

The Passion of the Christ Child

It's a gamble, but Hollywood is betting that Christians will flock to theaters to see this year's most Bible-friendly film, *The Nativity Story*.

In December 2004, screenwriter Mike Rich was restless to break out of writing sports-related films. The author of *The Rookie*, *Radio* and *Finding Forrester* found inspiration on the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*, which were trumpeting the "secrets" of the Nativity.

"It struck me that the Nativity had always been presented as an event-based story and was rarely looked at as a character story," says Rich, a member of Southwest Bible Church in Beaverton, Oregon. "The timing was certainly right. *The Passion of the Christ* earlier that year had served as a trailblazer and opened doors for this kind of movie."

But when he ran the idea by his pastor, "There was a bit of a raised eyebrow when I first told him I was going to pursue this particular story," says Rich, laughing. "He said: 'I'll pray for you. Godspeed.' There's a natural inclination to wonder if you've bitten off more than you could chew."

New Line Cinema was more enthusiastic, buying Rich's *Nativity Story* script within weeks of its completion in early 2006 and rushing it into production for release in December 2006—an almost unheard-of schedule for a major motion picture.

"I've never had a project go this fast," says *Nativity* producer Wyck Godfrey, whose producing credits include *Daddy*

Day Care; I, Robot and Behind Enemy Lines. "When the studio read it in February and wanted to make it for December I said: 'That won't happen. It's impossible. It'll take forever.'

"But every time there was an obstacle it got cleared. ... There is an element of it feeling like providence. This is happening for a reason. Maybe we'll look back and say, 'This is a miracle that this movie passed all thresholds to be made.'"

In the wake of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, which pulled in \$610 million in worldwide box office receipts, Hollywood is rushing to make Christian-friendly movies. But will Christians like what Hollywood is offering?

A Journey of Faith

The Nativity Story, scheduled to release December 1, stars Academy Award-nominee Keisha Castle-Hughes (*Whale Rider*) as Mary and takes audiences inside Mary and Joseph's journey of faith, culminating with the birth of Jesus. "All roads, from a storytelling standpoint, lead to that one moment on screen that shows what we put on our fireplace mantle every December," Rich says.

The story also delves into the minds and motivations of the Magi and shepherds. "We're going to see a side to a lot of these characters that maybe hasn't been showcased much before," Rich says. "We're going to see a story that has a lot of layers and emotional depth [because] a lot of times when the Nativity story is played, the Magi and shepherds are looked at as bit parts.

"I wanted to show that there were no bit parts. They represented the poorest of the poor, and what a remarkable

gift from God these individuals received on that day. This was an amazing grand design.”

The filmmakers hope *The Nativity Story* becomes the go-to movie for the holiday season. But they recognize that, as the still-uneasy relationship between evangelicals and Hollywood matures, Christian audiences may snub the film if they see it as a patronizing money-grab rather than a sincere effort to illuminate a beloved Bible story.

For that reason, New Line worked hard to gain evangelical street credibility. They hired Grace Hill Media, founded by Jonathan Bock, son of the late Christian composer and arranger Fred Bock, which helps studios woo Christian audiences. And New Line put the script into the hands of influential Christian and Jewish leaders and asked for their stamp of approval.

“It’s very good,” says Darrell Bock (no relation to Jonathan Bock), author of *Breaking the Da Vinci Code* and research professor of New Testament studies at Dallas Theological Seminary. He read the *Nativity* script in spring 2006, just as filming commenced. “The story is terrific ... and the genuine authenticity of the first century was handled very well,” Bock says. “They had certain details you would only know if you really had done some work in the first century background.”

New Line also secured Bible teacher Anne Graham Lotz’s blessing. “From what I have observed, *The Nativity Story* is biblically accurate, historically authentic and visually stunning,” she states. “Written with heart, directed with sensitivity, produced with excellence and performed with artistic grace, it is destined to become a beloved, cherished classic.”

Others listed in support of the film are Paul Cedar, CEO of the Mission America Coalition; songwriter Gloria Gaither; Catholic Archbishop John Foley; and The 700 Club Vice President Gordon Robertson.

But perhaps more surprising than the endorsements are the number of evangelical Christians involved in the film's making. *The Nativity Story*, more than *The Passion of the Christ*, is an evangelical enterprise.

