

**A Guide to New Line Cinema's**

***The Nativity Story***

For Individual Study or Group Discussion

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## **The Birth of Jesus as Told by *The Nativity Story* and the Gospels**

The story of Jesus' birth comes primarily from the first two chapters of the Gospel of Matthew and the first two chapters of the Gospel of Luke in the New Testament. Certainly our understanding of the story has been significantly aided over the centuries by the wealth of information provided by biblical scholars and historians. Their insights into the culture and social situation of that particular historical period in which Christ was born are invaluable. Nonetheless, a faithful telling of Jesus' birth remains rooted in the brief, yet powerful words of Matthew and Luke.

From Matthew we learn about Joseph's dream, the wise men, and Herod's decision to execute all male children under two years of age. Luke informs us of Mary's stay with Elizabeth, the lack of space in the inn, and the shepherds in the fields and their own visitation by angels. We couldn't tell the whole story without the witness of both Gospel writers, and thus over the centuries we have simply merged one with the other.

New Line Cinema's *The Nativity Story* presents the events in the same way, borrowing here and there from both Matthew and Luke. At points *The Nativity Story* also attempts, as do many modern Christmas pageants, to fill in the gaps where the text is silent. These attempts help us to grasp the rest of the story. Yet it is important to be clear as to when we are speculating and when we are communicating what we learn from the Gospels.

This guide looks at various scenes of the movie and provides insight into the points at which the film retells the Gospel story and the points at which it provides its own perspective as to how the missing elements of the Gospel story may have transpired. It also provides some background information for the scenes. This guide also offers some lessons that are at the heart of the story and provides some questions worth our reflection as individuals or as a group.

*The Nativity Story* does an excellent job of conveying the story and the meaning of the greatest birth the world has ever known. Almost all of the film provides a faithful and accurate portrayal of the Gospel birth narratives in a powerful way that is so valuable for the visual world in which we live today. This movie will likely aid both believers and seekers for years to come in their quest to understand and fully appreciate God's great gift of a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

## **Scene Analysis and Gospel Comparison of *The Nativity Story***

The primary scenes of *The Nativity Story* discussed below should not be understood as an exhaustive list but rather as a look at the main movements and emphases of the film. Copy in italics describes how the movie portrays that particular part of the story of Jesus' birth. Subsequent paragraphs compare the movie to the biblical narrative and scholarly research on the various aspects and characters of the birth story.

### **The Slaughter of the Innocents/King Herod, Matthew 2:16–18**

*From the beginning the movie portrays Herod as insanely jealous and suspicious of any supposed attempt to usurp his power or take his throne. Herod suggests that he has had several family members, including wives and children, put to death because of his paranoia and affirms this as he threatens another son with the same fate if he fails to remain loyal. Through his attempt to gain access to the child via the wise men and his ultimate decision to have all boys two years and under in the Bethlehem area put to death (known also as the Slaughter of the Innocents), Herod's self-obsession is made obvious over and over again as the story progresses on the screen.*

Herod is definitely the evil character in the biblical birth story. Herod would stop at nothing to ensure his place of power. Undoubtedly, these suspicions led Herod to fear and paranoia when it came to news of the baby Jesus' birth.

The only question might be the degree to which the film goes to show Herod's obsession with the Jewish prophecy of the promised Messiah. How much focus Herod actually gave this possible rival may be debatable.

Since Herod plays such a central role in the film's version of the story, it might be helpful to know a little bit more about him. Herod was half Jewish and half Idumean. He had proved himself useful and trustworthy to the Romans during the civil wars of Palestine, and he ruled the area from 47 BC until 4 BC.

Most of us are aware of the awful things Herod did during his reign. Yet few are familiar with the many good things he did while he was ruler in Palestine. Herod was the only leader of the period who was able to sustain any long-lasting peace in Palestine. He was responsible for building the temple in Jerusalem. This was the temple Jesus and his followers visited. And he was conscientious during periods of crisis and famine. During one period of difficulty, Herod remitted the people of Palestine's taxes; and during the famine of 25 BC, Herod had his own gold melted down to purchase more food for the people. All in all Herod was actually viewed as a decent leader.

