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The Evangelical Reception of Mary Magdalene in *The Chosen* Series, Seasons 1 and 2

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Abstract: *The Chosen* is a wide-reaching series born within American Evangelicalism in 2019, whose academic interest resides in its value as a cultural product that has been gaining influence after the release of its four seasons. This article discusses the reception of Mary Magdalene in two chapters (S1/E1 and S2/E5) on the basis of two key principles that characterise North American conservative Evangelicalism: biblical inerrancy and its “born-again” model of conversion. The last part presents the difficult compromise between these religious values and filmic fictionalism, which leads to maintaining the traditional image of the repentant prostitute, though with a few particularities: the disappearance of all features of sensuality, an ambiguous interpretation of demon possession that is linked to an episode of sexual abuse and the story of Mary Magdalene’s childhood.

Keywords: *The Chosen*; Bible and popular culture; American Evangelicalism; Mary Magdalene

1. Introduction

The American series *The Chosen* is a singular media phenomenon. Against all odds, the risky venture of filming a seven-season series on the life of Jesus has become a trend among conservative Evangelical Christians¹ in the US and Latin America.² Between 2017 and 2024, four seasons were released with increasing success,³ season five has just been produced and creator, director and co-writer Dallas Jenkins hopes to finish two more seasons shortly. *The Chosen* won several awards of Christian organisations: two GMA Dove awards (2022 and 2023), two K-Love fan awards (2023 and 2024) and one Epiphany Prize from Movieguide (2023).

While some journalists consider it to be sufficiently high-quality to be a series for all audiences (Gray 2020; O’Neal 2021; Graham 2022; TE Staff 2023), the series has less influence amongst the mainstream public. In fact, TV industry publications barely mention the series, except to note its successful crowdfunding campaign: the humble initial project was financed by the most potent crowdfunding campaign to date, raising more than 11 million dollars to finance its first season (Jurgensen 2021; Graham 2022).

Anyway, the discussion of *The Chosen* is not so much justified by its artistic quality or its impact on mainstream culture as by its importance as a socio-cultural symptom of American conservative Evangelicalism. As of April 2024, the underground product has 1.6 million followers on its Instagram account, not to mention its public profiles on YouTube, Facebook, X, TikTok and LinkedIn. According to its official channel data, it competed in audience shares with independent productions due to the worldwide distribution offered by Lionsgate: by January 2024, 200 million people had watched *The Chosen*, reaching 770 million viewings of the different episodes.⁴ The series is already translated into almost 50 languages by the non-profit foundation Come and See, and it is expected to be available in 50 more languages and to be subtitled in another 500 languages (Foust 2022).

Today, the most important distribution channel is still its own app and the official website. New episodes are usually released via streaming on YouTube and Facebook, and then uploaded to the app and website. The streaming is complemented by panel discussions under the heading “Deep Dive” and premium content is available on the



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website, where socio-cultural, biblical or theological aspects of the newly released episode are explored in more detail. The televised broadcast is accompanied by several theatrical releases by Fathom Events: two Christmas Specials, in 2021 (“Christmas with The Chosen: The Messengers”) and 2023 (“Christmas with The Chosen: Holy Night”), together with musical performances, as well as several episode previews—the first two episodes of the third season (2022), the last two episodes of the third season (2023) and the complete fourth season (2024).

In the following pages, we will examine the reception of Mary Magdalene in S1/E1 and S2/E5 after closely watching the episodes and analysing the academic literature, on the one hand, and reviewing a number of interviews with the director and co-writer of *The Chosen*, Dallas Jenkins, on the other.

Mary of Magdala is not only an almost ubiquitous character in the series⁵ but also inaugurates S1/E1, becoming part of the first core group of the chosen ones who join Jesus on the threshold of his public ministry. The choice of both episodes is motivated by the fact that Mary Magdalene is a well-developed round character only in S1/E1 (“I Have Called You by Name”) and S2/E5 (“Spirit”), and to a lesser extent in S1/E2 (“Shabbat”) and S2/E6 (“Unlawful”), although it is necessary to refer to these episodes in order to understand the resolution of the narrative plot. In the remaining episodes, her dramaturgical importance is lesser: she interacts with the male disciples as part of the family configured around Jesus and performs domestic tasks together with other women who form a growing circle of female disciples by S3/E1. Mary Magdalene mostly participates in the Jesus movement by organising communal meals (S1 and 2) and by teaching Ramah to read and write (S2).

In this sense, up to the broadcasting of S4, *The Chosen* does not alter the perception of Mary Magdalene as a disciple of Jesus. Although she is part of the group of the chosen ones who follow Jesus, her position is alongside other women and her tasks are traditionally feminine: caring in domestic tasks, on the one side, and discipling other women who become part of Jesus’ movement, on the other. In doing so, she is set in the conservative Evangelical perspective of a Nardine Productions film, *Magdalena Released from Shame* (2006). This film follows the docudrama format and includes scenes from the evangelistic film *Jesus* (1979), inspired by Luke’s Gospel and targeted at a female audience. Set in 40 AD, Mary Magdalene explains Jesus’ ministry to a woman who has not yet heard about the life, death and resurrection of the Son of God. Mary and other female disciples witness key moments in Jesus’ ministry, such as his address in the synagogue (Luke 4:14–22) or the episode of the woman surprised in adultery (John 8:1–11), but she does not show leadership to the male disciples, who are presented in *The Chosen* as protective brothers of Mary Magdalene.

Our aim is twofold: first, we will analyse how the evangelical religious imaginary determines the way of interpreting the Gospel stories and the manner of script building; in particular, we will show how the dogmatic principle of biblical inerrancy and the conception of conversion affect the way in which Mary Magdalene is presented. Secondly, we will argue why *The Chosen* is committed to the traditional portrayal of the repentant prostitute, despite the fact that this does not correspond to the Mary of the Gospels.

2. *The Chosen*, an Evangelical Faith-Based Series

The above data on the production, distribution and exhibition of *The Chosen* do not only point to the broad reception of the series among its implicit audience, but also point to some key features of the Evangelical religious imaginary⁶ that shape the reception of the multi-faceted figure of Mary Magdalene. As Kuhn states (Kuhn 1991, p. 204): “The institutional activities of film production, distribution and exhibition intersect at the point of the construction of meaning, which functions in a peculiar way in each particular text”.

The director of the series is Dallas Jenkins, an Evangelical filmmaker and son of Jerry B. Jenkins, author of the famous *Left Behind* novels,⁷ who declared in an interview (Alexander 2021):

“We like watching ‘The Chosen’ for the same reason that we like watching Robert Downey Jr. as Iron Man—the portrayal of these beloved characters resonates deeply and we want to come back and hang out with them again and again”.

Asked in March 2024 about the alleged influence of Mormon theology on the series, the director emphatically answered journalist Michael Foust that *The Chosen* is “Conservative Evangelical” (Foust 2024), a self-referential expression of American Evangelicalism—cf. footnote i; two of its key elements will be further developed in this article. Indeed, the series was born out of American Evangelicalism and is primarily targeted to American Christian families who are familiar with the Bible. Journalist Joseph Holmes wrote before the premiere of the second season (Holmes 2021): “. . . it is undeniably cool to spend time with a version of Jesus who feels like the Jesus my parents taught me about and I would actually want to hang out with”.

The explicit aim of *The Chosen* is to reinforce the assumed Evangelical faith of the viewers thanks to an extensive media deployment. Each episode is supplemented by devotional studies and children’s books written by Amanda Jenkins, wife of the director. From 2021, interactive Bible studies are available in a variety of formats published by the Christian non-profit organisation David C. Cook (RP Staff 2021). Interviewed about the launch of this latest project, Dallas Jenkins said (RP Staff 2021):

“The Chosen TV series isn’t the end game [. . .] Ultimately, it’s a tool to revive the viewer’s passion for Jesus, but discipleship is the end game, and it’s why we put so much time, effort and prayer into this study guide”.