Writer Rich is an active member of his nondenominational church. Producer Godfrey grew up in a charismatic church in Tennessee and attends Bel Air Presbyterian with his wife and three children. His parents are still involved with Young Life campus ministry.

Director Catherine Hardwicke (*Lords of Dogtown*, *Thirteen*, winner of the Director's Award at the 2003 Sundance Film Festival) grew up Presbyterian in Texas. Her parents still sing in the choir and teach Sunday school, and two of her cousins are ministers.

If Christians give *The Nativity Story* a lukewarm reception, one irony will be that these same audiences embraced *The Passion of the Christ* almost unquestionably even though director Mel Gibson had starred in violent, R-rated movies for 25 years and belongs to a deeply traditionalist wing of the Roman Catholic Church.

By comparison, *The Nativity Story* makers seem like a Baptist youth group. Each says the Nativity film intersects with his own spiritual journey.

“You find yourself at times in your life being more connected to God and less connected,” Godfrey says. “I wasn’t going to church in my 20s. I was focused on career. It was probably the least happy I’ve ever been in my life. Marriage and children were the path that reconnected me to my faith, which also forces you to look inward and say, ‘What can I do to live a life that’s more pleasing to God?’”

“He finds you when you open your heart. That’s what this movie was. God reaching out and saying, ‘Do this.’ Of course I feel happier now having taken on that challenge than I had before.”

More Than Friday Night Entertainment

In the past, Godfrey would flinch when his parents read scripts of films he was producing. “They weren’t particularly excited about When a Stranger Calls or Alien vs. Predator,” he says. But The Nativity Story is “a movie you can take to your grave. It’s important to your faith.”

It is also the first film Godfrey is producing after leaving a secure position as president of a major production company to partner with former super-agent Marty Bowen in their own production venture.

Both men wanted to make movies “that are underserved in the marketplace, that put positive values in the world and leave audiences thinking and feeling, as opposed to pure Friday night entertainment that you forget about the next day,” Godfrey says.

“We wanted to get away from [the] cynical, jaded, irreverent. ... Having children makes you think, What kind of values do I

want to be putting on screen? You enter in that phase of life where you want to raise your kids in a more Christian environment.”

But Godfrey recognizes that selling Christian films to Christian audiences can be tricky. He is concerned “about Hollywood cynically chasing success,” he says. “[People say]: ‘The Passion worked, so let’s do every biblical story on an epic scale. They did the death of Christ, why not do the birth of Christ?’

“People doing movies but not for the right reasons: I think we’ll have to deal with that. People [can] feel they’re being pandered to. Hollywood just trying to make a buck. I would hate for that to happen. It’s the opposite of what Marty and I want to do with our company.”

He predicts that for a while studios will cater to “conservative Christian audiences because of the success of The Chronicles of Narnia and The Passion of the Christ. That will continue until people feel the movies are less authentic or entertaining. At some point there will be that sense of, ‘We’ve seen a bunch of those.’ It’s cyclical.

“Because of the success of some of these films, Hollywood will follow, maybe not for spiritual reasons but because they’re businessmen. Then at some point bad movies will be made chasing that dollar, and the Christian audience will be turned off. Then Hollywood will quit.”

Hardwicke says no director would make a film such as The Nativity Story if they didn’t have faith. “You pour your heart and soul into it,” she says. “It’s too intense, too many

hours, too stressful. I get dozens of scripts every month. Even if it's a fun script, if I don't feel it's going to do something for the world, I won't make it."

Hardwicke's mother believes The Nativity Story is an answer to a long-ago prayer. "My mother wanted to have a child but couldn't carry a baby to term," Hardwicke says. "[When she became pregnant with me] she prayed to God and said, 'If you let me have this baby it will be in Your service.' So she's so excited.

"Of course, two members of my family stepped forward and said this was preordained for me. My cousin who's a minister said he's prayed for two years for me to have this kind of opportunity. ... Myself and the actors have discussions about how it's come to pass that we're making this movie instead of someone else. What a gift and what an opportunity."

But Rich says the script was written with a sense of awesome responsibility. "There were many moments of trepidation," he says.

"You don't want to be irresponsible. If you write a scene where the audience even subconsciously feels that you strayed from the tone and content of the Gospels, then you'll have failed. You want the speculative scenes to feel seamless, not as if they were shoehorned in."

His challenge was to create a 90-minute story based on a few lines of source material. Although the events surrounding Christ's crucifixion and resurrection are reported in great detail in the Gospels, the Nativity is told in just a few lines in the gospels of Matthew and Luke.

