and the average ones like Jesus and his mother's (where Jesus shares his room with the sheep), Zebedee's, and Peter's. Thus, digitizing the story from the Bible into episodes is also an act of welcoming imagination to polish the often overlooked “human” in the divine hermeneutics of Jesus' life.

The stories of the disciples are also portrayed in a different light in *The Chosen*. The story of Matthew is one of a kind. In the Bible, Matthew is the disciple of Jesus, a tax collector. Matthew 9:9, Mark 2:14, and Luke 5:27 narrate the story parallelly in a sentence: “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.” In *The Chosen*

there is a more detailed description of this disciple and his profession, spanning across a few episodes. We see Matthew at a tax booth. A Roman soldier, Gaius, is assigned by the Roman government the duty to protect Matthew because he is shunned by the Jews. Matthew is a Jew who works for the Roman government. He is despised by his own family, and he has no friends. Once, when he was walking by the Jewish market, someone threw rotten fruit at him. He is spat upon by a taxpayer. His family calls his income “blood money,” and his father refuses to talk to him (Season 1, Episode 7). But he keeps repeating that he is good at math, and that was why he was working for Rome. He is the least concerned about the heavy taxes put upon the common people by the colonial power. His aim is to work, tally the accounts at the end of the day, and make money for himself. *The Chosen* does justice to the story of the tax collector as he slowly realises how blind he was. Another tax collector whom we find in the gospel is Zacchaeus. But never would we imagine the liminal spaces they were pushed into while collecting taxes, and therefore abhorred by their own people.

What makes the character of Matthew more interesting to a contemporary audience is that Dallas Jenkins has portrayed him as autistic. Paras Patel, an Indian American actor, plays Matthew’s role in the series. In an interview with Francesca Pollio Fenton, he reveals that he regularly receives messages from fans thanking him for playing the role, because they could connect either with themselves or with someone whom they knew who had an autistic condition. He says,

It means a lot, because a lot of times when you are working in this industry, you are kind of doing job to job. So being an ambassador for the autistic community has been so special for me because I never thought that I’d be the face of it through our show, and it is something that I am very passionate about.

The scenes that show Matthew interacting with Jesus, Mary, Peter (who takes a long time to forgive him for his previous professional occupation), and then his own family touch our hearts. Rhonda Burnette-Blesch in “The Bible, Disability and *The Chosen*” says,

Other characters consider Matthew an oddity and sometimes treat him as an object of ridicule. The Roman magistrate considers him a delightful rube but is eager to capitalize on his talents. The animosity sometimes directed toward him by the other disciples seems more attributable to his former job than his neurodivergence. Jesus defends his choice of Matthew as a disciple, insisting that each of his followers brings something unique and important to their ministry. The possibility that Jesus might cure Matthew is never raised (251).

This underlines that Jenkins emphasises the spirit of inclusivity. Matthew is accepted as he is by the disciples in *The Chosen*. The simplicity and innocence that lie behind the professional indecency he had followed ambitiously to reach the upper strata of society,

and then giving it up after he understands the cruel plight of his own people, connect with the viewers. The feedback received shows that they have readily accepted his condition and the personality he transforms himself into.

Women play great roles in *The Chosen*. The narratives about Jesus in the gospels do not offer many references to the women who followed him. The gospels do imply their presence in very few passages, including Luke 8.1–3 and Matthew 27.55–57, where it is mentioned that women followed him till the cross. Mother Mary, Mary Magdalene, the mother of the sons of Zebedee, Martha and Mary (sisters of Lazarus), Joanna, Suzanna, Peter's wife, and the bleeding woman are a few of them. In *The Chosen* each woman is given space and dialogue. Though women are mentioned in Jesus' narratives, very few speak in the Bible. But in *The Chosen*, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Jesus, Joanna, the bleeding woman, Peter's wife, and every woman who encounters Jesus speaks. Female dialogues stand out in contrast with the very few female conversations in the Bible. The series also has spaces for conversation between women, which highlights a spirit of sisterhood and bonding. One of the important insights brought in by the series (Season 3, Episode 3) is the portrayal of women followers of Jesus engaging in the olive oil business.

