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# The Nativity Story

## **Abstract**

This is a review of *The Nativity Story* (2006).

Few showgoers (other than Mel Gibson himself, presumably) were as satisfied as I was that the exquisite *Passion of the Christ* was a blockbuster even by secular box-office standards back in Lent 2004. I did worry at the time, however, that Hollywood cynics sensing a fad would soon churn out mediocre religious biopics, hoping to cash in on the latest celluloid trend.

When New Line Cinema released *The Nativity Story* during Advent 2006, I was skeptical that the flick would be little more than a bland Sunday school pageant catered to cash in on the already over-commercialized Christmas season. Now that the feature is available on DVD, I am happy to admit how ungenerous I was in making such an assumption.

Academy award-nominated actress Keshia Castle-Hughes stars in *Nativity* as Mary, a Jew divinely lifted out of her household's obscurity to become one the most famous heroes of religious history. Director Catherine Hardwicke thus continues the pattern started in *The Passion* of casting Jesus' biological mother as more of a practical, resolute woman of God rather than the simple-hearted, effervescent darling she is often portrayed as in other epics. Jehovah's "highly favoured" handmaiden starts out in the movie as a somewhat sullen and weary peasant girl, quietly resentful of her father's pragmatic decision to marry her off to a smitten but respectable woodworker named Joseph (played masterfully by Oscar Isaac).

Indeed, once the shock of Gabriel's revelation that the young virgin will conceive the Consolation of Israel wears off, Mary appears to regard the Annunciation as a *deus ex machina* offering her something of an "out" of a repellent engagement. Understandably stalling for time, the Galilean requests permission to visit her giddy cousin Elizabeth in the Judean hill country until harvest. After witnessing the birth of John the Baptist (and Elizabeth's agonizing travails that surely foreshadow Mary's own), the visibly expectant servant of the Lord returns to her kin in Nazareth. Hopping off the donkey cart that has brought her home, Mary blithely strides past the appalled villagers and Joseph, doubtlessly preparing herself to receive the latter's intendment to divorce.

How Biblically accurate Mary's reluctance to betroth herself to her enamoured suitor is a secret that I suppose heaven only knows. Yet screenwriter Mike Rich's interpretation of the pair's bumpy courtship actually sets the saga up for the most unexpected of plot twists: by the middle of the film, *Nativity* shifts into something of a sweet love story. Noticeably impressed that Joseph wishes to remain pledged to a disgraced pregnant outcast, Mary travels courageously with her husband to Bethlehem to participate in the national census at Caesar's decree.<sup>1</sup>

On the journey to his birthplace, Joseph behaves gallantly towards his wife, confirming in her eyes that she has indeed found her *mensch*. The carpenter starves himself so that both his spouse and the burro upon which she rides will have enough

strength to make it to their destination. Then, as the couple passes through a marketplace en route to Bethlehem, a fortune teller noticing Mary with child congratulates Immanuel's stepfather and beams, "To see yourself in a young face - there is no greater joy." As Joseph turns positively ashen at the palmist's ignorant felicitations, Mary reaches for her helpmeet's hand to comfort him at the painful reminder not only of his bride's disrepute, but also of his own nagging doubts.

When the pair finally do reach the environs of Bethlehem, Joseph becomes hysterical as he beholds the parturient Mary doubled over and whispering urgently, "The child is pressing." Scrambling, the beleaguered wayfarer ultimately procures shelter for his panting fiancée in a bucolic stone stable full of sheep. Guided by the spotlight of an effulgent star, shepherds and potentates fittingly attend the birth of the one prophesied to exculpate "the lowest of men to the highest of kings." The sobriety of the Magi as they confer their portentous gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh on the holy family is especially poignant, as the three wise men serve mostly as comic relief for majority of the picture.

I have heard many believers preach during the Yuletide season that mercy, generosity, and virtue are characteristics sincere disciples of the cross should exhibit not only in the dead of winter, but in each moment of our quotidian lives. For my part, owning a copy of this touching and inspirational theatrical production is one of the best ways to keep the spirit of "Christmas in our hearts" all year round.

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<sup>1</sup> Apparently, a "Jewish custom in Joseph and Mary's day recognized a state called 'betrothal' that fell somewhere between our modern commitments of engagement and marriage. A betrothal was more binding than an engagement: it could only be broken with an act of divorce. And if a betrothed woman became pregnant, she was regarded as an adulteress." Philip Yancey and Tim Stafford, eds., *The New Student Bible NIV*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 857.