“The virgin birth is like a bookend to the life of Jesus,” Darrell Bock says. “You’ve got the virgin birth on one end and the crucifixion on the other. [The Nativity] is a very important indication that this child is something unusual and special. It shows that God is about the business of doing something unusual for people through this child.

“But what’s interesting is that the Bible doesn’t make near as much of [the Nativity] as you think it might. It doesn’t put a lot of neon lights around it. It tells it in such a way and accepts it that it’s surprising, but doesn’t put near the stress on it as the Resurrection. That’s part of the curiosity that surrounds it.”

The Gospel According to Matthew and Luke

In the script, Rich sought to bring to life the political, social and spiritual tenor of the times, including the oppression from the Roman government, to set the foundation for why so many people were seeking the Messiah. “There are usually bumps in the road that emerge as you write a script, but I never really had that with this script,” he says. “I’ve never had a script that flowed to the page as easily as this one did.

“[My] church spends a lot of time in the Bible. I value that. My faith is based, my foundation is the written Word, so there’s a reverence I have for those two gospel accounts.

“It was never something I forgot when writing it. It was very much in the forefront. You look at the WWJD bracelets and a lot of times I would have had a bracelet that said, ‘What would Luke and Matthew write?’”

Bock notes that the script takes poetic license and compresses time so the Magi and shepherds appear in the same scene, which “likely did not happen,” he says. Bock also recommended that New Line not promote the film by saying it was “completely biblical.”

“That is too much,” he says. “Just say it’s in line with and parallels the biblical account very well. You have to be honest with people about what’s going on.”

In Bock’s opinion, movies about biblical events should try to capture “the authenticity of the first century scene and stay true to the [biblical] characterizations” Bock says. “The Nativity script reflects that. It’s about the best you can do, or you can’t do something like this.

“A person has to appreciate the nature of the genre. You only have five minutes at most of directly biblical material. The best you can do is try to fill in the gaps.”

To Rich’s relief, there were no major complaints from the experts. “When you get the word back from Frank Wright or Anne Graham Lotz that the script has passed the test of what they view as a responsible and inspiring account, as a writer that’s all you can ask for,” Rich says.

Frank Wright, president and CEO of National Religious Broadcasters, calls the film “a biblically faithful and artistically superb expression of the most momentous event in human history—when God became a man. For a generation of moviegoers unfamiliar with this truth and its implications for their lives, this magnificent film may well be transformational.”

Rich says he will be pleased if audiences “go back and take a closer look at what was actually written by Luke and Matthew.”

“Regardless of what happens, we’ll be proud of the movie,” Godfrey says. “Hopefully the box office will vote and open the door for other movies and keep the trend of people wanting to make movies for Christian audiences.”

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Screen Saviors

Hollywood hasn’t always portrayed Jesus accurately. Here’s how one film critic ranks the most popular films about Christ.

Which Hollywood films handle the Bible accurately, and which films botch it? Charisma asked Terry Lindvall, C.S. Lewis chair of communication and Christian thought at Virginia Wesleyan College in Norfolk, Virginia, and former president of Regent University, where he was distinguished chair of visual communication. His book Sanctuary Cinema, to release in 2007, traces the origins of the Christian film industry.

Lindvall says Cecil B. DeMille’s “spectacular and sentimental 1927 silent blockbuster, King of Kings,” in spite of controversy over its sex, violence and alleged anti-Semitism, “proved to be a model of visual piety, with the actor playing Jesus, H.B. Warner, being touted as the face of Jesus that people ‘saw’ when they prayed to God.”

The 1961 *King of Kings*, however, drew strong rebuke from even *Time* magazine, which called it “the corniest, phoniest, ickiest and most monstrously vulgar of all the big Bible stories Hollywood has told in its last decade.” Jesus was portrayed as the pawn between Judas and Barabbas, and the film constantly downplayed His divinity. (Because teen actor Jeffrey Hunter played Jesus, the film has been labeled “I Was a Teenage Jesus.”)

The 1946 neo-realist Italian film by atheist and communist director Pier Paolo Pasolini, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, surprised and gratified Christian audiences by literally conveying the words of Matthew’s Gospel “with a reverent intensity,” showing how Jesus chose suffering and death, called His disciples to be serious followers of His way and “spoke with a righteous anger against wealthy hypocrites and religious leaders,” Lindvall says.