In addition, we should also mention the works by Jerry B. Jenkins that novelise each season—*The Chosen: I Have Called You by Name* (2021), *The Chosen: Come and See* (2022), *The Chosen: And I Will Give You Rest* (2023) and *The Chosen: Upon This Rock* (2024), the graphic novels published by Corvus Comics and, finally, the customary merchandising of the TV hits, which includes mugs, T-shirts, sweatshirts and sales of the seasons’ broadcast in DVD or Blu-ray format.

In the following, we develop two concepts that characterise American conservative Evangelicalism and condition the reception of Mary Magdalene in *The Chosen*: biblical inerrancy, which puts artistic creativity at the service of the literal reading of the Gospels, and the way of seeing conversion as a radical rupture with the past that opens up a new identity.

2.1. Biblical Inerrancy

The first episode of the series (S1/E1) opens with the following pre-show disclaimer:

“*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 dialogues 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. . .”

This statement alerts the audience on a key issue to understanding the series: the building of the plot and the characters is shaped by Evangelical orthodoxy, which mandates a literal reading of the Gospels consistent with the biblical inerrancy that conservative American Evangelicalism proclaims (Bebbington 1989, p. 2; Balmer 2004, pp. 246, 351, 377; Silliman 2021, p. 637). The current doctrine of biblical inerrancy, as defined in mainstream American Evangelical Christianity, dates back to the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* (International Council on Biblical Inerrancy 1978): “Strictly speaking, [biblical inerrancy] applies only to the autographic text of Scripture” (*Chicago Statement*, Article X). In other words, it applies to the hypothetical “forever lost” original autographs and not to translations. However, The Chicago Statement says (*Chicago Statement*, Article X): “We deny that any essential element of the Christian faith is affected by the absence of the autographs. We further deny that this absence renders the assertion of Biblical inerrancy invalid or irrelevant”.

In short, the *Chicago Statement* affirms the plenary, verbal and inerrant inspiration of the Bible; in other words, the Scripture was fully and literally inspired—word by word—

by God, reducing the Christian doctrine of inspiration to a mechanical dictation theory of inspiration. As we read (*Chicago Statement*, Article VI): “We affirm that the whole of Scripture and all its parts, down to the very words of the original, were given by divine inspiration”. Thus, the Scripture contains no errors or mistakes of any kind in the original manuscripts (Geisler 1980; Sproul and Geisler 2021), as stated (*Chicago Statement*, Article XI–XII): “We affirm that Scripture, having been given by divine inspiration, is infallible, so that, far from misleading us, it is true and reliable in all the matters it addresses [. . .] We affirm that Scripture in its entirety is inerrant, being free from all falsehood, fraud, or deceit”.

Accordingly, Evangelicalism advocates a literal reading of the biblical text, including healing stories, miracles of various kinds, prophecies or Revelation (Cone 2008), without considering the various literary genres within the Bible, the oral and/or written sources that were used in the final redaction or the theological specificities of particular theological traditions.

2.1.1. A Religious Identity Permeated with Biblical Language

The familiarity of the audience with the Bible explains the very title of the series *The Chosen*, as it employs religious language taken from the Gospel of John to refer to Jesus’ disciples, “the chosen ones” (cf. John 15:16). The storytelling demands the complicity of the audience in each episode: it calls the characters by the name by which they are known in the Gospels—Simon, Andrew, Matthew, Nicodemus, etc.—and thus appeals to the shared religious imaginary. In Jesus’ case, it is not even necessary to name him in S1/E1, since his very physical presence is enough for his being recognised. However, as we shall see below, the presentation of Mary Magdalene is more complex, as it plays with the competence of the public as her true identity is revealed over the course of the episode: she starts out as Lil/Lily/Lilith—a name that does not appear in the Gospels, to discover her real name at the end of the episode: “Mary”.

With some freedom, the biblical version used in the series is apparently the New King James Version, a traditional translation commonly used in the Anglo-Saxon Evangelical context. The recourse to the verbalisation of biblical texts is a constant in the series. Firstly, the different characters speak hundreds of expressions and/or short fragments of biblical verses as their own words that are recognised by the audience as part of the canonical text of the Bible, particularly the Gospel. Secondly, the Hebrew Bible is quoted in the disputes Jesus has with the Pharisee interpretation of the Torah (S2/E1,4,6)—a question that gains importance in S4;⁸ in the dialogues that reflect on the messianic identity of Jesus in the light of prophetic texts such as Isaiah, Daniel or the book of Psalms (S1/E3,6; S2/E6,8; S3/E1,6,7,8); and in the group of disciples memorising and reciting biblical texts (S2/E3,5,6; S3/E2,8), a mirror image of one of the most popular spiritual practices of conservative Evangelicalism. Thirdly, by S3, two biblical texts had gained prominence, providing both the series’s hermeneutical key and the main thread of the plot.

In S1/E1, Isaiah 43:1 articulates the narrative plot featuring Mary Magdalene, being heard at three key times in the episode, creating a circular structure; it tracks the unveiling of her true identity from the possessed Lilith to the forgiven Mary; and lastly, it is a paradigmatic text for the conversion experience of the chosen ones:

“ . . . thus says the Lord, who created you, O Jacob,
And He who formed you, O Israel:
‘Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by your name;
You are Mine.’”

Psalm 139:8 runs through several episodes of S2. In S2/E3, when asked by Matthew about the best starting point for becoming familiar with the Hebrew Bible, Philip chooses the book of Psalms:

“Matthew: But where would be a good place to start?”

[. . .]

Philip: For example, To the choirmaster, a psalm of David.

If I ascend to heaven,

You are there.

If I make my bed in the depths,

You are there.”

The text occurs again in S2/E5 and is of particular importance in the story of Mary Magdalene. The episode opens with her reciting Psalm 139:8 after raising a prayer while picking persimmons. A casual encounter with a Roman soldier brings up a trauma from the past and, in distress, she drops the fruit and crumples the small manuscript in her hand. The soldier is distracted without paying attention to Mary, but she is still in shock. Later, in the company of the disciple Ramah—a fictional character—she regrets not having been able to trust what the verse she had been memorising to strengthen her faith affirms.

2.1.2. A Literal Reading of the Gospel Accounts

The series grants an accurate historical reliability to the biblical accounts (Foust 2024): they are “true stories”, even in the smallest details. Each episode is inspired by a series of selected Gospel texts, to which a complex puzzle of biblical fragments is added, placing texts from the Old and New Testament on the same level, thus establishing a reading pact in a Christ-centred and Christological key. Such is the case of S2/E1, a privileged example of biblical inerrancy, where we can trace more or less extensive explicit allusions to Matthew 4:34; 7:7–8; 8:5–13; 9:12 and parallels; 9:35; 10:1.5; 12:9 and parallels; Matthew 10:1–4 and parallels; Matthew 13:3–23.54 and parallels; 14:26; 15:21–28; 17:1; 18:1–5; 20:20–28; 24:35; Mark 1:21–28 and parallels; Mark 1:38–39 and parallels; Luke 2:19.51; 13:10–17; 17:11; John 1:45–51; 4:19–24; 46–54; 6:59; 10:1–18; 13:19; and 21:2.29–24, as well as various allusions to the Old Testament (Genesis 1:1–3; Exodus 32:19; Numbers 22:21–35; Judges 14:19; 1 Samuel 20:34; Psalm 33:6) and Acts 1:8; 3:1–4:31; 8:1–25; 9:31; 12:1–19; 15:3.13–21; and 21:18–25; and Galatians 2:9.

