

Manger politics: The Nativity Story

by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [December 26, 2006](#) issue

So where does Jesus ever say, “I’m the Son of God”? My cabdriver was pressing me as we careened through the streets of Birmingham on the way to the airport. “The Gospel of John?” I replied limply.

“Come on! Late gospel, you know that. Stick with the synoptics! Where does Jesus himself ever say that he was born of a virgin, that he was God incarnate?” My driver continued his Muslim exam of my evidence for the incarnation. I had been crazy to admit to this Pakistani cabdriver that I was a minister.

He had a point. That God Almighty should become flesh and move in with us is the strangest of all affirmations of faith. Many other faiths are willing to walk with Christians a long way, but part company when it comes to the incarnation. Jesus Christ, fully God, fully human? Chalcedonian Christianity is as tough to sustain today as ever.

I was reluctant to see *The Nativity Story*, director Catherine Hardwicke’s film rendition of the tale that makes Christianity strange. Three factors accounted for my disinclination: 1) Having preached 35 years of Christmas sermons, I know how hard it is to bring anything new or interesting to a story that is either suffocatingly familiar or overly sentimentalized; 2) I was turned off by the barrage of publicity foisted on pastors by New Line Cinema since September; and 3) I feared that Mel Gibson’s mishmash of the Passion had ended the possibility of credible biblical movies forever.

But *Nativity* got me. Though not devoid of sentimentality, it isn’t sentimental mush. The film begins in violence—state-sponsored violence by the Roman occupation forces in Judea. It ends in violence by the same troops. Matthew would surely approve of the way the movie makes Herod, lackey for the Romans, and his troops—the hooves of their horses storming into town—a constant threat. Herod, played by Ciaran Hinds, is nervous, insecure and dangerous. He and Herod Antipas are an oily, seedy duo of politicians. Ironically, they are also insightful—they are the first to know that this baby poses a challenge to their power.

From one angle, *Nativity* is an anti-war film, a film opposed to occupying armies and hardnosed politicians. The film shows the occupying power's brutal taxation system and the day-to-day terror of a land under siege by a foreign power. In one scene, after Roman troops have pursued some villagers for their tax payments, Mary and Joseph pass by the crucified bodies of villagers, which have been strung up in trees along the road as a warning. A street prophet who dares to speak of the advent of the Messiah is dragged away and crucified as Mary and Joseph make their way to Bethlehem. The movie ends with the Holy Family's getaway to Egypt in the nick of time as more Jewish babies are slaughtered.

Nativity is beautifully filmed. The scenes of Judean village life seem real and devoid of cosmetics. Peasant Judaism is lovingly portrayed. The baby Jesus is shown being born among a people whose faith is vibrant, hopeful and resistant to the powers that be.

Women figure prominently in the story, as they do in the Gospels, performing heroic acts of defiance and fidelity. God upsets a male-dominated world through women like Mary and Elizabeth. The gynecological detail is unsettling, but not as much as it is in the Gospels themselves. Mary is wonderfully played by Keisha Castle-Hughes (who was introduced to the film world in *Whale Rider*).

I thought the movie did too much with Joseph (Oscar Isaac), transforming him from a silent onlooker (in Matthew's portrayal) into a man with whom Mary had a wonderful, caring relationship. I don't doubt that Mary and Joseph had a wonderful relationship, but it's interesting that the Gospels don't feel the need to focus on Joseph. I also question the decision to have the Magi provide comic relief. One of them repeatedly says, "If I am right, and I usually am . . ." And the scene in which the pregnant Mary is dunked into the water after a snake threatens the Holy Family is silly—as if the story needed a bit of Hollywood drama to relieve the tedium of the biblical narrative.

I don't know what could have been done to make the angelic visions work better, but I loved the use of a hawk flapping away portentously every time an angel appears. A bird of prey like the hawk seems just about right for a God who would impregnate a poor, adolescent girl and then send an angel to call her "blessed."

At Jesus' birth, the film makes a perhaps inevitable lapse into the hackneyed with a crèche-like depiction of the illuminated manger in the cave, a scene more indebted to Radio City than to scripture. But the poor shepherds, stumbling out of the fields in

the middle of the night to make their way to the stable, are well portrayed. It is repeatedly made clear that this Messiah has come to the poor, from the poor, for the poor and that Herod has good reason to be nervous.

The politics of the Nativity story as presented so forcefully by Luke and Matthew really come through. Perhaps the politics came through to me especially because I saw the film just a few days after Bush returned from a frustrating trip to Iraq where he had pleaded, apparently unsuccessfully, with Herod (I mean, Iraq prime minister Nouri al-Maliki) to get tough and act like a real king. The baby, whom Mary births in pain upon the straw of a cowshed, threatens to take back what belongs to God.

The incarnation—God as human being, as Jew, as peasant, as a vulnerable baby born to a poor family on the margins, nonviolent but threatening—this is the strangest story of all. It is the story that preachers must rise again to proclaim, a story that, if true, is the most glorious story of all. As Luther says: “It is the honor and glory of our God . . . that, giving himself for our sake in deepest condescension, he passes into the flesh, the bread, our hearts, mouths, entrails, and suffers also for our sake that he be dishonorably handled, on the altar as on the cross.” This Hollywood movie told me that story so that even I, who have heard and told the story so many times, heard it yet again.