

Notes for “The Chosen” series (Season 3) 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 6: “Intensity in Tent City”

Once again, we have a very packed episode, with numerous plot lines and conceptual themes running through the story, sometimes converging and other times simply continuing and leading us forward to the next episodes. (1) The opening scene introduces us to two new characters, Pontius Pilate and his wife, with some strong foreshadowing of future scenes in Jesus’ Passion: the garden of Gethsemane, Pilate’s wife’s dream, and the crucifixion. (2) An ongoing motif is the combination of Roman power and dominance and their concern for order. (3) Married to this motif is the growing popularity of Jesus and the corresponding growth of crowds eager to see him. (4) This growing popularity leads to growing concerns by the disciples for Jesus’ safety; Romans, Pharisees, and Zealots are all possible sources of trouble for Jesus. (A secondary concern that is a helpful complication for the plot is ‘Z’s expectation of retaliation from the Zealots for abandoning their Order.)

A major development in the plot concerns the preaching tour of the Decapolis by Andrew and Philip. The Decapolis was a region to the east and south of the Sea of Galilee in which a loose confederation of ten semi-autonomous and mostly independent cities had existed since the third century BCE. (Some ancient lists include as many as eighteen cities; the number varied depending on the territorial changes due to conquests by various rulers or states.) The western area of the Decapolis, including a few of the cities, had occasionally been conquered by Jewish rulers, leading to Jewish settlement in the region, some of whom would have been Hellenistic Jews (Jews who were Greek speaking, and who possibly adopted Greek customs or ways of thinking). But for the most part, the whole of the region was principally populated by a mix of various Gentile peoples—Arabs (Nabateans), Syrian Greeks, and others. The cities were thriving trade centers, located on three roads that connected Damascus with southern Arabia. The history of border wars between the Jews and the various inhabitants in the area (beginning with the period of the Maccabean kings [167-63 BCE] and continuing until the reign of Herod the Great [d. 4 BCE]) made the region one in which the underlying conflicts between the Jews and the Gentiles often erupted into open hostility.

The writers have postulated such a setting of conflict that suddenly explodes coming about as a result of the preaching of the disciples. Though the disciples obeyed Jesus’ instructions to restrict their preaching to the Jewish people only, their message was overheard by Gentiles in the region, leading to considerable tension and outbreaks of violence. This raises questions about the historical likelihood that Jesus or his disciples actively sought to minister to Gentiles during Jesus’ lifetime. Scot McKnight points out that while Jesus occasionally ministered to Gentiles, he did not seek them out or go out of his way to find them. Gentile participation in the kingdom during his ministry was the exception, not the rule.¹ Since the extension of the gospel to the Gentiles in the book of Acts was clearly seen as a new and

problematic stage in the church's growth, it seems highly unlikely that Jesus or his disciples actively sought to minister to Gentiles prior to his ascension and the sending of the Spirit.

Two other developments relate to the characters, specifically, some of the disciples, which allows the creators to address common issues among Christians today. Although the series is not "preachy" in the way many Christian media productions are, there are certainly some moments when opportunities for "life lessons" arise in the story. Simon and Eden continue to have marital problems. And Mary Magdalene and Tamar have a dramatic confrontation that exposes their respective sources of pain, shame, and insecurities, providing a chance for them (and us) to learn about forgiveness, understanding one another instead of judging, and how Jesus can heal our brokenness.

One final development involves John the Baptist and his disciples who come to question Jesus. You can read about this in Matthew 11:2-19 and Luke 7:18-35.

Some things to look for:

1. Pontius Pilate is portrayed as a fairly young man who is more indifferent to the suffering of Jews (Zealots) who are crucified than vicious or cruel. His ambition is also downplayed; at one point he claims that he is mostly concerned about governing in peace rather than achieving victories in war.

2. There is a passing mention of "the four philosophies." This is a reference to something explained by Josephus, a Jewish historian, in his *Antiquities of the Jews* and *Jewish Wars*. Josephus uses the term "philosophies" to describe four different sects within Second Temple Judaism: Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots. In this way he can explain the differences among these religious groups as something comprehensible to his Roman readers.

3. An extraordinarily significant (and difficult) question—for this series, as for the gospel writers and for those who heard Jesus during his ministry—comes to the forefront in this episode: "Is Jesus the promised Messiah of Israel?" But the follow-up question is even more important, again, in all three settings: "If he is the Messiah, what kind of a Messiah is he?" Note that this question comes to light in a scene where we find a variety of people in the crowd who are listening to Jesus—John's disciples, Zealots, other Jews, and Romans.

4. Jonathan Roumie, the actor who plays Jesus, when preaching or healing someone, often assumes a pose that resembles the clichéd depiction of Jesus in medieval and Renaissance paintings—right hand lifted up with two fingers and thumb extended heavenward. I cannot tell if this is intentional (and if so, why?), accidental, or unconscious borrowing.

Some questions to consider:

1. One of the disciples says of Jesus, "Reputation has never seemed to be an issue for him." What do you think about that? How did Jesus approach the question of his reputation?

2. Where have you had to face your own failures or brokenness? How has Jesus helped you heal? How have others in the church helped you find healing?

3. Why do you think John the Baptist asked Jesus if he was the one who was to come? Why did Jesus answer the way he did?

Endnotes

1. Scot McKnight, "Gentiles," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 259-265, p. 260-61.