Until S4 airs, the most illustrative chapter for understanding the inerrancy promulgated by Evangelicalism is S2/E1. The season opens with a scene that takes place years after the ministry of Jesus, after the death of James the brother of John, the first apostle to be martyred according to Acts of the Apostles 12:1–2. Aware of the passing of time and the need to preserve the memory of the events experienced for the future generations of disciples, John gathers the memories of Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus, disciples who had been introduced in S1. As if it were a contemporary interview, the camera focuses on close-ups of the protagonists as they tell their memories. John explains his intention and the differences with Matthew’s Gospel:

“John: I’m not in a hurry to write a whole book, but I do want to get the eyewitness stories now, while we’re together.

Mary, mother of Jesus: Isn’t Matthew going to write something?

John: He’s only writing about what he saw, and about what Jesus told him directly. But I was there for things that Matthew doesn’t know about. I was in His inmost circle. He loved me. [. . .] You see, Mother, if I do not write these things down, they’ll be lost to history.”

Following the suggestion of Mary, the mother of Jesus, John conceives the end of his Gospel (John 21:25, cf. 20:30–31) and tells her how it will begin, “In the beginning, naturally. . . I’m just not sure which beginning”. Closing the circle, the chapter ends with John writing the beginning of the Gospel (John 1:1–5), switching between present-day scenes and the memory of Jesus reading Genesis 1 in the synagogue after a Christological self-assertion central to Christianity: “I’m a man, John. And yet. . . I am Who I am” (Exodus 3:14). Fiction features a scripted dialogue between John and Jesus, reflecting on the meaning of the Greek term *logos*, which is of theological importance to the Gospel:

“John: You know, the Greeks use ‘word’ to describe divine reason what gives the world form and meaning.

Jesus: I like that. And it is a favourite memory.”

The literal reading of the Gospels is also clear in the cinematic representation of the healings performed by Jesus. For example, in S1,⁹ the episodes are intended to represent the story faithfully and to make the audience suspend credulity:

1. The marks on the skin of the leper in S1/E6 disappear before the spectator’s eyes (Mark 1:40–44; Matthew 8:1–4; Luke 4: 3–49).
2. In the same episode, the camera zooms out the feet of the paralytic who stands up immediately after Jesus speaks the following words of the Gospel: “But. . . to show you, and so that you may know, that the Son of Man has the authority on earth to forgive sins. . . I say to you, my son, rise, pick up your bed, and go home” (Mark 2:1–12; Matthew 9:1–8; Luke 5:17–25).
3. Peter’s mother-in-law instantly recovers from fever in E8 (Mark 1:29–31; Matthew 8:14–15; Luke 4:38–39).

Two further signs or miracles recorded in the first season are as follows: (1) the miraculous fishing episode in E4, when to the amused gaze of Jesus, Simon and his brother Andrew need the assistance of John and James to haul the nets into the boat, which is about to overturn (Matthew 4:18–22; Mark 1:16–20; Luke 5: 1–11); and (2) the turning of the water into wine at the wedding at Cana in E5, as Jesus is left alone with the jars filled with water; he is focused by camera in close-up, prays to God, puts his hand inside the jar, says the words “I’m ready, Father” and draws red wine with his hand—again, a close-up—and smiles (John 2:1–12).

For non-religious spectators, the literal reading of the biblical narratives produces an effect of “re-enchantment of the world”, as sociologist Michel Maffesoli (2007) puts it, which is borrowed by Zygmunt Bauman to describe postmodern society as “the attempt to restore to the world what modernity has arrogantly taken away; as a re-enchantment of the world that modernity has tried so hard to disenchant” (Bauman 1992, p. X). In other words: in contrast to modern rationality, the new religiosity of postmodernity embraces the magical (Maffesoli 2007, p. 153), which enables the non-Christian audience of *The Chosen* to suspend credulity and enter a world inhabited by the sacred, the mystical, the mysterious. . . Dallas Jenkins himself is well aware of this possibility: non-Christian viewers “can appreciate these stories in the same way that, if you don’t believe in the Force, you can still appreciate ‘Star Wars’” (TE Staff 2023).

Regarding Mary Magdalene, the biblical text that inspires S1/E1 describes her as “Mary called Magdalene, out of whom went seven devils”:

“And it came to pass afterward, that he went throughout every city and village, preaching and shewing the glad tidings of the kingdom of God: and the twelve were with him, and certain women, which had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities, Mary called Magdalene, out of whom went seven devils, and Joanna the wife of Chuza Herod’s steward, and Susanna, and many others, which ministered unto him of their substance”. (Luke 8:1–3)

As can be seen in the biblical quote, the deliverance of the seven spirits is only mentioned, not narrated, allowing Dallas Jenkins to create an elaborated literary fiction. In line with biblical inerrancy, the possession is understood literally in T1/E1,¹⁰ although there seems to be a hint of a connection between demonic possession and the traumatic experience that will be further unveiled.¹¹ The mise-en-scène follows the visual standards of demonic possession pioneered by *The Exorcist* (1973), a film that has indelibly marked the popular imagination: the darkness of the scene and the background music generate a horror film atmosphere; the way the woman crawls on the floor and moans frightens Nicodemus, the master of the Pharisees responsible for performing the exorcism; and demons cause a violent attitude in Mary and speak out through her when she responds to Nicodemus by changing her voice: “We are not afraid of you. You have no power here,

teacher". The exorcism fails, leading to frustration for the exorcist, who explains his failure in the following terms: this woman has ignored the Torah and pursued a life of wickedness: "Demons root in wicked souls as pigs in filth. A possession like this was fatal. And souls such as hers, sadly, are beyond all human aid". This statement will underline Jesus' success at the end of the episode.

2.2. *The Evangelical Understanding of Conversion*

The series has a clear evangelistic vocation characteristic of conservative Evangelicalism (Noll 2014, p. 19):

"'evangelical' religion has always been 'gospel' religion, or religion focusing on the 'good news' of salvation brought to sinners by Jesus Christ. As 'news' it implies the need for the message to be spread—indeed, evangelical Christianity takes the 'speaking' and 'Word' elements of the faith as definitional. [...] foundational to evangelicalism is the need to witness to the 'Good news' of Jesus Christ, to 'go into all the world'".

This evangelistic interest is not new to film productions within North American Evangelicalism. Its best-known predecessor is the above-mentioned *Jesus* film by Nardini Productions, a product destined exclusively for the evangelisation of the population, which was accompanied by teaching materials, as with *The Chosen*.

An example is the pre-payment strategy, which has an important role in the funding of the project and allows donors who surpass a certain amount of money to access the new season's broadcast in advance, which covers the cost of free access for the rest of the spectators. This funding policy is aligned with the catechetical and propagandistic aims of the series, as we read in Dallas Jenkins' response to journalist Jeannie Ortega Law (Law 2019): "I'm trying to justify the faith of those who invested in this project and I'm also trying to, of course, please my Savior, and make sure that we're doing this project for Him".

On a cultural level, *The Chosen* shares the messianic role that dispensationalism¹² assigns to the American nation (Marsden 1991; DiTommaso 2014; Kyle 2017a, 2017b). The producers expressed their wish for *The Chosen* to be broadcast worldwide and to be watched by more than a billion people by 2024 (Rabey 2022), fostered by a missional effort that rests on dispensationalist beliefs about the imminence of the end times (Balmer 2004, pp. 211–12), a characteristic feature of the religious context in which the series originates. Pessimism about the imminent future of the world is accompanied by an evangelistic enthusiasm for the need to grasp the time before the end comes. It is not surprising that in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis—interpreted as another sign that the end is near, director Jenkins stated in an interview: "We feel a sense of urgency" (Holmes 2021). He responded in the aforementioned interview with Michael Foust (Foust 2024):

"I have a personal mission, my wife and I have a personal mission, we will always want to bring people closer to Jesus [...] Now, the work of conversion is God's work, the Holy Spirit's work, it's not our work. But we are hoping to introduce people to the authentic Jesus, we're hoping to remove veils, hurdles and walls that have been put up, and we want people to come closer to Christ".

