

The Nativity Story

A movie tells the story, with just a hint of its mythic power

I AM not a fan of movies that project biblical stories on to the silver screen. They are, inevitably, interpretations of events by the director, script-writer, editor and cast. There is much to gain by leaving each person free to let the stories percolate in their own imagination. Depicting them on screen also tends to “fix” the narratives in a literal and historical way, whereas their value today lies not in whether this or that happened in the manner portrayed, but in the religious insight they were written to convey.

So, having been repelled by the gratuitous violence of Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*, I approached the newly released *Nativity Story* with some apprehension. While it would fill in some gaps for people who have only a hazy idea of the stories that gave rise to Christmas, I wondered how it would handle their deeper meaning. For from a religious perspective, the point of the Christmas story is not precisely what happened 2000 years ago, but what it means for human experience today – in other words, its mythic power.

To its credit, the film sticks closely to the basic gospel narratives. Some reviewers pan it for this, branding it “a dull re-telling of a well-worn tale”. That’s a fate it presumably shares with stories such as Goldilocks and Maui: the story is the story, and you can’t add novel characters or events without turning it into something else.

The bedrock facts of Christmas are that Jesus was born in Roman-occupied Palestine during the reign of King Herod, and Mary was his mother. All the other details – the angels, the virgin birth, the star, the wise men and their gifts, the shepherds – are poetically conceived to bring out the significance of Jesus in a religious sense.

Christians differ on the historical accuracy of such details, but to treat them as history while disregarding their mythic content would be like applying the rules of draughts to a game of chess. It sells the bigger story short.

It is intriguing to see in *The Nativity Story* a parallel creative imagination at work, though there its purpose is to add dramatic interest. It blends the very different accounts of Matthew and Luke into a single story – as do most people who are familiar with both. It also shows the astrologers (or wise men) at odds over whether two or three of them would make the journey, sensitively explores Joseph’s dilemma when he finds that Mary, to whom he is engaged, is pregnant, and has Mary topple off her donkey into a river they are crossing. Titivating the story in that way diverges from the originals, but does no harm. Less successful is the Maori Mary (Keisha Castle-Hughes) delivering a pure-bred white child.

On the other side of the ledger, showing angels with a human body solidifies a metaphor in an unhelpful way. For centuries angels were part and parcel of a world-view in which God was located in a physical heaven above Earth, requiring a telecommunication system to connect them. The angels provided it. They were the heavenly messengers.

That is not how we conceive of the world today. In the Christmas story the angels are best seen not as supernatural beings, but as symbols suggesting that there is more to this Jesus than meets the eye: there is a glow of Godness about him.

Even that was written into the story retrospectively, reflecting the impact Jesus made on his followers 30 years later. Without his cross and their resurrection experience, there would

have been no reason to tell the story of his birth, let alone embroider it with the rich symbolism of virginity, kingship, worship by the wise and the humble, persecution by Herod and the flight of Joseph and his family to Egypt. All these are interpreted as fulfilling Jewish religious prophecies, against the background of a yearning for a messiah who would bring national deliverance.

Two touches towards the end of the film hint at the deeper meaning of the story. One is a wise man's gift of myrrh, used in embalming bodies, so pointing forward to Jesus' death and burial.

The other is the song of Mary during her pregnancy, which the director uses to round off the movie. It sums up what the whole Jesus story is about: Godness in grace, compassion, hope, trust, Godness in humanity, in the righting of wrong, in giving food to the hungry, in freeing people from oppression, Godness in the worth of every human life.

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