George Stevens’ 1965 *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, on the other hand, featured silly Hollywood cameos including Pat Boone as an angel and John Wayne as the centurion at the cross drawing, “Surely this musta been the Son-a God.” The film was so long—originally 260 minutes—that it became known as “The Longest Story Ever Told.”

“Baptist film critic Billy Joe Bob once quipped that the film was so long that when Jesus says, ‘I am with you always even until the end of the world,’ it is a threat,” Lindvall says. Swedish actor Max von Sydow speaks in King James English though everyone else speaks colloquially.

Lindvall recommends Franco Zeffirelli’s television miniseries *Jesus of Nazareth* as “one of the most authentic, Jewish presentations of the gospel account.” And *The Gospel According*

to Matthew, produced by the Visual Bible, offers a literal textual (NIV) version and “a laughing Jesus, [which] did much to make it enjoyable.”

He pans Martin Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ* for its “confused, neurotic and angst-ridden Messiah, struggling with His mission.” And he says Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* “strikes one as an American film of the end of the century, full of violence and excess, even while demonstrating a visceral and emotional connection of passion to faith.”

But “to paraphrase the apostle Paul, whether the story is told in pretense, for crass profit or from an honest humility, the story is told and gets out,” Lindvall concludes.

Joel Kilpatrick

Mangers, Magi and Swaddling Clothes

Much of what we believe about the Christmas story is shrouded in myth and legend. Here are the facts.

Through the years since Jesus’ birth, we have read and heard the Christmas story over and over again. We have seen it portrayed in paintings, books, Nativity sets, plays, movies and TV specials, and on cards of every description. Unfortunately, much of what we have seen, read and heard does not accurately reflect the factual account found in God’s Word. Let’s debunk some of the most popular myths.

Myth: Mary rode into Bethlehem on a donkey.

Fact: The Bible doesn’t specify how Mary got to Bethlehem. It

says only that her husband, Joseph, went there to be registered with her, and that while they were there, she had her first child (see Luke 2:4-7).

Myth: Mary gave birth to Jesus the night she arrived in Bethlehem.

Fact: It is more likely that she and Joseph went well in advance of her delivery. The Bible simply says that “while they were there [in Bethlehem], the days were completed for her to be delivered” (v. 6, NKJV).

Myth: Jesus was born in a stable.

Fact: The Bible says, “And she [Mary] brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn” (v. 7). It doesn’t mention a stable.

The reference to a manger—a feeding trough for animals—has caused some people to assume that Mary and Joseph were staying in a free-standing barn. But in biblical times, mangers were also located inside houses because animals were often kept on the lower level of homes at night rather than in a separate building.

The Greek word translated “inn” in the verse quoted above is *kataluma*. Elsewhere in the New Testament it is translated “guest room” (see Mark 14:14; Luke 22:11).

When Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem to register for the census, they would undoubtedly have gone to the home of one of

Joseph's relatives, not to a public lodging place. The upstairs living quarters of the home were probably already full of other relatives, so they stayed downstairs in a room that at times housed livestock (hence the manger).

Myth: Jesus was born on December 25.

Fact: The Bible does not tell us when Jesus was born. However, considering the description of the events surrounding His birth, this date seems improbable.

It would have been too cold at that time of year for shepherds to be "living out in the fields" and keeping watch over their flocks, especially at night (see Luke 2:8). It also would have been a hard time for Mary to travel (see).

The date was chosen by the early church fathers to replace a pagan festival that celebrated the annual return of the sun—the time of year when the days began to grow longer—with a Christian holy day.

Myth: Angels sang on the night of Jesus' birth.

Fact: There is no indication in the biblical account that the angels sang. One angel appeared to shepherds living out in the fields and announced Jesus' birth, and then "a multitude of the heavenly host" joined the first angel "praising God and saying: 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!'" (vv. 9-14). The Bible states that the angels were speaking, not singing.

Myth: Angels were in evidence at the site of Jesus' birth.

Fact: Though there may have been angels present, the Bible does not mention that they were there or that they were visible.

Myth: Three kings on camels visited Jesus soon after He was born.

Fact: This is the impression we get from most Nativity sets. However, the Bible says only that “wise men from the East came to Jerusalem” asking for the King of the Jews (Matt. 2:1-2).