As the quote reads, the series is an evangelistic tool that seeks the salvation of its viewers. This conservative Christian sensibility can be seen in the underlying storyline that runs through the disciples' encounters with Jesus: in one way or another, the chosen ones are social outsiders, marginalised people who suffer different kinds of discrimination... but, above all, they are sinners who need to be redeemed and who will be radically transformed after their encounter with Jesus. The majority of Evangelicalism sees conversion as an instant and abrupt process, clearly identified in the biography itself—year, month, day and even hour (Balmer 2004, p. 187)—that marks the definitive transition from sin to salvation, from a state of spiritual death to eternal life (Noll 2014, p. 20): "Evangelicals stress the need for a definite turning away from self and sin in order to find God in Jesus Christ".

Some were surprised at Nicodemus' prominence in *The Chosen* (Keating 2020). However, this plot choice perfectly fits the Evangelical context of the series, since the terminology used to describe conversion includes the phrase "born again" (John 3:3; 1 Peter 1:23), which is of great importance in describing the Evangelical religious experience, along with "surrendering to Christ", "accepting Jesus as Lord and Saviour" and so forth (Balmer 2004, p. 187): "Evangelical understandings of conversion derive from the third chapter of St. John in the New Testament, where Jesus tells Nicodemus that in order to enter the kingdom of Heaven he must be born again".

Thus, Nicodemus is part of the religious imaginary of conservative Evangelicalism, linked to the most important biblical text connected to conversion, John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life". This wording establishes a strong in-group identity, as a "born-again Christian" differentiates himself from "nominal" Christians or other Christian denominations that are considered "liberal" (Balmer 2004, p. 93), as well as enables the audience to identify with the experience of Nicodemus' conversion, which becomes a spiritual pattern for the audience (S1/E7).

In all probability, this understanding of conversion also conditions the reception of Mary Magdalene. S1/E1 presents her as an alcoholic, gambler and violent woman with her clients/lovers, and with a triad of vices—sex, alcohol and gambling—that are frequent in the Evangelical religious imaginary. The final minutes of S1/E1 narrate the transformative encounter between Jesus and the as-yet Lilith outside the tavern where she was getting drunk. Mary mistakes the unknown man for a possible customer, but Jesus calls her by her real name, and the spectator hears for the first time: "Mary. . . Mary of Magdala!"

"Lillith/Mary: Who are you? How do you know my name?"

Jesus recites Isaiah 43:1, the third time the biblical text occurs in the episode:

". . . thus says the Lord, who created you, O Jacob,

And He who formed you, O Israel:

'Fear not, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by your name. . .'"

Jesus takes her by the head and says the words "You are Mine", exorcising her, and she responds by weeping and lying against him. In Dallas Jenkins' words, "[Jesus] is not just casting out a demon, he is taking [her] over". At the end of S1/E1, Mary describes her transformation after her encounter with Jesus in these terms: "I was one way and now I am completely different", an expression that is repeated in S1/E2, when she explains to the perplexed Nicodemus her impressive personal transformation: "I was one way and now I am completely different. And the thing that happened in between. . . was Him".

In S1/E2, Mary Magdalene's transformation is realised as she is employed as a hairdresser. In Beavis' opinion (Beavis 2024, p. 6), "This depiction echoes Talmudic references to a 'Miriam, the plaiter of women's hair' (*Hagigah* 4b; cf. *Shabbat* 104b), which in its original context may be a slighting reference to Jesus' mother or to the Magdalene".

But, after the conversion story of her first encounter with Jesus in S1/E1, Mary Magdalene relapses into her old way of life in S2/E5. For the first time in film fiction featuring Mary Magdalene, she suffers what we would today call a post-traumatic stress episode. As we briefly noted in Section 2.1.1, our main character encounters by chance a Roman soldier in the countryside who reminds her of the rape she had suffered some time before by another Roman soldier, narrated in a flashback in the opening episode and in this one—we will come to this again in Section 3.2.3:

"Mary Magdalene: I just feel, um. . . I don't know, I. . . I saw a Roman on horseback today when I was picking persimmons. [. . .] he didn't even see me. But just the sight of him made me—it filled me with. . . [shuddered breaths] I just dropped my basket and ran. Totally ignored the prayers in my hands".

She is ashamed because of her lack of trust in the promise of Psalm 139:8, the text she was learning while picking persimmons (“If I ascend to heaven, You are there. If I make my bed in the depths, You are there”). Next, she witnesses a possessed man that recognises her as “Lilith” and tries to attack her, another painful reminder of her past:

“Possessed man: Lilith?”

Mary Magdalene: I don’t answer to that name.

Possessed man: [Growling] They told me about you.

Mary Magdalene: Did they?

Possessed man: All seven of them.

Mary Magdalene: My name is Mary. It was always Mary.

Possessed man: Oh, the stories they had! You’re scared”.

Instead of moving to the place where the group of disciples is camped, she decides to return to the “Red Quarter” of Capernaum. There, she recovers her former dishevelled appearance and enters the tavern to fall into alcoholism and addiction to gambling. The scene is presented as a new descent into hell, parallel to S1/E1, which lasts for two days.

Jesus is concerned and sends the disciples Simon and Matthew to find her. The relapsed Mary meets Jesus and the following dialogue takes place, presenting the need to repent of her sins once again:

“Jesus: It’s good to have you back.

Mary Magdalene: I don’t know what to say.

Jesus: I don’t require much.

Mary Magdalene: I’m so ashamed. You redeemed me and I just threw it all away.

Jesus: It’s not much of a redemption if it can be lost in a day, is it?

Mary Magdalene: I owe You everything, but I just don’t think I can do it.

[. . .] Jesus: I just want your heart. The Father just wants your heart. Give Us that, which you already have, and the rest will come in time. Did you really think you’d never struggle or sin again? [. . .] I forgive you. It’s over.”

Jesus approaches, embraces her, smiles and comforts her. While forgiveness of sin is still a central theme, the scene highlights the need for acceptance and belonging, as in S1/E1.

Until the airing of S4, S2/E5 is the only episode where Mary Magdalene briefly abandons the Jesus movement. It seems unlikely that a similar event would be repeated, considering the criticisms provoked by this subplot. The director acknowledged that this was a script twist to increase the drama of the episode and the interest of Mary Magdalene’s character, but it caused great controversy among some Evangelical groups who rejected the possibility that Mary Magdalene could relapse into her old life on theological grounds, as this would imply a false conversion. However, Dallas Jenkins valued the episode in “Deep Dive” as a great lesson about divine forgiveness and the struggles of all Christians to overcome addictions, including himself.

3. The Fictional Mary Magdalene in *The Chosen*

The creative freedom of the scriptwriters has not been without controversy, accused of taking too much creative license (TE Staff 2023; Foust 2024) or of violating the second of the Ten Commandments (CP Staff 2023). Dallas Jenkins acknowledges that “Imagination is something Evangelicals are scared of [. . .] Evangelicals think that if we imagine too much, well, we’re relying on our own human brain, and we can’t trust that”, but, despite the criticism, he defends the need to combine “historical context, biblical context and a little artistic imagination [. . .] I want people to feel, taste, smell. I want them to feel the dust, what it must have been like back then” (Duin 2022).

We can point to at least two strategies to develop the narrative threads of the different disciples that weave through each episode, interweaving the religious confrontation with

the Sadducees and Pharisees, the unresolved family conflicts, the violence of the Roman imperial power against the messianic hopes of the local population. . . The first one is to capitalise on the spatial-temporal gaps in the canonical Gospel to generate sub-plots, including characters that do not appear in the biblical texts. The second one is to fictionalise the past of the characters in a previous time to that narrated in the Gospel; the script recounts the life of the disciples prior to their encounter with Jesus—in some episodes, there are jumps forward in time, as we mentioned in case of S2/E1, where John writes the Gospel years after Jesus' death.