Mother Mary worries about her son, yet is a very strong woman who becomes a motherly figure for the rest of the young women in the group. Mary Magdalene's transformation is given a longer narration in *The Chosen*. Imagination meets history in Season 1, Episode 1, when Mary is portrayed as an orphan at a young age and grows up alone. She is abused by a Roman soldier, which derails her completely. Jesus meets her at a bar, where people, mostly men, drink wine and make merry. Later, she becomes one of his most beloved followers, strengthening and supporting the others. That Jesus' disciple Peter was married is mentioned in Matthew 8.14–15 and Luke 4.38–39. We get a glimpse into a Jewish house and family through the portrait of Peter and his wife in *The Chosen*. Again, Dallas Jenkins uses an imaginary shift to the biblical narrative. The Bible talks about how Peter walked on the waters to Jesus, almost drowned midway, and then was saved by Jesus. In Season 3, Episode 8 of *The Chosen* we find an appended story to it. Peter was away ministering with Jesus, and his wife had a miscarriage. She is alone and suffering, and Peter returns home not knowing the news. He finds his wife very distant, and it hurts him. Later, when he comes to know the truth, he grows frustrated. His wife, on the other hand, goes through the emotional and physical pain associated with the miscarriage all by herself. His act of walking on the waters was an act of challenging himself, as portrayed in the series. Jesus pulls him out of his despondency. Later, Peter and his wife reconcile.

The story of the bleeding woman is an act of resistance on the part of Jesus and the woman. In Season 3, Episode 5, we meet her as one who had been suffering from haemorrhage for twelve years. According to Jewish law (Leviticus 15), a menstruating woman defiles everything and everyone she touches. So for twelve years, this woman was

an outcast. Ritual purity is the most important concern in Jewish lore and law. Hanna Liss, in “Patterns of Intensification of the Laws on Ritual Purity in Medieval Jewish Ashkenaz,” says, “The concept of ritual purity is, in particular, linked to the notion of holiness, especially to the question of how the idea of the Holy faced with, or even surrounded by, the Common can be upheld” (269). *The Chosen* shows her as a representative of a common woman, an outcast, who secretly tries to earn a living by washing clothes for people. One day, a man finds a bloodstain on her clothes as she delivers his washed clothes. He shouts at her and verbally abuses her. The man is angry that since she had touched his clothes, he will have to purify himself according to Jewish customs. In such a context, the act of her touching Jesus’ robe was a courageous one. The episode shows how the crowd moves away, making space for Jesus, whom many believed was a Jewish rabbi, to punish her. But in contrast, he appreciates her faith and gives a clear message that no being is impure. This contradicted the patriarchal Jewish teaching of the rabbis of that time.

One element that distinguishes *The Chosen* from other screen adaptations of the life of Jesus is its sustained use of humour. Humour becomes a primary narrative force, shaping not only Jesus but nearly all the disciples and even Mary, who frequently share lighter, playful moments. These instances humanise the characters, easing them down from the religious and saintly aura that typically accompanies their representation in Christian literature. In *The Chosen*, Jesus is not portrayed merely as a solemn holy figure who preaches, heals, and teaches; rather, he is rendered as a young man with purpose, warmth, and a lively sense of humour.

Several scenes exemplify this approach. One of the most memorable is Jesus and his disciples joyfully jumping and playing in the sea. Season 3, Episode 5, which centres on questions of ritual “cleanliness” in Jewish law, foregrounds humour while simultaneously interrogating stringent customs. After the stories spread about Jesus healing the bleeding woman and raising a dead girl, he is admonished by the Pharisees for having touched a corpse. According to Jewish tradition, such contact renders one unclean until sunset, after which purification rituals must be performed. Instead of submitting to these formalities, Jesus and his disciples plunge into the sea, splashing and laughing together. When asked whether the priest had sent him for purification, Jesus answers with amusement, “So thinks he,” prompting Peter to add, “The joke’s on him,” before he too rushes into the water.

