Opinion
Culture



Mehdi Dehbi is the mysterious man Al-Masih in the Netflix series "The Messiah," which was largely filmed in Jordan. (Netflix)



by Rose Pacatte

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"What better agent of chaos is there than a new Messiah?" asks a character in the new Netflix drama series "Messiah" from show creator and writer Michael Petroni and executive producers Mark Burnett and Roma Downey.

This 10-part streaming series arrived on Jan. 1, and its title caught my imagination and engaged my curiosity from the first moments because it was not what I expected. Petroni ("The Book Thief," "The Rite"), brings together the three main monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and others to answer the question "What if the Messiah came back today?" It proceeds to take audiences on an intelligent, spiritually risky journey, steeped in current geopolitical and religious events, to discover the answers.

In the modern-day Middle East, crowds of men and boys listen to a fine-looking young man with a beard and long black hair who tells them that God is with them as a huge sandstorm overtakes the city. They are an impoverished people who practice Islam. They need hope, something to believe in, like Jibril (Sayyid El Alami) whose mother is killed, and he has to bury her in the rubble of their bombed-out home in Syria. The people call the mysterious man Al-Masih (Mehdi Dehbi). He asks the crowd to do something difficult: to bring their guns and arms and bury them. His ascetic persona has some kind of draw over them, and they do so. Then Al-Masih leads them into the desert and they amass at a barricade at the Israeli border.

CIA agent Eva Geller (Michelle Monaghan), barely recovered from a health issue, learns of the perceived threat to America's ally from the moving crowd of humanity via satellite coverage and orders that their Israeli counterparts be notified. The mysterious young man walks to the make-shift border fence with Israel and climbs through. The Israelis, in a state of shock, react slowly but take him into custody. Aviram "Avi" Dahan (Tomer Sisley), a Shin Bet security officer, interrogates him, but when the mysterious young man tells him secret things about his past that no one else knows, Avi covers his head with a hood and erases the tape of the session. Later that day, Al-Masih disappears from his cell.



From left: Melinda Page Hamilton, John Ortiz and Stefania LaVie Owen play characters living in Dilly, Texas, in the Netflix series "The Messiah." (Netflix)

In the small town of Dilly, Texas, the Rev. Felix Iguero (John Ortiz) learns from his depressed wife Anna (Melinda Page Hamilton) that the church is almost bankrupt. She wants to borrow money from her wealthy father, a televangelist Edmund DeGuilles (Beau Bridges), but Felix refuses and begins to plan something drastic. Their teen daughter, Rebecca (Stefania LaVie Owen) is troubled and feels suffocated in their small town. She runs away just as a massive tornado strikes Dilly.

In "Messiah" everyone has a secret, and everyone needs a redeemer. The end of the current age is at hand and a new world is about to be born. Or is it?

Early on, Geller sees a quote from Oprah carved into a seat at a diner: "You become what you believe." Although show creator and writer Petroni uses this cliché to tease this first season, it can keep believers and non-believers who may be watching on the edge of their seats. Faith and skepticism are rampant, and most government officials fuel cynicism with their decisions.

The writing, acting and directing is excellent throughout the series, though a few of the plot twists stretched the imagination at first (which I cannot get into without giving away the story). The series works well, however, because the key characters are well developed and their performances are strong, consistent, believable and human. Dialogue is sparse, and for once I wasn't able to fill in the next sentence before the characters uttered it. This series is unique, quality television.

Watching "Messiah" I was reminded of one of my favorite television series ever, Sundance TV's "Rectify" from the genius of Ray McKinnon. The main character, Daniel Holden (Aden Young), has been newly released from 20 years on death row for a crime he did not commit. He seems physically and spiritually bound-up with regret, suffering and love. He does not speak much, but when he does it is meaningful.

I think that Geller is very much like Holden, and Monaghan's performance is right out of a best actor's playbook. Sisley, a German-French actor who plays the Israeli agent, Avi, is right up there with Monaghan, and I wonder why we have not seen him more often on the screen — he's that good. But none of this could happen without great writing, and Petroni delivers here, doing what I think is his best work yet. A nod to directors James McTeigue and Kate Woods (who also directed an episode of "Rectify") for their work. They show an understanding of the characters and a complex, layered storyline.

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The faith of it

I kept asking myself about the worldview and theology driving the series because it got under my skin. As the series comes from Burnett and Downey ("The Bible," "Ben-Hur") I expected "Messiah" to be heavily evangelical Christian in its orientation, and it is — sometimes.