Dallas Jenkins is interested in creating an emotional atmosphere that presents the everyday life of the characters that depict the Gospels (Duin 2022):

“Movie Bible projects are usually stiff, formal—they go from Bible verse to Bible verse, and everything is very, very black and white. I think we have to round the edges a little bit making this show feel a lot more human”.

In fact, the series flips biblical epic films about Jesus by shifting the focus from the traditional narrative centre, which focused solely on Jesus, to the perspective of the group of disciples (Beavis 2024, p. 5). In some ways, it follows the trail of films such as *The Robe* (1953) or *Ben-Hur* (1959), where Jesus is perceived through the eyes of the main characters, although on this occasion he is a less hieratic Jesus and more akin to the contemporary human experience: he hugs, dances, jokes, laughs, ironises. . . In the words of Dallas Jenkins, *The Chosen* aims to “encounter Jesus through the eyes of those who actually met Him” (Carpenter 2022), and, in doing so, to tell a story “a little bit more personal, intimate, immediate [. . .] [Jesus] tells jokes, he laughs, he dances with his friends; we don't normally see that in other Bible projects” (Moore 2020). “The version of Jesus in ‘The Chosen’ is both basically faithful to the Bible and very human and fun. [. . .] He's kind, yes, wise, yes, but also cracks jokes and teases his friends” (Alexander 2021).

This helps the spectator's identification, although it results in cultural anomalies. More than once, Dallas Jenkins compromises authenticity to create complex and credible characters for 21st century audiences with anachronistic emotions, attitudes and social relationships that do not correspond to 1st century Palestine. Here are a few examples that affect Mary Magdalene.

S1/E1 places Mary in the “Red Quarter” of Capernaum, a place of disrepute to which the teacher of the Pharisees, Nicodemus, refuses to go at first instance, even though he has been pressured by the Roman authorities to help solve the social problem being caused by a woman we will know as “Lily”. The expression “Red Quarter” is an anachronism, as it was first used in English in the late 19th century; according to legend, when railway workers went to the brothels, they hung their lamps lit with a red light on the door. Given that *The Chosen* is a family series, talking about the “Red Quarter” is a way of telling adult spectators that Lil is a prostitute without needing to make it explicit.

In S2/E2, Mary and Ramah—a fictional disciple of Jesus, decide to learn the Torah; in S2/E5 Ramah is learning how to read Psalm 7 out loud and write with the guidance of Mary Magdalene, although she is frustrated because she cannot remember how to explain grammatical rules correctly. The scene evokes the protagonist of *Yentl* (1983), the young Jewish girl who learns the Talmud with her father, as she states: “I was young. I think it's easier when you're a child, but. . . I had a better teacher than you”, referring to her father. However, recent studies suggest that only 3% of the Galilean population was literate (Crossan and Reed 2001, pp. 64–65), which makes such a scene rather unlikely.

3.1. The Required Plausibility of Scripts

In terms of filmmaking, *The Chosen* does not venture in the use of point of view or narrative shots. It follows the conventional codes of classical cinema, which are based on the audience's identification with the characters and on screenplay endings that resolve and close the plot. In Kuhn's words (Kuhn 1991, pp. 170–71):

“ . . . the codes of classical narrative organise relations of identification of the spectator with the fictional characters and with the very progress of the narrative.

Through this identification, the spectator is immersed in the film in such a way that when the problems raised by the narrative are solved in the final closure, the spectator is also ‘closed’, complete or satisfied: cinema achieves this result in part through the ‘binding’ process of suture”.

This is a central feature of biblical epic cinema, which, like any other form of cinematic realism, aims for transparent representation: “what is projected onto the screen seems to the spectator to be built in the same way as its referent, ‘the real world’” (Kuhn 1991, p. 145). This is of special relevance to fiction in *The Chosen*, which aims to strengthen, as we discussed in the previous section, the “truth and intention of the Scriptures” by recreating realistically the everyday life of the disciples in first-century Palestine. In a 2021 interview with USA Today, Dallas Jenkins said the following (Alexander 2021):

“The No. 1 word that we put on our wall, the banner across everything we do, is ‘authenticity’ [. . .] So many past Bible projects telling Jesus’ story have been a little stiff, maybe a cleaned up, sanitized version of the story. We desperately seek to pursue a portrayal that’s as authentic as possible”.

The director committed the plausibility of the four seasons to three advisors: Messianic Jewish rabbi Jason Sobel, Catholic priest and filmmaker David Guffey and New Testament professor Douglas S. Huffman (Burnette-Bletsch 2022, p. 194, n. 5)—in the fourth season, they were joined by Orthodox Jewish theologian David Nekrutman. They participate in the post-broadcast panel discussions to justify their creative choices and deepen conversations into historical, cultural, etc., issues.

The staging supports the claim to plausibility, for instance, in the case of Mary Magdalene: in S1/E1, superimposed labels announce to the spectator the space–time settings of what is coming next, “Magdala, 2 B.C.”, “City of Capernaum, 28 Years Later”; the use of light in the indoor scenes of “Rivka’s place” and the tavern mimics a world that relies almost exclusively on sunlight, leaving the inside of the humble houses in half-light, barely lit by a few candles.

The Chosen seeks to accurately reflect the practices and costumes of first-century Palestine regarding the use and symbolism of the female veil, a sign of shame and modesty. Along the lines of earlier cinematic representations, such as *King of Kings* (1927), the act of covering her hair makes Mary Magdalene a sinner who repents for her past, an act that echoes the ancient tradition of Gregory the Great. After her encounter with Jesus at the end of S1/E1, the Lilith with her hair tousled and uncovered is at the beginning of chapter S1/E2 the Mary who wears a veil. As a counterpart, we see Mary Magdalene relapse into all her previous vices in S2/E5, and as she enters the tavern in E6, she uncovers her head to show her speaker that she is not a “nice girl”. Welcomed back by Jesus, Mary the mother of Jesus and the disciple Ramah cover her hair as a symbol of rejoining Jesus’ group, her foster family.

3.2. *Mary Magdalene, the Repentant Prostitute. . . Once More*

The prevailing picture in Western culture from Gregory the Great to the present day is that of a sinful Mary Magdalene, a prostitute to be precise, in need of redemption (Brown 2006, p. 291; Bolton 2020, pp. 26–27; Taylor 2022, p. 203). As critics point out, this image is influenced by several historical factors (Thimmes 1998, p. 194):

1. An early misinterpretation of the Gospels, which confuses Mary Magdalene with other women (Navarro Puerto 2007, pp. 64–65; Rocco 2007, pp. 155–76; Bernabé Ubieta 2020, pp. 20–29; Bolton 2020, pp. 27–28). During the patristic period (4th–6th centuries CE) a controversy persisted among the Church Fathers about the identification of Mary Magdalene with Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus (Luke 10:38–42; John 11:1–44), with the woman who anoints the feet of Jesus (Mark 14:3–9; Luke 7:36–50; John 12:1–8) and even with the adulteress of John (John 8:1–11). Justin Martyr and Irenaeus of Lyons are the first Church Fathers who try to solve the seeming contradictions between the four Gospels, on the one hand, and adapt the subversive

memory of Mary Magdalene to the hegemonic culture, on the other. Later on, Jerome, Ambrose and Augustine of Hippo downplay the relevance of the Magdalene as a witness to the resurrection, describing her as faulty and unsuitable for transmitting the news of Christ's resurrection. Gregory the Great completes the process of blending the three women, and Mary Magdalene becomes definitively the repentant prostitute who anoints Jesus with costly perfume and weeps in sorrow on the cross.¹³