### **Zechariah in the Temple, Luke 1:5–25**

*The film does an excellent job of following the pattern of Luke as it interweaves the birth of John the Baptist with the birth of Jesus. John and Jesus were born only a few months apart, and their lives would remain connected. John would serve as God's messenger to the Jewish people announcing the arrival of the promised Messiah. This scene portrays the announcement at the temple to Zechariah, a priest, that he and Elizabeth would be the parents of John.*

In Luke 1:5, we are introduced to Zechariah, John's father. Zechariah was a descendant of Aaron, and his wife Elizabeth was also the daughter of a priest.

Every male descendant of Aaron was automatically a priest. These descendants were divided up into twenty-four different groups named after Aaron's twenty-four sons. All twenty-four groups served in the temple at Passover, Pentecost, and during the Feast of Tabernacles. During the rest of the year, the twenty-four groups took turns serving. Each priestly group would generally serve two times at the temple with each term of service lasting a week.

In this text Zechariah and his group were serving one of their weeks at the temple. Since each priestly group could total as many as one thousand members, lots were used to determine what jobs would be assigned to the various priests on duty. When the lots were cast, Zechariah was chosen for one of the most desirable jobs; he was to burn incense on the Alter of Incense.

Twice a day year-old, unblemished male lambs were sacrificed to God as burnt offerings. Incense was also burned so that the offering might reach God enclosed within a sweet envelope. The privilege of burning incense was so great that a priest could be assigned this duty only once in a lifetime.

In the midst of this momentous occasion, Gabriel visited Zechariah and told him that he and his wife Elizabeth would have a child. They were to name the child John and were promised that he would have a tremendous role in the life of Israel and in the coming of God's Messiah. Such news baffled Zechariah. After all, he and Elizabeth were well along in years. Evidently, they were both beyond the age where having children was considered to be a possibility. Zechariah's doubt led him to ask for a sign. Gabriel rewards Zechariah's doubt with the inability to speak.

### **Mary and Joseph in Nazareth, Luke 2:26–38**

*In our first encounter with Mary and Joseph, we are called to wrestle with Mary's interest in Joseph, the sincere faith of the two in the days before they learned they would be earthly parents to the Son of God, the angels visit to Mary and her desire to spend time with Zechariah and Elizabeth before her marriage.*

We do not know how Mary and Joseph met or what their real feelings for each other were in a society where most marriages were arranged. In all likelihood Mary and Joseph were both young when they married. Most people believe that Mary was in her early teens and Joseph was in his later teens or early twenties.

We know from the Scriptures that they came from Nazareth. Nazareth is located fifteen miles west of the southern tip of the Sea of Galilee. The small community was not on a major trade route, and it played no real role in the economy of Galilee. Both the city and its citizens were held with little regard or interest by its neighbors. Against this background Nathanael said in John 1:46 when first hearing of Jesus, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

### **The Wise Men, Matthew 2:1–12**

*The movie gives significant attention to the journey of three Persian astrologers who arrive to pay homage to the Christ child on the night of his birth. The three men are given the names Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. They are aware of the Hebrew prophecy of a promised Messiah and see in the merging of three stars the sign that it is time for the awaited child's birth. They leave immediately on their epic trip and ultimately arrive in Bethlehem on the evening of the birth where they present the newborn child with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Although Herod had asked them to return with information about the child in order that he too might "worship him," the three show wisdom in their suspicion of Herod and decide to travel home by a different route.*

Despite the film's focus on the wise men, Matthew tells their story in only twelve verses. We know little about them or where they came from. We don't know their names, though those used in the movie have been assigned to the three by tradition over the centuries. And we don't know where they were really from. Persia is certainly a good guess though astrologers were also prevalent at the time in Egypt, Babylon, and other parts of the ancient world. Furthermore, we don't even know that there were three. We assume this was the case since Matthew writes about three gifts.