There are two places where I thought the plot was lost because it seemed so message-laden, no matter how much I agreed with Al-Masih's words. However, themes of peace, demilitarization, ending occupation, and of tolerance and respect for different faiths, guide the series. Al-Masih tells U.S. President Young (Dermot Mulroney), "A hundred years ago, Europeans chose lines and called them borders

and then brutally enforced them. … The world is about to begin again, and you need to do your part. You can usher in a thousand years of peace if you bring home all your military, and every man and woman will remember you as a man of peace." Personally, I think this is a great idea.

There are also strong references to human rights, as well as to Judaism and Islam, and nods to Catholic Christianity and Mormonism. At least once Al-Masih prays in a Buddhist posture. No, the series is not trying to create a one-world religion, but I think it tends toward a vision of humanity united by differences, justice and peace. But, if there is a second season, anything could happen.

Theologically and politically, the show is bound to evoke strong responses. Jordan's Royal Film Commission, where the film was largely filmed, has asked Netflix not to stream it there. The Times of Israel noted there is a shootout at the Temple Mount, to which Petroni said, "The show is provocative, but provocative is not offensive." This of course, is a matter of opinion.



Michelle Monaghan, right, as CIA agent Eva Geller, questions Mehdi Dehbi, Al-Masih, in a scene from the Netflix series "The Messiah." (Netflix)

The idea of the end times drives the series. As I watched it, I was reminded of two film versions of the novel "Left Behind" (2000; 2008) about the world's last days and the Second Coming. There are hints of the biblical "dispensationalism," or historical biblical progression of God's salvific action in the world, put forth by the relatively recent Christian sect, the Plymouth Brethren in the late 18th century. Basically, this means that we are now approaching the turbulent end times when the Messiah will return to the nation of Israel and save the Jewish people.

Then, at other times I was reminded of Pier Paolo Pasolini's unproduced script, "St. Paul." Its realism and contemporary visioning of what Paul would be like in modern urban settings breaks through all cinematic and historically bound theological concepts. So does Petroni's "Messiah." I asked if he had read this script (it's available on Amazon) and he smiled and said that Burnett had given it to him — after the pilot was written.

Writer says there is no particular theological view

Mystery drives the series that, to me, seems to say that everyone, every family, community and nation is in need of a messiah. Petroni explained in an interview with me before the series premiered that "the trick of the show is that you don't ever give away who that person is so the audience can believe — or not — what's going on. Your perception is only through the character's point of view and human experience, and this leaves it up to you, the audience, to decide the meaning of what's going on, and what the bigger picture is.

"Historical biblical development is something I took very seriously because it is not something fantastical," he continued. "And it makes sense that the Al-Masih character emerges from the Middle East. If you look at Islam, the prophet shows up in Damascus. Syria today is a boiling pot of political and religious turmoil. What better place for a messianic person to come from? What would logically happen next if that person had followers? What do all these refuges want? They want to return to their land."



Tomer Sisley, left, and Mehdi Dehbi in the Netflix series "The Messiah" (Netflix)

Petroni said he asked himself what would happen if the Messiah were to return today.

"It was like walking the idea into a forest. I didn't know where it was going to go. I asked, 'What would his coming look like now? How would his influence be spread? What would the 24-hour news cycle look like if someone like Al-Masih was walking around? What would social media do with his sudden appearance? How could someone like this have an impact or influence society today?' "

Petroni told me he did a lot of research for the show. However, "it doesn't take any particular theological point of view. This is the thing about it, everyone can have their own opinion about what is going on, or who Al-Masih really is. Faith is a very personal thing that we take very seriously. When you involve it with politics, it can drive people crazy."

"Messiah" asks a lot of us as an audience because it seems inconsistent with a comfortable Christian life that many of us have settled into. There is little comfort in the affliction that Al-Masih's words and demeanor communicate. He is a gadfly, a prophet, who teaches peace. But who is he? Where did he come from? Who are his family?

"You will be challenged to bring your own perspective to trying to figure out what the series means at any given time," Petroni said. "Al-Masih seems to threaten the geopolitical world view and human rights for some characters and the limits of religious faith to others. He asks the American president to act on his faith. I hope the series is an invitation for people to talk about what it might look like if the Messiah came today. It is a mainstream show that I hope will stimulate conversation and uplift the religious genre from pablum to substance. I wanted to take this idea seriously because if we don't take faith seriously, it diminishes religious belief."

Petroni was not about to tell me where the series was headed if it gets a second season, which I hope it will. I asked if the pope, as the leader of the world's most populous religion, would make an appearance, or if Al-Masih would reach out to him. Petroni smiled and said, "You'll have to wait and see."

I think the series is worth your time. You don't have to be religious; the characters' personal stories are profoundly interesting even as Al-Masih's story seems to parallel that of Jesus — except when it doesn't.

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