2. The *Vita* of Saint Mary of Egypt (Jansen 2000, pp. 37–38; Schaberg 2008). In the 7th century AD, Sophronius of Jerusalem wrote *Vita*, which recounts the legend of Mary of Egypt, a repentant prostitute who finished her days as a desert ascetic (Alvar 1969). This Mary will be identified with Mary Magdalene and become a female model of repentance and purity, while the shadow of sin and guilt remains over her.
3. Medieval folk legends about the figure of Mary Magdalene included in the *Golden Legend* of the Dominican Jacobus de Voragine (2016, 1264; ed.) (Schaberg 2008). The *Golden Legend* is one of several hagiographies about Mary Magdalene's life that place her in French territory in order to legitimate the relics. In this book, Mary Magdalene arrives to Provence by boat, together with her siblings Martha and Lazarus; she is therefore identified with Mary of Bethany. They are all wealthy landowners who followed Jesus and fled with their possessions to save their lives. Mary preaches in Provence, performs miracles and finishes her days in a cave as a penitent.
4. Finally, centuries of artistic representations depicting her as a penitent prostitute (Haskins 1999; Lahr 2006; Sánchez Hernández 2007; Apostolos-Cappadona 2023). Apart from the anointings (Mark 14:3–9; Luke 7:36–50; John 12:1–8), the episode in the house of Bethany (Luke 10:38–42) and the Passion cycle (the crucifixion, the visit to the tomb on Easter morning, *Noli me tangere*), Mary Magdalene is depicted according the Provençal legends, which include the journey across the Mediterranean, the adventures in Marseilles and the retreat to Saint Baume. Related to the Gospel and Provençal texts are the scenes prior to his conversion and her renouncement of material possessions, inspired by medieval theatre. Finally, the isolated representation of Mary Magdalene encompasses two types: the woman who appears with a perfume jar and the repentant sinner clearly favoured by Baroque art.

As Karras states (Karras 1990, p. 30), “sexuality, in all these legends, was the woman's *sin par excellence* [...] This was the worst and the most typical sin of woman”. Indeed, promiscuity remains the most characteristic feature of the Mary Magdalene figure in Western culture (Reinhartz 2007, p. 129). Many examples in mainstream film history mirror this portrayal: *King of Kings*, by Cecil B. DeMille (1927), Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice's rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973), the film version of Nikos Kazantzakis' novel *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) or Mel Gibson's *The Passion* (2004), among others (Bolton 2020; Taylor 2022). This is the case of the Evangelical film *Jesus* (1979) as well, where Mary Magdalene is a sexually promiscuous woman. In the “Deep Dive” commenting on S1/T1, Dallas Jenkins was aware that the Bible does not support the portrayal of Mary Magdalene as a prostitute, and an official X post denied that she was portrayed as such. Despite these official claims, it seems clear that the character in *The Chosen* fits the traditional picture of the prostitute (Keating 2020; Taylor 2022, p. 206; Beavis 2024, p. 6), though the director incorporated some peculiarities that we will present below.

Two possible reasons for maintaining this traditional image of Mary Magdalene as a repentant prostitute are related to the concept of conversion that we presented in the previous pages:

Firstly, it enhances identification with the spectators, something that is, as we mentioned above, crucial for biblical epic cinema. This aspect has been highlighted by Culbertson, wondering about the reasons that led his students to prefer the prostitute Mary Magdalene, despite the fact that scholarly research denies it (Culbertson 2010, pp. 75–76):

“Comments such as ‘Well, I know that Bible doesn't say she was sexually active, but I still believe she was,’ reclaim Mary Magdalene from being two-dimensional, and make her into a three-dimensional character that the students could identify

with more closely. [...] Perhaps the truest answer to the question of why for some, Mary Magdalene will forever be the repentant sinner and healed submissive, is because some people will always need her to be, for their security in a scary world”.

Karen King also points to the symbolic significance of portraying her as a sinner (King 2003, p. 153):

“Yet the role of repentant prostitute is symbolically appealing in its own right, and not just because the other options were closed off. It has proven itself to be a much more evocative figure than that of Mary as Jesus’ wife or lover. The image of Mary as the redeemed sinner has nourished a deep empathy that resonates with our human imperfection, frailty, and mortality. A fallen redeemer has enormous power to redeem”.

Secondly, the prostitute who has to repent of her sins fits best with the Evangelical concept of conversion, which stresses the radical split between the before and after of the encounter with Jesus. In S1/E1, the “before” is the woman known as Lil, Lily or Lilith, the demon-possessed prostitute; the after is “Mary”, who is named by Jesus, evoking Isaiah 43:1.¹⁴

3.2.1. A Far-from-Sensual Image

Although the opening episode (S1/E1) presents Mary Magdalene as a prostitute in the Red Quarter of Capernaum, this is only possible by reading in between the lines, maybe to be shown to all audiences (Keating 2020), maybe to avoid the rejection produced by other sexualised cinematic approaches since the end of the 20th century, such as Martin Scorsese’s Mary Magdalene in *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) (Bolton 2020, pp. 30–32; Rindge 2022). There are no explicit sex scenes, and her activity is only indirectly referred to by the two clients who figure in the episode and by the character of Rivka, the owner of “Rivka’s place” where Mary engages in prostitution (Burnette-Bletsch 2022, p. 197).

Actresses playing Mary Magdalene have been required to display their sensuality on camera (Brown 2006; Taylor 2022; Beavis 2024). For example, DeMille’s Magdalene in *King of Kings* is an irreverent, beautiful and wealthy courtesan, living in a palace wrapped up in luxury and exoticism. Frustrated that her lover Judas abandons her to follow Jesus, she pursues revenge: “That carpenter must learn that you can’t take a man away from Mary Magdalene”. However, *The Chosen* moves away from the stereotype of the temptress, even before her transforming encounter with Jesus at the end of S1/E1. At the beginning of the episode, she appears uncombed, without make-up, jewellery or seductive clothes. She is rather more reminiscent of the “lachrymose” or penitent Mary of the Western pictorial tradition, and, in filmic terms, of the Mary embodied by Monica Bellucci in Mel Gibson’s *Passion* scene, confused with the adulteress about to be stoned in John 8:1–11. Taylor, for her part, points to Edvard Munch’s lithograph “Madonna” (1865) as a visual reference (Taylor 2022, p. 206).

There is no hint of a romantic relationship with Jesus: the behaviour is that of a father caring for his daughter. Nor are there any explicit erotic scenes to begin with, because *The Chosen* is a family series. Burnette-Bletsch, however, explains the absence of explicit sexual scenes from the narrative pattern of the “martyr prostitute”, a typical character identified by Campbell in *Marked Women* (2006) (Burnette-Bletsch 2022, p. 197): “Films that employ the motif of prostitute as martyr tend to elide the grittier details of servicing clients (as does *The Chosen*), though telling references to this life remain”.

3.2.2. The One Possessed by Seven Demons

Based on Luke 8:2, Dallas Jenkins develops in S1/E1 an original intrigue of unveiling Mary’s identity that drives the episode, with Isaiah 43:1 as the guiding thread. He offers a fresh, if not a more positive, compassionate approach to this woman, presenting her as a victim of the circumstances and supernatural powers that overcome her, thus guiding Simon’s statement in S2/E3: “Mary had horrible trauma, she didn’t choose all that happened

to her". In line with contemporary exegesis, Mary Magdalene is presented as a woman tortured by powers that overcome her (Atwood 1993, p. 36).