As for the star that is so prominent in the movie and is known as the Star of Bethlehem by many believers today, we have little insight into what led to the phenomenon. It may have been the alignment of Jupiter and Saturn with the constellation Pisces, an event that is said to have happened in the year 7 BC, and that is apparently suggested by the film. Other theories suggest that the magi may have followed a comet, meteor, or nova.

### **Mary Visits Zechariah and Elizabeth/The Birth of John, Luke 1:39–56**

*According to the film, Mary finds acceptance, love, and companionship in the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth. In fact, the child in Elizabeth's womb leaps for joy at Mary's arrival. Mary seems to mature during her visit and finds great support from her relative for her claims that she is carrying God's Son. According to the movie, Mary is present when Elizabeth gives birth to John.*

We do not know why Mary chose to spend time with Elizabeth at her home in an unnamed Israelite village. Countless reasons may have driven Mary to go to Elizabeth including the needs for friendship, advice, and support. As the film insinuates, Elizabeth's home also likely provided a place to rest in the midst of accusations and questions or simply the desire to share the days with someone else who was pregnant.

The story of Mary's visit to Elizabeth is riddled with allusions to Old Testament narratives. First, John's jumping in Elizabeth's womb, which is depicted in the movie and found in Luke 1:41, calls the reader to remember Jacob and Esau jostling in the womb of Rebekah. In both this story and the Jacob and Esau narrative, the younger becomes the master of the older because of the grace and plan of God. Second, this account ends with Mary's song, also called the Magnificat. Mary's song parallels the words of Hannah in 1 Samuel when she learns that she will give birth in her old age.

According to Luke, Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months (Luke 1:57). The text does not indicate that Mary was present when John was born as suggested by the movie. This idea is neither excluded nor supported by the biblical text.

### **Mary's Return to Nazareth, Matthew 1:18–25**

*The movie positions Joseph's realization that Mary was pregnant when she returns from visiting Zechariah and Elizabeth. Mary's family and neighbors also learn of Mary's secret and her belief that she will be the earthly mother of God's Son. She is doubted by family and shunned by neighbors. Her revelation also leads to a crisis of belief for Joseph. Ultimately, he chooses to remain committed to Mary. This decision is affirmed when an angel visits Joseph in a dream and tells him of the miraculous nature of Mary's child. The angel tells Joseph to name the child Jesus.*

The Scriptures don't tell us as whether Joseph learned of Mary's pregnancy before or after her visit to Elizabeth. The Gospels segregate Joseph and Mary's perspective on the unfolding events of the birth story with Matthew telling the story from Joseph's perspective and Luke focusing on Mary and her feelings. Only in our modern retelling of the story are the two sides brought together. Thus it is impossible to know when Joseph learned of Mary's pregnancy.

The Scriptures present a bit of a different take from the movie on Joseph's initial reaction to the news. In the film Joseph pledges to stay with Mary. According to the biblical text, Joseph planned to divorce Mary but to do it privately (Matt. 1:19). In biblical times engagements and marriages were conducted differently from today. There existed in that day a time known as the betrothal period. A betrothal was not exactly an engagement, but it wasn't exactly marriage either. Unlike an engagement period, a betrothal, which lasted for a year, signified that a couple was legally married. Thus, any breaking of the union would have to be done by divorce just as with any married couple. Unlike marriage, a betrothal was a period in which the man and the woman continued to live apart, and it was a time in which they had to refrain from sexual relations.

Mary's apparent adultery could have been punished by death. So Joseph's decision to divorce her privately would have saved her life and that of the child. According to Matthew, the visit by an angel to Joseph did not merely reaffirm a decision Joseph had already made. Rather, the angel's visit led to Joseph's decision to continue with the marriage rather than to seek divorce.