Another engaging instance is Jesus’ reunion with Lazarus, his childhood friend. Lazarus teases him into attempting their old pastime—playing trigon. Jesus never manages to win, despite receiving numerous instructions from his friends. Watching Jesus play, lose, and still delight in the gentle teasing of those around him offers a refreshing, endearing portrayal rarely seen in earlier biblical adaptations. Similarly, at the wedding at Cana (Season 1, Episode 4), Andrew’s awkward dancing becomes the subject of affectionate

mockery. When Simon Peter asks Jesus if he can “fix” Andrew’s poor dancing skills, Jesus quips, “Some things even I cannot do.”

The dinner at Matthew’s house (Season 1, Episode 8) adds yet another layer of humour. Rivka, one of Jesus’ followers—later accused by a Pharisee of being a prostitute—jokes that she saw a Pharisee run past so quickly that she “thought for certain he would trip and fall on his robes,” drawing laughter from everyone present (9:17). Barnaby, another follower, teasingly remarks that Matthew looks quite handsome when not enclosed behind the iron bars of his tax booth, prompting yet another round of laughter (9:56).

The Chosen is not merely a religious drama intended to underline Christian doctrine. It is a television series that narrates the story of a young man who walked the earth centuries ago and touched people not only through miracles but through the generosity of his heart. In a digital age, the portrayal of a Jesus who laughs, dances, plays, and sings enables viewers to rediscover the human dimension often overshadowed in traditional hermeneutics. The series expands the lives of Jesus and the minor biblical characters, drawing them with greater depth and emotional range. Its episodic form allows history to blend with imagination, and the modern sensibility of storytelling to merge seamlessly with ancient tradition.

Works Cited

Alves, Glynda. “‘The Chosen’ Creator Dallas Jenkins Discusses ADHD, Faith and the Show’s Growing Popularity in India.” *The Economic Times*, 2 May 2025, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/the-chosen-creator-dallas-jenkins-discusses-adhd-faith-and-the-shows-growing-popularity-in-india/articleshow/120822661.cms?from=mdr>.

Burnette-Blesch, Rhonda. “The Bible, Disability and *The Chosen*.” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, vol. 78, no. 3, 2024, pp. 242–252. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00209643241239670>.

Fenton, Francesca Pollio. “‘The Chosen’ Actor Paras Patel Says Portraying Matthew ‘Has Given Me My Purpose’.” *Catholic News Agency*, 12 June 2024, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/257965/the-chosen-actor-paras-patel-says-portraying-matthew-has-given-me-my-purpose>.

Gladden, Philip K. “Between Text and Sermon: Portrayals of Christ in Film.” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, vol. 78, no. 3, 2024, pp. 253–255. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00209643241243275>.

Jones, Emma. “‘The Chosen’ — The Christian-Funded Hit About Jesus Taking the US by Storm.” *BBC*, 24 Jan. 2024,

<https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20240124-the-chosen-the-christian-funded-hit-about-jesus-taking-the-us-by-storm>.

Liss, Hanna. "Patterns of Intensification of the Laws on Ritual Purity in Medieval Jewish Ashkenaz." *Discourses of Purity in Transcultural Perspectives (300–1600)*, edited by Matthias Bley, Nikolas Jaspert, et al., Brill, 2015, pp. 269–282.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctv2gjx0j7.14>.

Masunga, Samantha. "This TV Series About Jesus Is Making Millions." *YourSun*, 3 Oct. 2025,

https://www.yoursun.com/charlotte/features/this-tv-series-about-jesus-is-making-millions-at-the-box-office/article_9953e234-8edd-59b2-8b50-791627d1edd5.html.

Rolheiser, Ronald. "Why We Feel Better About Jesus in *The Chosen* Than Anywhere Else." *Angelus News*, 30 Apr. 2025,

<https://angelusnews.com/voices/rolheiser-the-chosen/>.

Russell, Letty M. "Authority and the Challenge of Feminist Interpretation." *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, edited by Letty M. Russell, The Westminster Press, 1985, pp. 137–146.

Thiselton, Anthony C. *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading*. Zondervan Publishing House, 1992.