After the flashback of Mary Magdalene's childhood at the beginning of S1/E1, the woman wakes up disorientated and alone in a dark and dirty room in the Red Quarter of Capernaum, covered in blood. A man flees terrified and bloody down the stairs from "Rivka's place" after an attack that Mary remembers nothing about, shouting: "Help! Somebody help me! She tried to kill me! She tried to kill me! Somebody. . . somebody! [. . .] Demons. . . live. . . inside her!". The possession makes Lilith a violent woman with her clients, as we see later on, when a second client approaches her in the tavern scene to ask for her sexual services. When he is rejected, he asks: "Are you going to scratch me too?"

Throughout history, the seven demons have been interpreted in many different ways, and contemporary exegesis also offers multiple alternatives: it is associated with an ancient cult of the goddess, it describes some kind of mental disability or illness, it tries to explain convulsions. . . (Bernabé Ubieta 2007, p. 22). To begin with, the Latin Church Fathers developed an exegesis on Luke 8:2 that considered Mary Magdalene a sexual sinner, as lust was considered to be a feminine vice: demon possession was identified with moral evil, embodied in prostitution. This was due to the literary connections and the previous identification established between the woman that anoints Jesus (Luke 7:36–50) and Mary of Bethany (John 12:1–11) (Bernabé Ubieta 2006, pp. 191–201; 2007, p. 23). According to Monzón and Bernad (Monzón Pertejo and Bernad López 2022, p. 13), "The exegesis on the seven demons [. . .] is one of the most transcendental elements obscuring the importance of Magdalene as a follower of Jesus, recipient of his teachings, witness of his death and resurrection, as well as an apostle of the apostles".

Gregory the Great identified the seven demons with the seven deadly sins in his *Homilia XXXIII*, and this interpretation deeply influenced western art and Christian theology: "And what are these seven demons, if not the universality of all vices? Since seven days suffice to embrace the whole of time, the number seven rightly represents universality. Mary had seven demons in her, for she was full of all vices" (Magno 2000).

Again, let us take the cinematic example of Cecil B. DeMille, who in *King of Kings* followed Gregory the Great. An intertitle sets out Jesus' words "Be cleansed", and the spectres present themselves as they emerge from the woman: lust, greed, pride, gluttony, envy and anger. Asked by Peter what is happening, the intertitle replies that Jesus is "cleansing her from the seven deadly sins". However, Dallas Jenkins proposes a more contemporary interpretative context for demonic possession, such as sexual trauma (Taylor 2022, p. 206), although he is very cautious and ambiguous about this. Possession might be seen as a metaphor for trauma, but the need to maintain a conservative Evangelical reading of the biblical texts leads him to open up only the possibility that trauma made her more vulnerable to demonic possession, which is understood in a literal sense.¹⁵

The originality of the script of S1/E1 is that the first name by which we know Mary Magdalene is "Lil" or "Lilith". The name "Lilith" and the fact that the Red Quarter is inhabited by pigs—a clear allusion to the impurity of the place and perhaps an echo of the episode of the possessed man of Gerasa (Mark 5:1–20; Matthew 8:28–34; Luke 8:26–39), emphasise her demoniac status. The Hebrew term "Lilith" is only found in Isaiah 34:14 and is usually translated as "night bird", although some authors consider that it is not an animal but a demoness from Mesopotamian mythology (Patai 1990). The earliest text identifying her as a demonic figure in Jewish folklore dates from the 8th century CE, the *Ben Sira Alphabet* (Blair 2009, p. 28). Identified as Adam's first wife, she refuses to have sex because she finds it offensive to have to bear the weight of man (Graves and Patai 2022, p. 59) and rebels against divinity (Blair 2009, pp. 26–30). Since then, she is considered an evil spirit who seduces men and murders children (Beavis 2024, p. 6).

3.2.3. Mary, a Traumatized Women

Contemporary societies are more sensitive to sexual violence against women and more aware that prostitution is not caused by lust, as was claimed in ancient times, but often

by poverty and oppression. This new sensibility can be seen in novels featuring Mary Magdalene, such as Anthony Burgess's *Man of Nazareth* (1979) and Marianne Fredriksson's *According to Mary Magdalene* (1997) (Brown 2006, pp. 300–4), or in the television series *The Friends of Jesus. Mary Magdalene* (2000) by Raffaele Mertes and Elisabetta Marchetti (Calero Ruiz 2021, p. 22).

The Chosen also reflects this sensibility in S1/E1. On the one hand, it narrates in a flashback the early death of her sick father, which left her emotionally, socially and economically vulnerable in a patriarchal society that offers few opportunities to an impoverished woman. The first scene is located in Magdala, 2 B.C.E. During the night, a sick man converses with his young daughter, who cannot sleep, and the father comforts her by reminding her of "Adonai's words", Isaiah 43:1 in the New King James Version. As in Cecil B. DeMille's *King of Kings*, the film begins with Mary Magdalene, though in a very different way: she is not a rich and powerful courtesan, but a frightened little girl.

On the other hand, we also know about the rape by a Roman soldier through a flashback, although narrated in a very elusive way (Taylor 2022, p. 206). In "Deep Dive", the director explains that he intentionally filmed the scene so that the aggressor's shadow darkens the victim's face to point to the moment when Mary becomes Lilith. Asked about Mary's violent attitude, Rivka replies "Lilith never hurt anyone that didn't hurt her first [...] She has these spells. We let her be and then she's as sweet as an angel again". In S2/E6, Simon apologises for Mary as follows: "Look, she went through something horrible and terrifying and she dealt with it the best way she knew how".

3.2.4. Innocent and Guilty All at Once

As mentioned above, the director of *The Chosen* envisions a childhood in poverty and a sexual assault that pushes Mary Magdalene into prostitution, but this does not remove the core Evangelical idea of guilt and personal responsibility. Mary Magdalene is not innocent; she needs to be released not only from the suffering caused by others, but also from her own sins. The fictional woman created by Dallas Jenkins is a woman who shows signs of depression and is suicidal, but she is also a violent, rebellious alcoholic and gambling addict.

Burnette-Bletsch follows Campbell in explaining the ambiguity that characterises Mary Magdalene in *The Chosen*, presented as simultaneously innocent and guilty. In her opinion, this ambiguity points out precisely to her responsibility or complicity as a prostitute (Burnette-Bletsch 2022, p. 197). The innocent victim side responds to the aforementioned character of the "martyred prostitute", embedded in a "love story" type of narrative structure, a frequent combination in films featuring sex workers (Burnette-Bletsch 2022, p. 197). According to Campbell, the martyr is a vulnerable young woman who has been seduced or raped and has no choice but to prostitute herself after running away or being expelled by her family. In some cases, she is redeemed by a virtuous man who risks his own reputation to save her (Campbell 2006, pp. 125–27). For her part, Mary Magdalene's violent side would fit into that of femme fatale or siren (Burnette-Bletsch 2022, pp. 197–98).

Indeed, Campbell's depiction of the "martyred prostitute" responds to the character of Mary Magdalene in S1/E1 presented above, although it is doubtful whether she is a *femme fatale*, as Burnette-Bletsch claims, because of the way she is represented on screen—cf. above.

4. Concluding Remarks

The Chosen seems to be a melting pot where stereotypes elaborated in previous centuries converge, just conveniently adapted to contemporary conservative Evangelical sensibility. Although the character of the repentant prostitute cannot be accounted for in the canonical Gospels, she is a paradigm of a believer who fits the "born-again" conversion model of American Evangelical Christianity and is presented as an example for today's non-believers. Her life is turned upside down after her personal encounter with Jesus, who forgives her and incorporates her into his group of disciples, although her struggle with

her former way of life—disordered sexuality, alcohol and gambling—is not entirely over, an issue that generated controversy within the complex Evangelical context.

In the two episodes under review, Dallas Jenkins imagines an empathetic Mary Magdalene: forced into prostitution due to a poverty-stricken childhood and a rape by a Roman soldier, innocent and guilty at once, she suffers from depression and post-traumatic stress symptoms. Though the concept of personal sin is still at the heart of the series, Jesus is portrayed as a man—God moved by empathy and compassion who exorcises Mary and joins her to her new family without blame.

