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The Nativity Story: First Impressions
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It has been over five decades since a major-release film was made about the Christian story of Christmas, that is, about the birth of Jesus. This is not surprising, given the difficulty of the subject matter. Any film about Jesus' birth faces the problem that the story is so well known it contains little suspense. Christians know by heart what will happen. Given this difficulty, it is surprising that the new film, *The Nativity Story*, actually provides a fresh portrayal of this old story, even telling a tale that takes on new dimensions as it unfolds.

Since the nativity's events and their outcome are known, the film creates narrative tension by emphasizing the contingency of Mary and her pregnancy. The *Nativity Story* consistently raises challenges to Mary's well being in general and to a successful pregnancy in particular. This is done not by focusing on how Scripture tells the story, but on what it leaves out; the film places the gospels' nativity story into the historical context of grinding poverty, oppression of the Jews by Herod and the Romans, an out-of-wedlock pregnancy, and the difficult journey of a pregnant woman. At each stage, the film makes clear the dangers facing Mary, her family, and the fellow villagers. When a fellow villager cannot pay his taxes, his daughter is dragged away. Once the audience discovers Mary's father cannot pay all his taxes, they realize she stands in similar danger. Shortly thereafter Mary's father agrees to marry her to Joseph, without consulting Mary first, in order to ease the household's food needs.

Furthermore, Mary's pregnancy makes her liable to stoning, but Joseph decides not to accuse her. After the angel visits him, he actively protects her. The villagers shun Mary as her pregnancy begins to show, and shun him once his support of her becomes clear. Finally, when Mary decides to travel with Joseph to Bethlehem, the journey is clearly difficult. At different times, she is in risk of starving and in danger of falling down steep hills. At one point she is swept away by the Jordan River's swift current. In the film, her birth pains start just before they arrive in Bethlehem. Joseph struggles to control his panic as he searches for shelter, and then, when they are directed to a stable (the film does not even bother with no room at the inn), he must be her midwife. So although the story's end is known, the difficulties facing its successful completion stand out at each turn.

Just as the difficulties facing Mary and Joseph stem from their surroundings, so those surroundings are made as realistic as possible. The village of Nazareth is presented

as authentically as possible. A trained eye recognizes much about the houses' construction that has been discovered by archaeologists. The grape-pressing scene takes place in vat carved into the bedrock, just like a vat actually excavated in a recent archaeological dig.

The clothing, too, is authentic to the period. The colors are primarily tans and browns, in keeping with the natural colors of wool. Missing is the color symbolism of clothing, largely developed in medieval and renaissance paintings and used in earlier Jesus films.

Despite these attempts to be more authentic to the historical past, the film draws extensively from previous Jesus films. Like *The Last Temptation of Christ*, *The Nativity Story* uses a raptor to indicate the presence of the supernatural: in this case, a hawk symbolizes the angel's flight. There are also several crowd scenes reminiscent of *Last Temptation*, which emphasize too many things and people moving excitedly in too small a space. Like *The Passion of the Christ*, the film uses spoken Hebrew and Aramaic without subtitles in particular scenes. Indeed, the sentences in these languages were developed in consultation with William Fulco, who was responsible for the Aramaic and Latin in *The Passion*. The brutality of the soldiers and the interaction between Herod the Great and his son Antipas are borrowed from earlier films such as *King of Kings* and *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. The latter film also contributes the type character of the old man who has been waiting for a messiah. In *Greatest Story*, this was a blind man who followed Jesus to Jerusalem, while in *Nativity Story*, it is an old shepherd who shares his fire with Mary.

The film itself is quite understated. Apart from various messianic prophecies about the child, there is no explicit religious message. There is little Christian or Christmas imagery in the staging, dialogue, or other aspects of the film. The only obvious nod in the direction of Christian symbolism appears in the way the light of the star shines through the stable roof. Indeed, the film is rather subtly and tastefully executed.

In closing, let me make a few casual observations. First, Morocco is not Palestine/Israel. As dry as Palestine is, Morocco, where the film was made, is even worse. The land seems to be all stones and little seems to grow, while the rivers are bigger and swifter than the Jordan. Second, there are few smiles in the film. Indeed, most smiles appear on the faces of the two pregnant women, Mary and

her older cousin Elizabeth. Third, the three wise men are integrated into the story as a sub-plot. Although most of it is completely imaginary, the film humorously manages to breathe some life and personality into their characters. Fourth, although several reviewers have made a big deal about the Christmas carols in the film, there are only four total. These are well-situated in the film and do not make a big splash. They are understated in keeping with the rest of the film. Finally, Herod's tax burden receives historical

backing when a scene shows Herod inspecting the building of his palace at Masada. When he tells the builders to add gold tiling to a new pool, he dismisses concerns about the cost. After all, that is what subjects are for.

These are just initial observations and comments, made on opening day. In-depth analysis will have to wait for further thought and viewing. Luckily, I think this film will repay re-viewing.