### **The Journey to Bethlehem, Luke 2:1–5**

*The film creates a possible scenario where the text is silent. In the movie we find Joseph and Mary borrowing a donkey from Mary's parents for the journey. While en route to Bethlehem, they eat a meal of fish, face the dangers of a treacherous road and a hissing snake, and encounter a palm reader in Jerusalem. These events accentuate the difficulties of the trip the young couple undertook and present possibilities of what life may have been like for them along the road. But none of these elements are based on the biblical story. They are only conjectures. The couple finally arrives in Bethlehem to find no one willing to provide them lodging.*

Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem for the census. Joseph had to travel to his ancestral home, Bethlehem, to be counted. Bethlehem was not a large or important city. It seems safe to reason that the town may have been overrun with folks like Joseph and Mary who had come to town for the same purpose.

Ancient inns were different from our modern hotel chains. Rooms were more like covered porches arranged around a courtyard. Securing lodging in an inn in the biblical period generally meant that guests cooked their own food, provided their own bedding, and generated their own heat.

### **The Birth of Jesus, Matthew 2:1, Luke 2:1–7**

*The film does an excellent job of situating the birth in a crude, humble spot. Jesus is born in a pen for sheep and cattle. He is wrapped in cloth and nestled in the hay of a feeding trough. The scene ends with Jesus and his parents being visited by shepherds from neighboring fields and ultimately by the wise men that followed the star to the site of the child's birth. Their gifts symbolize their recognition that this is God's promised King.*

This is one of the few scenes in the movie inconsistent with the Gospel stories. The scene unfolds on the screen as it does in many church's Christmas productions; however, most scholars believe that the wise men did not arrive to pay homage to the Christ child until Jesus was a toddler. This perspective sets their departure on the journey to Bethlehem closer to Jesus' birth rather than many months before as depicted in the film. Matthew, which tells of the visit by the magi, seems to support this perspective as it suggests that the wise men visited Jesus and his family in a house (Matt. 2:11) rather than a stable.

Other elements of this scene are well done. Particularly accurate is the location of the birth in what appears to be the opening of a cave. Most scholars believe that biblical stables were nothing more than cave entrances with perhaps a crude covering over the entrance. This seems to be the type of setting suggested by the film.

Also important is the film's inclusion of the shepherds, who are pivotal to Luke's narrative. Shepherds were among the lowest of the low in the biblical world. That the angels announced the child's birth first to such figures made clear that this King had come to care for and as a gift to all people.

### **The Flight to Egypt, Matthew 2:13–18**

*The film ends with Mary and Joseph leaving Bethlehem and traveling to Egypt after being made aware in a dream of Herod's plan to do away with the infant Messiah. This part of the story, found in Matthew, quickly ushers the stark realities of Jesus' birth back into the narrative. The powerful people of the world were threatened by the arrival of this child, and they would do anything to do away with him.*

Herod's decree that boys two years of age and under should be put to death in the Bethlehem area conjures images of hundreds or thousands of untimely deaths. But Bethlehem was not a heavily populated area. Most scholars suggest that between twenty and thirty infants may have been killed as a result of Herod's decree. This smaller

number should in no way lessen the horror of this event in our minds, but it should help us keep things in proper context.

As the film points out, Joseph and Mary were likely poor. In light of this, it has been suggested that one of the ways they may have paid for the trip to Egypt was by selling the three gifts from the wise men. This theory is merely a guess and not based on any passage from Matthew or Luke.

## **Valuable Lessons from *The Nativity Story* and the Birth Narratives**

### **God's promises do not always come to instant fruition.**

We live in a society where many things are instantly available. Cable television and satellites make news from around the world, movies, and TV shows available at the click of a button. ATM machines ensure that money is always available with the swipe of a plastic card. E-mail and cell phones offer quick communication around the world.

All of these advancements cause us to place unrealistic demands on other areas of our lives that are not governed by the rules of instant access in the twenty-first century. Faith remains one area that cannot be described by the word *instantaneous*. Faith and the voice of God are still primarily about patience, trust, and waiting.

