

Notes for “The Chosen” series (Season 1) small groups Pastor Barry Foster

The following notes offer some background information, brief explanations related to Scriptural content and context, and suggestions for things to look for when viewing the episode. One practical note: you may find that it is easier to understand what is being said if the captions are turned on when viewing the show.

Episode 1 “I Have Called You By Name”

Episode 1 introduces us to several important characters in the story of Jesus.

One of the main characters is Nicodemus, a Pharisee and rabbi. In the series Nicodemus is portrayed as the leading teacher of the Pharisees, who holds a position of near-absolute authority and supreme respect. The justification for this portrayal likely stems from a reading of John 3:10 (“*Are you the teacher of Israel . . . ?*”) that takes “the teacher” to mean that he is the supreme rabbi from among the Pharisees whose teaching is followed by all the others.

This reading is not really warranted, nor is it likely historically. We know that there were two major divisions among the Pharisees at the time of Jesus, those who viewed a rabbi named Hillel as the premier scholar among them, and those who viewed a rabbi named Shammai as the premier scholar. But even among their respective disciples, neither of these two rabbis would have been regarded as the only or most authoritative interpreter of the Law, only as the rabbi whom they regarded as best representing the traditions of the elders. So Nicodemus, who was a highly regarded member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the Jews, would have been seen *by his own disciples* as their primary teacher. His teaching would have dominated their understanding of the Law, but not to the exclusion of all other voices.

What the portrayal does reflect accurately is the picture of the Pharisees as those who saw themselves as the only ones who rightly understood, obeyed, and taught the Law. They saw themselves as a group, and each of them personally, as “*the teachers of Israel,*” which is what Jesus is referring to in his question to Nicodemus in John 3:10.

This small inaccuracy aside, the series’ portrayal of Nicodemus captures well the character of a Pharisee—ferently devoted to God, concerned about being righteous above all else, and intrigued by Jesus.

We are also introduced to several characters who will become disciples of Jesus. We meet, for instance, the brothers Simon and Andrew of Bethsaida, Mary of Magdala, and Matthew the tax collector, all of whom are now living in Capernaum, a small city on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. We also encounter Romans in the form of soldiers and a regional commander, responsible for the maintenance of Roman law and order in the province.

As with all historical fiction, the authors have taken some dramatic license and used their creative imagination to tell the story. A few things have been necessary to make the story palatable for contemporary tastes. For instance, the show features dialogue between men and women as something very common and natural (as would be the case today). But that would have been quite unlikely, except, perhaps, in the privacy of the home or in some rural settings. In public, men would normally only speak to females who were relatives; it would be an exceptional breach of decorum to speak to a married woman who was not with her husband. Even in private (or in the rural areas where men and women had to work together in order to

survive), conversations between men and women would not have been between equals, but between a dominant and a subordinate. Only among Jesus' disciples—and even then, probably with considerable awkwardness—would there have been more freedom and consideration of women as full members of the society/community.

Some things to look for:

1. Note how the Romans regard the Jews, and vice versa. How does the character of Matthew fit into this world?
2. Note the differences between the world of the common people and the world of the Pharisees. How does each group view the other? What is each group concerned about?
3. Nicodemus' appeal to a list of angelic beings reflects historical reality. Jewish literature of the time reveals a fascination about angels, including attempts to name them and arrange them by rank.