Review: **JAR160323**

IMAGINING JESUS' HUMANITY IN *THE YOUNG MESSIAH*

a Movie Review of
The Young Messiah
Directed by Cyrus Nowrasteh

(Focus Features, 2016)

The Young Messiah is based on Anne Rice's 2005 novel *Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt.* It tells the story of Jesus returning to Nazareth from Egypt as a 7-year-old. In the Biblical narrative, King Herod hears that the Messiah has been born and orders all the children in Bethlehem killed, hoping to eliminate any potential political rival. But an angel warns Joseph in a dream about Herod's plot, so he takes Mary and Jesus into hiding in Egypt until Herod dies (Matt. 2:12–23). Writer-director Cyrus Nowrasteh's movie version adds a Roman centurion character sent by Herod's son Archelaus to investigate rumors about a miracle-working child just the right age to have been a survivor of the massacre in Bethlehem.

Filling in the Gaps. In the Bible, the story of Jesus' return from Egypt is only a few verses, so the filmmakers had to imaginatively fill in the gaps to come up with a two-hour movie. The most interesting aspect of *The Young Messiah* is its attempt to imagine what Jesus would have been like as a child. What would it have been like for Jesus to realize that He was the Messiah and the Son of God? The Bible doesn't give us very many details about Jesus' childhood. Really, after the birth narratives, all we get is the brief story about Jesus in the Temple as a 12-year-old (Luke 2:41–51), so Anne Rice and the writers of *The Young Messiah* had to imagine a lot on their own.

It might seem sacrilegious to make up a fictional story about Jesus. Yet, in a way, such imaginative engagement with Scripture is unavoidable. We are called to love others the way Christ loved us (John 13:14–15; Eph. 5:1–2; 1 Pet. 2:21; 1 John 2:6; etc.). This does not mean, of course, that we do the exact same things Jesus did. We obviously can't die for people's sins! Rather, we are called to be the kind of person Jesus was (Phil. 2:5). Yet if we are to apply Christ's teachings to our own lives today, we need to be able to imagine what He would do if He were in our shoes. This is a kind of imaginative story-telling, and it requires us to picture Jesus a real human man who did ordinary human things like eat and sleep and get tired and even laugh and have fun. We can't imagine Jesus' relevance to our everyday lives if we can't imagine Him having His own

everyday life, and there is no reason we can't use historical fiction about Jesus to help us round out our mental picture of what His everyday life would have been like, including His life as a child, as long as our imaginative stories don't contradict anything in Scripture. And our stories will be even better if they are grounded in good historical knowledge of the culture and time period in which Jesus lived, as *The Young Messiah*'s are.

The Incarnate Word Learned to Read. The main source of drama and conflict in *The Young Messiah* involves Mary and Joseph's attempt to protect Jesus from harm and to raise Him well. Throughout the story Mary and Joseph are concerned to keep Jesus' identity a secret and to stop Him from doing anything miraculous that might draw the attention of Herod or the Romans. In an attempt to guard His identity, they have not even told Jesus Himself about the miraculous events surrounding His birth. Mary and Joseph think Jesus is too young to understand that He is the only begotten Son of God, and they worry that they wouldn't be able to explain it well enough to Him even if they wanted to. "How can we explain God to his own Son?" Joseph asks.

In a way *The Young Messiah* is a kind of extended meditation on Luke 2:52—"Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man" (ESV). What could it mean that the incarnate God "increased" or *grew* in wisdom? *The Young Messiah* imagines the 7-year-old Jesus as not knowing that He is the Messiah or the Son of God. Jesus is able to perform miracles (such as resurrecting a dead boy) without understanding how He does this. He simply prays, and it happens. But the film manages to depict Jesus' growing self-understanding in a way that fits with the way the Bible portrays Jesus as an adult. This is harder to do than it sounds. Notoriously *The Last Temptation of Christ* was not able to pull off the same sort of attempt to portray accurately the human side of Jesus. *The Last Temptation* so emphasized Jesus' doubts and fears that the character was unrecognizable as the same Jesus portrayed in the Bible. With *The Young Messiah*, however, we can believe that this boy—in all His ordinary boyishness—could grow up to be the perfect man we worship as Christ the Lord.

It may seem controversial to think Jesus had to learn things, including things about Himself. We might think Jesus could not have been fully God if He had to be taught that He was God. If He was fully God, wouldn't He know everything? The problem with this way of thinking is that, though He was fully God, Jesus was also fully human. If Jesus was a real human baby, then His developing brain would not have been biologically capable of understanding everything all at once the moment He was conceived in Mary's womb. Like all human beings, Jesus had to *grow* in wisdom and stature. If Jesus did not have an ordinary human body that was subject to the same ordinary physical processes of growth as the rest of us, then Jesus would not be fully human.