The series's great concern for historical plausibility places Mary Magdalene in the traditional male-subordinate role of a woman in first-century Palestine, although we find several anachronisms, such as her being able to read and write. Moreover, the difficult balance between an inerrant understanding of the Bible and artistic freedom causes ambivalences which are hard to overcome, especially with regard to the interpretation of the seven spirits/demons (Luke 8:2).

We await the final season to find out whether Dallas Jenkins acknowledges Mary's prominent role as witness to the resurrection—*apostola apostolorum*—a role that has been highlighted in contemporary biblical exegesis. So far, she fits the picture of a modest and submissive disciple, who is in charge of the household for the group of disciples and leads together with Mary, the mother of Jesus, the group of female disciples.

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Notes

- ¹ It is not easy to define contemporary Evangelicalism. Historian Mark A. Noll has gone so far as to assert that it is nothing more than “a useful fiction” (Silliman 2021, p. 634, n. 14). The David Bebbington quadrilateral (1989) is still the most dominant definition of Evangelicalism, which identifies four marks: conversionism, activism, biblicism and crucicentrism. We are aware that world Evangelicalism is more complex than this definition might indicate, but we assume this generic description in order to contextualise our analysis of *The Chosen* series. Nevertheless, we agree with Silliman in seeing Evangelicalism as a complex crossroads between the religious movement in a narrow sense, a cross-cutting spiritual sensibility and some theological emphases that are not shared universally or equally: “If [...] evangelicalism is an imagined community, organised by communication networks, then one would not start with conversionism, activism, biblicism and crucicentrism. Instead, the first questions would be who likes whom, who trusts whom and who talks to whom. The answers to those questions will explain why this movement includes some people and not others, why the religious identity takes the shape it does” (Silliman 2021, p. 643). This might explain the success of the series among other Christian denominations, and even within the American Jewish community.
- ² Evidence of this was the successful attendance to the first ChosenCon convention hosted in Dallas in 2023, which gathered 3500 fans (Hollers 2023).
- ³ The distribution company VidAngel—now Angel Studios—a streaming service connected to the Latter-day Saints, handled the distribution of the first season with little success, and released the episodes for sale in DVD format. But in March and April 2020, in the midst of the pandemic crisis, the launch of *The Chosen* app (<https://thechosen.tv/app>, accessed on 2 September 2024) and the possibility of free access to the series boosted the number of viewers. A second breakthrough came after the third season, when in 2021 the series attracted the interest of several international Christian and secular platforms, including Peacock (NBC), Amazon Prime Video, Trinity Broadcasting Network and UPtv. In several countries, *The Chosen* is available on Netflix (from 2022) and Canal+ (from 2023); in Spain, the first three seasons can be seen on Movistar Plus+, and La 1 de TVE aired the first season in June 2024.
- ⁴ Data have been published on *The Chosen's* official media platforms and are not easy to check.
- ⁵ In one way or another, she appears in the following episodes: S1/E1 (“I Have Called You by Name”), E2 (“Shabbat”), E4 (“The Rock on Which It Is Built”), E5 (“The Wedding Gift”), E6 (“Indescribable Compassion”), E7 (“Invitations”), E8 (“I Am He”); S2/E1 (“Thunder”), E2 (“I Saw You”), E3 (“Matthew 4:24”), E4 (“The Perfect Opportunity”), E5 (“Spirit”), E6 (“Unlawful”), E7 (“Reckoning”), E8 (“Beyond Mountains”); Special “The Messengers”; S3/E1 (“Homecoming”), E2 (“Two by Two”), E4 (“Clean, Part 1”), E5 (“Clean, Part 2”), E6 (“Intensity in Tent City”), E7 (“Ears to Hear”), E8 (“Sustenance”); S4/E1 (“Promises”), E2

(“Confessions”), E3 (“Moon to Blood”), E4 (“Calm Before”), E5 (“Sitting, Serving, Scheming”), E6 (“Dedication”), E7 (“The Last Sign”), E8 (“Humble”).

- 6 I use the term “imaginary” in line with Cornelius Castoriadis, who describes the social imaginary as the set of figures, forms and images that build what we call “common sense” or “rationality” in a given historical moment (Castoriadis 1993). Applied to Evangelicalism, it refers to the shared beliefs, symbols and values that characterise and differentiate it from other Christian denominations.
- 7 Jerry B. Jenkins published in national magazines such as *Reader’s Digest* (Selections), *Parade* and *Guideposts*, but his celebrity is due to the success of the serial-published novels with Tim LaHaye *Left Behind*, which sold more than 50 million copies. The influence on his readers has proved far-reaching (Frykholm 2004, p. 11): “Often readers narrate their own interaction with the novels as a spiritual turning point where they realize how pressing and significant God’s plan for history is, how imminent the end may be. They feel compelled to share this concern with others, with unsaved or religiously marginal people in their lives who need to know that the rapture is imminent and also with fellow believers who need to share the message. [...] Furthermore, the appeal of *Left Behind* must be sought still more broadly as part of the American apocalyptic, as an integral part of American culture”.
- 8 The disputes with the Pharisees become more and more acute as the series develops. We find four key issues: (1) Jesus eats with tax collectors and other sinners (S1, S2); (2) he violates Shabbat on several occasions and commands others to do so; in S2/E4, Jesus heals a paralysed man; in S2/E6, the hungry disciples gather wheat on the Sabbath and Jesus heals a man with a withered hand; (3) he claims the authority to forgive sins (S1/E8; S2/E4); and (4) he identifies Himself using a divine title from the prophet Daniel, the Son of Man (S1/E8; S2/E6).
- 9 S2 covers the healing of the paralytic by the pool of Bethesda (E4, John 5:1–13), the exorcism of an unnamed possessed man (E5, cf. Matthew 4:24) and the healing of the man with the withered hand during the Sabbath (E6, Mark 2:23–3:6; Matthew 12:1–14).
- 10 Biblical literalism is further reinforced in S2/E5, where Mary Magdalene randomly encounters a possessed man who identifies her as Lilith, the name by which she was known before she was delivered from the seven demons. In dialogue, the man warns her: “They told me about you [...] all seven of them [...] Oh, the stories they had”. He then identifies himself as “Belial”.
- 11 “Deep Dive”, S1/E1.
- 12 Premillennial dispensationalism originated in the ideas of the British Anglican professor John Nelson Darby (1800–1882). His thinking was widely accepted in the USA at the beginning of the 20th century, helped by the famous preacher Dwight Moody (1837–1899) and the popularity of the Bible notated by Cyrus Scofield, published in 1909. According to this futuristic or eschatological scheme of thought, we are in the final period of human history; our world will continue to deteriorate, until Jesus Christ appears in the clouds and takes the faithful Christians with him, an event known as the “rapture”. The mission of the Church in the end times we live in is to preach the Gospel in order to convert as many people as possible and thus avoid the suffering that will go with the post-rapture period (Ryrie 1995; Cone 2008, pp. 12–31; Frykholm 2014, p. 449).
- 13 Gregory the Great ends with his Homily on the Gospels 33:1 by identifying the two Marys with the sinner who anoints the feet of Jesus in the Gospel of John: “Luke calls this woman a sinner, John names her Mary, and we believe that it is the Mary from whom Mark says that seven demons were cast out” (Magno 2000).
- 14 This play of “before”–“after” opposition is reiterated in other seasons. For example, when in S2/E4 the disciples celebrate the feast of tents, Mary Magdalene states: “There was a time in my life, my old life, when I had to sleep outside. This is a good reminder of how I was delivered from that”.
- 15 Deep Dive, S1/E1.

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