

The Theology of Cinema: Chosen

[Scott Myers](#)

The archetype of the Chosen One is common to movies, echoing the Messiah figure in ancient religions.



Neo is an example of a Chosen figure in 'The Matrix,' his name an anagram for the word "One."

As many of you may know, I have a background in the academic study of theology, a B.A. in religious studies from the University of Virginia and a Masters of Divinity degree from Yale. So it is only natural I bring that perspective to how I view and understand movies and screenwriting.

Let me be clear, when I say *theological*, I mean it — in this

context — in a secular way. How does that make sense?

The word “theology” is a combination of two Greek words: “theos” which means God and “logos” which means word. So theology is *words about God*. What if for this series we think of God as a metaphor for an explanation for the big questions of life? Thus, theology as *words about the meaning of life*. Broadly speaking that is one dynamic movies hit on consistently, characters forced to confront their values, behaviors, and world views related to who they are and how they should act.

In this respect, movies and theology wade in very much the same thematic waters. As Andrew Stanton noted about *Lawrence of Arabia* in this [TED Talk](#), how the central theme of that story is the question asked of the Protagonist “who are you,” that issue exists at the core of perhaps every movie, an existential exploration of a character or characters’ self-identity. So, too, with theology.

Also, movies tend to be about characters at critical junctures in their lives, facing a journey from the Old World into a New World where through a series of challenges and lessons they undergo a significant metamorphosis. Sounds an awful lot like a conversion experience to me.

Thus, it is only natural there will be a lot of crossover of theological themes in movies. But while a theological theme in a movie *may* have a religious or spiritual connotation, I am more interested in exploring such themes metaphorically to

find the widest value possible for screenwriters at large.

By working with this non-religious take on the concept, we can avail ourselves of numerous powerful theological themes in screenwriting regardless of whether our stories are secular or non-secular.

Today: Chosen.

The theme of being chosen by God exists at the core of the Judeo-Christian tradition and in other major religions as well. For example, the very idea of the covenant relationship between Yahweh and the Children of Israel is based upon the premise that God chose them: "For you are a holy people to Yahweh your God, and God has chosen you to be his treasured people from all the nations that are on the face of the earth." [Deuteronomy 14:2]

Likewise in the New Testament, when John the Baptist baptized Jesus in the Jordan River, it is written he said, "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and I testify that this is God's Chosen One." [John 1:32–34]

We see this messianic theme of the Chosen One in dozens of movies ranging from Neo in *The Matrix* to Frodo Baggins in *The Lord of the Rings* to Sarah Connor in *The Terminator* series to Harry Potter. This makes sense on many levels.

First, we like heroes and heroines, we want to believe there are individuals who are willing and capable of taking on seemingly insurmountable tasks. We find that to be a source of hope.

Moreover, we enjoy getting swept up in their escapades, often the underdog versus significant opposition and extremely long odds. We find that entertaining.

Also, whenever we follow the exploits of a Chosen One, we may indulge in a type of wish fulfillment, imagining that within our Self, we are unique, we are heroic, we are chosen. We find that to be empowering.

Obviously, there are exalted types of chosen figures. We need look no further than most any superhero movie playing at the local theater to find this dynamic at work. However, the idea of being chosen can work in any story, genre or scope of narrative.

It can be present in a small indie drama like *Little Miss Sunshine* where Olive being chosen to participate in the beauty pageant sets into motion the entire plot; a horror story like *The Exorcist* where Satan chooses to inhabit Regan's body; or a mainstream comedy like *The Santa Clause* where Scott Calvin is chosen to take on the role of Santa Claus.

I was reminded of this theological theme when watching the 2006 movie *Children of Men*. The IMDB plot summary: "In 2027, in a chaotic world in which women have become

somehow infertile, a former activist agrees to help transport a miraculously pregnant woman to a sanctuary at sea."

Here we have the theme at work in the lives of two characters: Theo (Clive Owen), the former activist, and Kee (Clare-Hope Ashitey), the young pregnant woman.



Kee is chosen in the sense she is the only pregnant woman in an infertile world. Indeed there is a comparison to be made to Mary, the mother of Jesus. For example, Kee, like Mary, is a young mother. When we first meet Kee, she is in a barn, reminiscent of the stable in which Mary is said to have given birth to Jesus. Kee has to travel many miles before giving birth, much like Mary. Most notably, the pregnancy itself is perceived to something akin to sacred.

Likewise, Theo is chosen by his former wife Julian (Julianne

Moore) to transport Kee to the Human Project. Later, when events become chaotic, Kee chooses to go with Theo rather than stay with the people who have been supporting her all along.

Once Kee gives birth, there are a host of incredible scenes evoking theological symbolism, perhaps most powerfully this one:



Theo guarding Kee and the baby through rebel fighters and government troops, briefly stopping their battle to gaze in awe at the miracle of the newborn child.

The fates of Theo and Kee bring them together, both chosen for this journey, their relationship functioning symbolically the emergence of a New Creation — Theo as

Adam to Kee's Eve.

Then again Theo, which as noted above, is Greek for "god," takes on the role of savior in the end, the ultimate act of a hero — giving up his life on behalf of a cause bigger than himself.

Broadly speaking, it is almost inevitable any of the Protagonists we write are in some sense chosen within the context of their story universe. Whether by an external force plucking them out of obscurity or the Protagonist responding to his/her own inner need to become who they are, or as in most cases a combination of both, their journey is an expression of them being chosen for that particular adventure.

It is the very essence of the Call to Adventure: The Protagonist chosen by Fate to go on a life-changing journey.

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