

The Streaming Rush to Turn Scripture Into Scripts

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A once-beloved king slips into madness as wary confidants surround him, breathless for his next maneuver.

A soldier wrestles with his dueling loyalties toward family and friendship.

A young man from a humble background defeats a brute, not knowing that the victory sets him on a path to ascend into power.

With its interpersonal intrigue and battlefield bloodshed, "House of David" looks like it could be an alternate-universe of "Game of Thrones." But rather than an adaptation of a high fantasy franchise from the 1990s, its source material goes back millennia.

"House of David," a series that premiered on Amazon Prime Video on Thursday, tells the story of David, the biblical shepherd who used a sling and stone to defeat the giant Goliath before assuming King Saul's throne. It is part of the original faith-based programming that streaming services are unveiling to court the viewers who have made "The Chosen," a prestige drama about the life of Jesus Christ, one of the most successful crowdfunded television or film projects of all time.

"The sheer size of the audience is enormous," said Jon Erwin, who pitched "House of David" to Amazon and co-directed several of the first season's eight episodes. "It is the largest underserved niche audience in the world."

Viewership figures from streaming shows are rarely made public, but the team behind "The Chosen" estimates that the show has been watched by more than 280 million unique viewers worldwide, a third of whom it says are not religious. The hit show feels more like a workplace comedy-drama, a version of "The West Wing" set in Galilee, than the direct evangelism of the widely translated "The Jesus Film" (1979) or the storybook sermons of the 1990s animated series "VeggieTales."

As "The Chosen" approaches its predestined ending — the biblical story of Jesus' crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension — streaming services are looking for what could capture its fervent audience next.

"Chosen" spinoffs about the spread of Christianity and Old Testament figures are already in the works. And other studios are eager to adapt material that has zero copyright protection and billions of adherents.

Last year, Netflix signed a deal for faith-based entertainment that will begin with a modern-day retelling of the story of Ruth and Boaz. It also released "Mary," a biopic about the mother of Jesus that included the Oscar winner Anthony Hopkins as King Herod.

"House of David" is among the first fruits of Amazon's collaboration with Wonder Project, led by Erwin, the director of movies like "I Can Only Imagine" and "Jesus Revolution," and Kelly Merryman Hoogstraten, a former Netflix and YouTube executive.

Vernon Sanders, the co-head of television at Amazon MGM Studios, said the company was responding to viewership data about TV shows and movies with religious elements. "On a Wing and a Prayer," a movie starring Dennis Quaid as a Christian family man who must land a plane after the pilot has a heart attack, was unexpectedly popular.

"This audience often is pigeonholed in a way that doesn't really speak to their sort of entertainment," Sanders said. "They love big action movies, they love rom-coms and they love inspiring stories."

"House of David" has a little bit of everything.

The collage of characters striving for power or peace, including Saul's son Jonathan, a close friend of David's, is reminiscent of the courtly intrigue in glossy dramas like "The Tudors." There are jokes, too: "I advise you to get plenty of sleep now," the seer Samuel says to a soon-to-be father. "I prophesy you will need it."

Before flashing back in time, the show opens with a famous battle that deviates from the biblical story by having Goliath pierce David with a spear. As the young shepherd begins to bleed into the earth, the camera focuses on a rock within his reach.

Making a TV show based on a religious text is a different task from adapting a book series that is considered sacred only by its most avowed fans. For "House of David," pastors, historians and biblical and rabbinical scholars were consulted for accuracy.

But centuries-old sources translated from Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic do not necessarily make for snappy dialogue. Script writers must put words into the mouths of adored figures and create scenes that connect the dots between events in the original text, which some viewers of "The Chosen" may see as blasphemous.

Casting also means putting modern faces to ancient names. Erwin said that the actors in "House of David" did not have to be religious, but that the production wanted people who were excited about the story.

David is played by Michael Iskander, a 23-year-old actor who was born in Egypt and is making his screen debut after appearing in the Broadway musical "Kimberly Akimbo." Portraying Goliath is Martyn Ford, a 6-foot-8 bodybuilder and actor from England who has played heavies in the "Fast and Furious" series. His nickname is the Nightmare.

The show was filmed in hilly patches of Greece and Canada, stand-ins for the Judean Mountains in the West Bank and Israel. That location filming is a sign of renewed investment into religious entertainment. Dallas Jenkins, the creator of "The Chosen," said that dedicated viewers of biblical stories often forgave scrappier productions with rough edges, but that high production values make it easier to reach broader audiences.

"There's no reason that some of the most famous stories in the world can't be treated as though they are a relevant part of the culture," Jenkins said.

A lasting religious revival in Hollywood is unlikely, said Diane Winston, a professor at the University of Southern California who studies religion in media and pointed to the cyclical nature of faith in entertainment.

But the increased outreach, she said, could be a savvy financial move for a secular business looking to spiritual audiences.

"Streaming services are companies that need to make money, and what drives them is getting more eyeballs," she said. "If they think faith-based content is going to get that for them, they will invest in it."

Erwin said Wonder Project shows would lean on religious themes and morals while trying to serve an audience with diverse tastes. Amazon has also greenlit the studio's "It's Not Like That," the story of a widower minister and a divorced mother of teenagers who must now navigate lives as single parents in the church.

Netflix's deal for faith-based productions is with the mogul Tyler Perry and DeVon Franklin, a Christian motivational speaker who has previously produced secular films and adaptations of popular Christian memoirs. The partnership will begin with "R&B," the modern-day retelling of Ruth and Boaz, which places the story in Tennessee and follows a young woman finding love after escaping the Atlanta music scene and caring for a widowed woman played by Phylicia Rashad.

It is no mistake that streaming services are investing in faith-based entertainment after the success of "The Chosen." The actor who plays Jesus, Jonathan Roumie, has been swarmed by fans who look to him as a stand-in for Christ, he recently told The New York Times, including one woman who hoped he could heal her child who uses a wheelchair.

Season 5 of the show's planned seven-season arc, which includes the Last Supper and Judas's betrayal of Jesus, will premiere in theaters this month (with episodes bundled in sets) before streaming exclusively on Prime Video for 90 days. It will then be available on its own app for free, but can no longer be found on Netflix, Hulu and Peacock.

The next chapters in the "Chosen" universe will include "The Acts of the Apostles" and stand-alone seasons that follow the biblical figures Joseph and Moses. Jenkins is also developing a reality wilderness program, "The Chosen in the Wild With Bear Grylls," and a children's animated series, "The Chosen Adventures." As part of the deal that gives Prime Video exclusive streaming rights to the main series, the company will get the first look at all projects related to "The Chosen."

This latest push by streaming services has the potential to expand their international audiences, with large Christian communities in countries including Nigeria and the Philippines. Many of the productions will also appeal to an ascendant group in the United States, where President Trump has received substantial support from white evangelical Christians.

But Erwin said Wonder Project's productions were not intended to be partisan. He emphasized that an underdog story like David toppling Goliath has value for anyone, regardless of religious or political affiliation.

"We might all have different opinions on the size and scope of government or free enterprise," Erwin said. "But at our core, we really do believe in a lot of the same things."