It doesn't tell how many wise men there were, what mode of transportation they used or what their titles were. Some people have assumed there were three because they gave Jesus three gifts—gold, frankincense and myrrh. But there is no indication that each wise man gave only one gift (see v. 11).

There is also no reason to believe the wise men saw Jesus when He was still a newborn, as many greeting cards portray. In fact, by the time they arrived in Bethlehem, He was no longer a baby, but a young child—perhaps as old as 2—according to the Scriptures (see vv. 8-9,11,13-14,16).

Maureen D. Eha

Bethlehem on the Big Screen

The Nativity Story offers a refreshingly realistic look at the world's most famous miracle.

When I first learned that Hollywood was producing a film version of Jesus' birth, I feared the worst. I wondered if

they would use computer-generated angel wings, Renaissance-era costumes, cheesy subplots and sappy dialogue spoken in King James English by blond-haired actors. But I didn't cringe even once during an advance screening of New Line Cinema's *The Nativity Story*. It is possibly the most tasteful treatment of a Bible story to ever grace the screen.

Don't expect a romanticized, Christmas card version of the familiar story. This movie is not about cattle lowing while angels sing sweetly over a stable. It opens with a terrifying scene of Herod's soldiers storming into Bethlehem to butcher Jewish baby boys—a grim reminder that the promised Messiah came to a world gripped by government-sponsored terrorism.

The film then takes us to the town of Nazareth, where we meet the young Mary (played by Oscar-nominated actress Keisha Castle-Hughes of *Whale Rider*) and her future husband Joseph (Oscar Isaac)—whom Mary's father forces her to marry. The miraculous events that follow—the birth of John the Baptist, the appearance of an angel to Mary, and her unexplainable pregnancy—are set against the rugged backdrop of Palestine during the Roman occupation. Life was cruel, houses were tiny, food was scarce and Jews were the victims when Herod's troops marched into town.

When soldiers abduct a young Jewish girl because her father could not pay his taxes, we feel the fear and oppression that hung over the residents of Nazareth—and we find our hearts aching with theirs for the coming of a Savior. When the maniacal Herod (Ciarán Hinds) pouts on his rooftop lair in Jerusalem, worrying that his own son or a phantom Messiah will overthrow him, we understand the demonic forces that drove him to commit his despicable attempt at genocide.

Screenwriter Mike Rich (Radio, Finding Forrester) did his homework on the historic details of this film, and sets and characters conform to the customs of Palestine at the time of Christ's birth. Filmed on location in Israel, Morocco and southern Italy, the movie has a gritty quality that reflects the hardship of the times. We see the oppression of women (the men of Nazareth want to stone Mary when they learn she is pregnant), the pain of primitive childbirth (Elizabeth holds a rope during contractions) and the dangers of travel through Judea's terrain (Mary and Joseph's 100-mile journey to Bethlehem is almost fatal).

The stark realism of The Nativity Story will challenge those who think of the birth of Jesus as a fanciful fairy tale. Director Catherine Hardwicke made sure that the characters are believable (including the angels, who are understatedly human-looking).

Unlike Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ, which offered us a Catholic-style Mary on a decorative pedestal, this film gives us a frightened, teenage Mary who wonders why God chose someone like her to carry His Son and then tries to muster confidence after her family accuses her of immorality.

Though Mary's relationship with Joseph is strained at the beginning (after all, this was an arranged marriage), she grows to love him after God shows him in a dream that the child in her womb was miraculously conceived. Eventually the young couple discovers they are on a divine mission, and Joseph emerges as a hero as he protects his bride from snakes, marketplace thieves and murderous soldiers.

The film is not preachy but the message is clear: When God sent His Son into the world, He chose the lowliest people to carry out His plan—and the most powerful man in Palestine could not stop Him. The baby Jesus (who is seen only in a few

brief scenes) escapes Herod's sword and finds a hiding place in Egypt.

Theologians may quibble over minor details of the movie, especially that the Magi who travel from Persia arrive on the night of Jesus' birth instead of two years later. The film also suggests that the star that led the wise men to Bethlehem was actually an alignment of three heavenly bodies. That may not be how it really happened, but certainly some type of divine alignment occurred in Hollywood this year. The Nativity Story arrived in theaters just in time—when our terrorized world is desperate for some good news.

J. Lee Grady

Note to parents: The Nativity Story, though certainly not as violent as The Passion of the Christ, is rated PG because of Herod's brutality.