

BOOK REVIEWS

Review of *The Righteous Gemstones*, Season 4, Episode 1, "Prelude"

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The Righteous Gemstones, Season 4, Episode 1, "Prelude," directed by Danny McBride, aired March 9, 2025, on HBO Max, <https://www.hbo.com/the-righteous-gemstones/season-4/1-prelude>.

Spoiler alert

Sometimes the stars align. And so it is that on the eve of the 250th anniversary of military chaplaincy in the U.S., Bradley Cooper gives the most significant Hollywood portrayal of a military chaplain in decades in a prestige TV comedy-drama.¹

The Righteous Gemstone is a satirical comedy series created by Danny McBride and stars John Goodman as Eli Gemstone, Danny McBride as Jesse Gemstone, Adam DeVine as Kelvin Gemstone, and Edi Patterson as Judy Gemstone. The show follows a dynasty of megachurch, prosperity gospel televangelists at the height of their wealth and fame. The showrunners devote the entire first episode of the final season ("Prelude") to the story of Elijah Gemstone (played by Cooper), the great, great, great . . . grandfather of the main characters of the show. *The Righteous Gemstones* is a send up of religion in America more broadly and televangelism in particular. The episode traces the entwinement of religion and money back to the story of a grifter become chaplain.

Clips of this episode will no doubt make the rounds among chaplains online and eventually end up as funny illustrations in the courseware at the U.S. Army Institute for Religious Leadership. There is certainly a wealth of what-not-to-do fodder to be had here. Beneath the veneer of funny anecdotes of what it looks like to be a bad chaplain, important questions emerge.

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¹ For a good treatment of military chaplains in film before 1986 see Terry Lindvall, "The Faint Image of the Chaplain in Twentieth Century Combat Films," *Military Chaplain's Review* (Spring 1987), 1-26, <https://mcr.scholasticahq.com/article/127871-the-faint-image-of-the-chaplain-in-twentieth-century-combat-films>.

The episode opens with Abel Grieves (played by Josh McDermitt), a preacher in Civil War-era Virginia, banging on about God's support for states' rights and encouraging a congregation of full of women (many likely widowed) and children to give as the plate is passed. Cooper as Gemstone enters the back of the sanctuary in time to find Grieves going through the offering. Gemstone calls out his hypocrisy right before shooting him in the head and grabbing his take from the plate and Grieves' gold-plated Bible.

The universe comes knocking for Gemstone in the form of a Confederate unit looking for a chaplain. Although the job offer feels more like a conscription, upon hearing about the benefits package (fifty dollars per month and food!) Gemstone quickly assents and assumes the identity of his victim. Gemstone (now as Grieves) makes for the nearby camp with his new unit.

The episode follows Gemstone as he is thrust into various chaplain responsibilities while continuing to indulge his previous habits of drinking and gambling. We see him halfheartedly try (and fail) to meet the moment again and again. We meet him frequently at the bedside of soldiers in the openair field hospital. He runs out the clock on multiple occasions when he is asked to pray: "I did already. Yeah, it's done. I've been praying the whole time, silently in my mind." On Sunday, he's asked to get up and preach. He brings a Bible "to add authenticity" and tells the gathered soldiers to "do [their] best" before quickly bringing his message to a close because he doesn't want "to take up the rest of [their] Sunday morning."

He's a con man who is so confident in his newly bestowed office that he doesn't need to or bother trying to be convincing. When Captain Cane (played by Jim Cummings) questions him about the rumors swirling that the chaplain has been drinking and gambling with the men ("odd behavior from a minister"), Gemstone denies the accusations and weaponizes Cane's faith against him: "don't allow others to paint a man of God as a blasphemer. You can go to hell for that." Cane relents amid his own uncertainty about what the Bible says.

Gemstone is finally recognized by a soldier who had gambled with him before and knows he's not a real preacher. It becomes one more occasion for his real con, taking money at the card table. The soldier brings Gemstone in on a scheme to win big. Gemstone kills him to keep the haul and to keep himself from being exposed as a fraud.

The next day Gemstone heads out with his soldiers to presumably meet the "yanks" on the field of battle. They are ambushed instead, and Gemstone and a handful of other survivors are taken prisoner by the Union Army. Before they are executed, someone finds the gold Bible on Gemstone. The officer in charge discerns that he is the unit chaplain and pulls him out and asks him to pray for the men. Gemstone's retort that "it seems like bad timing"

summarizes his ministry to date. He relents and goes back to pray with the men. Some of the tension of the moment is cut when one of the prisoners asks if Gemstone if he could “tell them I’m your assistant chaplain” upon learning that Gemstone is being let go. When the men ask him to pray with them Gemstone finally speaks from the heart.

He advocates for them, praying: “They killed people because they had to. Now I know that ain’t great. But it’s better than killing for money or out of meanness.” The viewers have seen Gemstone kill for money twice and it seems likely that those weren’t the only times. He “gives each of them his highest recommendation that they get into heaven.” His prayer closes with him wrestling with the weight of his own sin in the face of the deaths of his soldiers.

The newly freed Gemstone could have cut and run, but he loads up the bodies of the executed prisoners in a wagon. Upon his return to the Confederate camp with the deceased, he declares that it was God who saved him. The episode closes with him back in his tent opening that gold Bible for the first time.

For a family that runs a ministry as grift, the backstory could portray a slippery slope, a fall from grace, a time when their faith was pure but became corrupted. Elijah Gemstone’s story is no straightforward declension narrative. Elijah comes to faith as a con man and a lover of money. The set up for the use and abuse of religion for personal gain is baked in from the beginning. But in this episode and throughout the series, the showrunners are careful not to dismiss the faith of Gemstone or the Gemstones as meaningless. It is precisely because there is something deeply compelling going on that they can pack their congregation and their coffers.

The story of Elijah Gemstone has its own place and logic within the series. But the show and this episode also portray larger trends in American religion. The local church pastor killed by the soon to be chaplain feels very on the nose regarding those trends, even if unintentionally. As local religious leaders decline both numerically and in public relevance, chaplains seem poised to remain welcome in life’s most fraught moments: by deathbeds, on death row, and in camps of all kinds in the valley of the shadow of death. That there are no atheists in foxholes is a severe overstatement. Even so, soldiers will continue to seek God and grace in the wake of killing and death. The question remains as to how chaplains will meet these moments if they are unmoored from the communities and traditions out of which the wisdom they practice or peddle emerged.

This episode unfolds in the American South during the Civil War and primarily among Confederate soldiers. It would be easy to focus on the individual failings of Gemstone, but what I have been drawing out here is how those failings take place within significant contexts. Gemstone’s ministry,

unlike Grieves, is not put in the service of Confederate politics. We never see him seek to rally his soldiers to “the cause.” Gemstone operates in seeming ignorance of both the wider religious context and the wider moral and the political context of the Civil War. In some ways that is helpful. The comfort Gemstone offers his soldiers in his sermon and prayers is that he sees the incredibly difficult spot they are in. And that’s not nothing. It is certainly more than the Abel Grieves of the world could offer them. But we also never see him question any of it. The faith that Gemstone comes to in the end is disconnected from a religious community and offers him no frame for understanding the war or the work of people of faith in relation to the war. Gemstone’s shortcomings are not his alone; they are part of the fractures between and among people that makes—as he discovers—the work of ministry so necessary and so hard. And so, in the end he returns to the only community he knows, his fellow Confederates.

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