Thinking and understanding are in part bodily activities that we have to learn how to do. As a child Jesus, too, would have had to develop His human mind's ability to understand His relationship to the Father. That relationship itself didn't change,

because Jesus was always fully divine, but there is no reason to think He would not have had to grow in his *understanding* of His relationship with the Father. To deny this and to say, for example, that Jesus never had to learn to walk or talk or read or memorize Scripture as a child is to deny His full humanity.

Trying to avoid controversy. The movie attempts to soften some of the more controversial elements of the novel. For example, given the lack of detail about Jesus' childhood in the canon of Scripture, Rice borrowed from noncanonical sources such as the "Infancy Gospel of Thomas," which portrays the child Jesus as performing various miracles. In one scene from this source, Jesus gets angry with another boy and curses him, after which the boy instantly falls dead (Infancy Gospel of Thomas 2:7-9). Rice portrays this as an accident in the novel. Jesus didn't mean to kill the boy and didn't know exactly how it had happened. Here Rice plays off of the canonical story of the bleeding woman who was healed when she touched the hem of Jesus' cloak in the crowd. Echoing Mark 5:30, Rice has Jesus say, "I felt the power go out of me" (*Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt*, p. 3). But in the movie, Jesus Himself does not kill the boy at all. Rather it is a Satan-like demon character that kills the boy and then whispers in the bystanders' ears that Jesus had done it. This change avoids the novel's suggestion that Jesus killed the boy out of revenge, which could seem to contradict Scripture's teaching of Jesus' sinlessness (Heb. 4:15).

Some viewers may quibble with the portrayals of Jesus' childhood miracles, since the Bible seems to say that Jesus' first miracle was changing the water to wine at the wedding in Cana. John 2:11 says, "This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him" (ESV). Yet this does not *necessarily* mean that Jesus had never done any miracles before. John might be drawing a distinction between "signs" and ordinary miracles, where signs are special miracles intended to reveal that Jesus is the Messiah (see John 20:30–31). For example, John also tells us that Jesus demonstrated supernatural knowledge about Nathanael *prior* to the wedding at Cana (John 2:47–48). Most of us would say that this was a "miracle," but John doesn't count it as one of Jesus' "signs," so perhaps he has something specific in mind when he talks about the wedding at Cana being the "first of his signs." Also, one might wonder, if Jesus had never done anything miraculous before, how did Mary know that Jesus could create wine (John 2:3)? These suggestions are admittedly not decisive. In any event, even if *The Young Messiah*'s depiction of Jesus performing miracles as a child is actually incompatible with Scripture, the movie seems to portray accurately the *character* of Jesus, which is perhaps the most important thing about a Jesus movie and the thing that has been difficult for other films to accomplish.

The beauty of Christ. The film portrays Jesus as a deeply sensitive and compassionate person, haunted in nightmares by the suffering and death He witnesses around Him in His Roman-occupied society. When He visits the Temple in Jerusalem, He buys a dove and releases it instead of sacrificing it. This is both a believable action for an innocent and sensitive child, but also foreshadows Jesus' future overturning of the money

changers (Matt. 21:12–13) and His eventual offering of Himself as a sacrifice that accomplished what the animal sacrifices could not (Heb. 9:12).

The film also portrays Jesus having a beautiful, child-like faith. He has a very sweet and natural way of praying, and when Joseph reminds Jesus to trust God, Jesus says, "I do. I trust Him for everything." And we believe it! Likewise, Jesus is portrayed as having a kind of brilliant innocence in his knowledge of Scripture. When the rabbi of Nazareth questions Jesus about God being a carpenter, Jesus creatively and convincingly replies that God must be a carpenter, because He told Noah the dimensions of the ark.

The *Young Messiah* affirms the full humanity of Christ, but it also emphasizes the full divinity of Christ. Jesus is often shown laughing and playing like a typical seven-year-old. At the same time, Jesus is usually filmed so that He is bathed in beautiful golden sunlight. He is a human boy, but there is clearly something special about Him, something beneath the surface that can't be kept completely hidden. "He is not *just* a child," says Mary's brother Cleopas, and other characters see it, too. Jesus' uniqueness sometimes provokes jealousy (as with the neighborhood bullies in Egypt or Jesus' cousin James), sometimes fear (as with the Centurion), or sometimes a sense of wonder (as with the local rabbi in Nazareth).

Cinematic flaws. While *The Young Messiah* may avoid any serious theological errors, it is not an especially good movie in term of filmmaking quality. The cinematography is beautiful, and the acting is mostly competent, but the script is cliché and too slow-paced. The action scenes are ineptly directed, and the miracle scenes tend to overuse slow-motion effects to unintentionally comic effect. The movie was also surprisingly and unnecessarily violent, including an attempted rape scene.

The Young Messiah would be fairly scary for small children—especially the Devil character and Jesus' recurring nightmares in which He is haunted by the faces of the various people He sees die. It is realistic that a seven-year-old child would have experienced much more death in that culture than children today do, and it is realistic that He would have nightmares about it. But that's exactly why you probably don't want to take your children to see this movie! As a movie, it is certainly not for everyone.

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