

# Jesus' Hidden Life



A scene from the film depicts the birth of Jesus

*In the new movie, **The Young Messiah**, a 7-year-old Jesus discovers his identity as God's only begotten Son*

By Gerard Condon

**W**HAT was the childhood of Jesus like? Apart from a fleeting reference to Christ as a 12-year-old (Luke 2:41-50), the Gospels are silent on his "hidden life," the thirty years between his nativity and public ministry. A 2016 movie by Cyrus Nowrasteh, now available on DVD and streaming services, attempts to fill the gap in our knowledge.

Nowrasteh, an American director of Iranian descent, based his screenplay on a novel by Anne Rice, *Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt* (1998). Rice, who is best known for the gothic fiction *Vampire Diaries*, had returned to Catholicism at the time of writing this novel. Even so, she included elements of the Apocryphal Gospels in her account of

the childhood of Jesus. These second-century texts never made it into the canon of the New Testament because they portrayed Jesus as a wonder-worker with, at times, a vindictive manner. With this adaptation, Nowrasteh makes the child Jesus to be entirely consistent with the adult Christ that we worship. Nonetheless, *The Young Messiah* retains a frisson of its extra-biblical sources. That helps to maintain the viewer's interest in a movie that would otherwise be quite predictable.

## Out of Egypt

The film opens with Joseph (Vincent Walsh), Mary (Sara Lazzaro), and a seven-year-old Jesus (Adam Greaves-Neal) living in Alexandria,

Egypt. They have fled Israel to escape the persecution of Herod the Great (Matthew 2:13-23). The movie conjectures that Jesus' extended family is there too, including Mary's brother Cleopas (Christian McKay, who brings comic relief to the movie) and his son James (Finn Ireland). This picks up a thread of early Christian tradition which held that the apostle James was a relative of Jesus (Galatians 1:19). In the movie, James is understandably envious of his cousin's special abilities, which include raising a dead bird and an apparently dead boy to life (incidents drawn from the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas).

Joseph receives a divinely inspired dream telling him that it is safe to return to Israel, following the death of King Herod (Matthew 2:19-20). However, the news of the child with miraculous powers reaches his successor, Herod Antipas (Jonathon Bailey), a debauched figure, complete with bad-guy eyeliner and an evil-looking goatee. He dispatches a contingent of Roman troops led by the centurion, Severus (Seán Bean) to capture and destroy Jesus.

## Road movie

The return from Egypt to Nazareth follows the pattern of a road movie. Along the way the Holy Family is exposed to life's sorrows, including a chronic family illness (of Cleopas), the mistreatment of women and above all, the oppression of the Roman Empire. At one point, Jesus is caught up in a melee between a group of Jewish bandits (presumably Zealots) and Roman legionaries: an image for his future destiny as an innocent victim. Later, clutching his mother,

Jesus witnesses how the Romans conducted a crucifixion (a scene reminiscent of the 1960 movie, *Spartacus*).

The effects of sin are encouraged by a demon (Rory Keenan) that only Jesus can see. The demon taunts the child Jesus ("Your little miracles can't save this chaos"), but Jesus is able to firmly and effectively countermand his malevolence. This prefigures the many confrontations that the adult Christ would have with Satan.

There is little respite for the Holy Family when they reach Nazareth. The movie reminds us that the first century Galilean town was a cosmopolitan place: an elderly Nazarene is able to placate a group of marauding Romans with her references to Greek and Roman culture. The child Jesus is taken to the local synagogue for religious education. There he amazes the local rabbis with his knowledge of the Bible (Luke 2:49).

### Historical accuracy

The movie achieves its best dramatic tension as the Holy Family makes a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the annual Passover feast. The night before they reach the great city, Jesus leaves the caravan (Luke 2:44) and makes for the Temple alone, in search

**Mary (Sara Lazzaro) and Jesus (Adam Greaves-Neal); the director based his screenplay on a novel by Anne Rice**



**Sean Bean, the only recognizable film star, was perfectly cast in the role of the brooding, guilt-ridden professional soldier**

of answers to the questions his parents have refused to discuss. On the way, he is given some coins by well-meaning pilgrims to buy a dove that could be offered in sacrifice at the Temple (Luke 2:24). But Jesus only buys the bird to set it free. This incident reflects the preaching of the adult Christ that God wants compassion, not ritual sacrifice (Matthew 5:17; John 2:13-22).

In the Temple Jesus speaks to a blind rabbi who confirms what he has heard in whispers: that the Messiah was born in Bethlehem seven years ago. Then, in the movie's climactic moment, the centurion comes face-to-face with the young Messiah. He is mentally disarmed by the holy innocence of the child. His conversion allows Jesus to resume his hidden life in safety.

In an epilogue, Jesus cuddles his mother under the bough of an olive tree ("You are getting so big we won't be able to do this for much longer.") She finally tells him the mystery of his origins, that he is not just a child of God, like all children are, but God's only begotten. Both she and Joseph have promised to guide and protect his identity until he is ready to assert it for himself.

The *Young Messiah* was filmed in Italy at a cost of \$18 million. The costume and sets look accurate and the cinematography is well executed. The scenes of violence are sanitized, in keeping with the movie's PG-13 rating. Adam Greaves-Neal was selected for the title role after a worldwide talent search. He is from a Catholic family in London, and brings a charismatic presence to the movie. Sara Lazzaro gives an emotional performance as Mary, one that is especially strong in the closing scenes (a narration of the Annunciation). Vincent Walsh fleshes out the part of Joseph, beyond its usual two-dimensional characterization, though his Irish



brogue is not in keeping with his son's English accent! Sean Bean, the only recognizable film star, was perfectly cast in the role of the brooding, guilt-ridden professional soldier.

### An adult Christ

It was William Wordsworth who observed that "the child is father of the man." Though there are no eyewitness accounts of the early years of Jesus, his adult persona must have been evident in his early life. Apart from the scene when Jesus suddenly makes it rain, this movie strikes the right balance in observing both his humanity and divinity in a balanced manner. As a child, Jesus already knew that there was something different about him; he had the gift of healing; he could sense the presence of angels; he had no interest in fighting or being cruel. However, he also enjoyed playing games with a toy camel.

The movie shows that, even as a child, Jesus experienced God as his loving father. The New Testament even preserves his use of the Aramaic word "abba" or daddy, when addressing God. Theologians call this the "filial consciousness" of Jesus, and say that it was present in him from a young age. It was only towards the end of his earthly life that Jesus "messianic consciousness," his unique role in salvation history, became self-evident. ♦