Months passed between the angels' visitations to Zechariah, Joseph, and Mary and the moment at which the various pronouncements came to fruition. Likewise, the wise men journeyed down a long, arduous road for a long time before reaching the child they sought. And the people of Israel had for centuries awaited the arrival of this promised child. Over and over again, faith is connected with waiting in this story, and this is a strong word for the world in which we live today.

### **Jesus came to and for all people.**

We often create a grandiose picture of Jesus' birth. In the midst of a babe in swaddling clothes, angels singing in the heavens, and a bright shining star, there were also dirty animals, a feeding trough for a crib, and shepherds of ill repute present to congratulate the poor couple welcoming their first child into a cave.

None of this seemed to bother Mary and Joseph. And none of it seemed to matter to God. This aspect of the story should help emphasize the fact that God's Messiah was for all people, not simply for those with polished shoes, pressed clothes, or perfect ethics.

### **Christmas reminds us that we are all travelers away from home.**

Whether at Christmas or some other time, many of us know what it is like to be away from home. Like Mary and Joseph we can empathize with the traveler who dwells for a time in a place that is unfamiliar and far from family and friends.

The image of Mary and Joseph as travelers who find lodging in a stable is indicative of the fact that, like them, we as the people of God are far from home. We, too, are in a place where we are not totally comfortable or at peace.

Advent is the season of remembering the coming of Christ on that first Christmas. It is also a season in which we look forward to Christ's arriving again at the second coming to signal the end of the age. Until that day comes, we will join Mary and Joseph and all of God's children as travelers on a journey far from home. This truth should call us always to be aware that this world is not our final home. It is not a place to become completely comfortable, for we are ultimately strangers in this land. (This idea is developed by J. Ellsworth Kalas, *Christmas from the Backside*, pp. 42–43.)

**God's words often come to unsuspecting people.**

Mary and Joseph were unlikely recipients of God's good news. After all, these young folks were from a town with a bad reputation. Rather than choosing the elite of society, God chose to involve a teenage mother from a backwoods town in the unfolding of the birth of his Son Jesus.

The application here is easy to see. Often we consider ourselves unworthy participants in God's work. The truth is that we are unworthy. However, that does not stop God from choosing to use us in accomplishing God's purposes in the world. The responsibility then shifts to our shoulders. We can no longer wrestle with the question of our worthiness before God. We must now deal with the question of our willingness to follow God.

**God's words to us come at unexpected places.**

Where were Joseph and Mary when the good news of Jesus' birth was made known to them? We don't know where Mary was or what she was doing. We do know, however, that Joseph was asleep. His encounter with the angel took place as part of a dream. In neither instance do we find Mary or Joseph in the temple worshipping, deep in prayer, or involved in some type of spiritual activity when the angels greet them. They were simply going about the everyday activities of their normal lives.

In the same way God often comes to us in the midst of ordinary activities. While we are working, having a conversation with a friend, or even while we are watching a movie, God often speaks to us. As believers we must remember that God may choose to speak to us wherever we are, even when we are asleep!

## Questions for Reflection from *The Nativity Story* and the Birth Narratives

- Which character in *The Nativity Story* do you most identify with? Why?
- What did you learn about the sacrifices made by Mary and Joseph in watching the film and reading the biblical narratives?
- How would you have responded had the angel called you to be an earthly parent to the Son of God?
- The film places significant emphasis on Herod and the wise men and their roles in the birth story. What insights did you gain into their lives through this movie?
- How does the story of Christ's birth and the movie speak to the issue of patience? In what ways does this contradict the perspective offered by our modern society?
- Which scene in the story speaks to you the most?
- If the birth story were to take place in our world today, where do you think it would happen and among which people group?
- If the birth story were to take place today, do you think you would have the faith to accept the child as the Son of God?
- How difficult would it have been to be a parent or friend to Mary as she was pregnant with a child that she claimed was the promised Messiah?
- How does this film change or reshape your appreciation of the Christmas story?

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