

The birth of a church?

## **Nat Turner led a slave rebellion. He also heard the voice of God.**

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [November 22, 2016](#) issue



Nate Parker (center) plays Nat Turner in the film *Birth of a Nation*. © 2016 Fox Searchlight. All rights reserved.

Nate Parker's film *The Birth of a Nation* draws its name from D. W. Griffith's aesthetically acclaimed but racist 1915 film. Parker counters Griffith's racist mythology with a story that puts the history and agency of African Americans at the center.

The movie is about Nat Turner (played by Parker), leader of the bloodiest slave rebellion in U.S. history. In 1831 Turner and fellow rebels killed 60 members of slaveholding families, including infants and children. They did it under the banner of divine mandate—Turner was a Christian preacher and claimed that the Holy Spirit orchestrated the rebellion.

The film won major prizes at the Sundance Film Festival and was sold to Fox Searchlight Pictures for a record \$17.5 million. Controversy arose when reports

circulated that Parker and one of the film's cocreators, Jean Celestin, were tried on rape charges in the late 1990s. Parker was acquitted. Celestin was sentenced to serve two to four years in prison, though the verdict was later vacated. In 2012, the victim in the case committed suicide. When the story of the trial and suicide resurfaced, some protested the film and called for a boycott.

Rape and accusations of rape are at the center of both Griffith's and Parker's films. In Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, the "true America" is born through the heroic actions of the Ku Klux Klan. When a white woman jumps to her death to avoid being raped by a black man, white southerners form the Klan to avenge her death and later bring white northerners into their fold to purify the nation from "African pollution."

Parker rewrites this white supremacist fiction with a story in which Turner and his fellow male slaves plan the rebellion after two enslaved women are brutally raped by white men. Although the rebellion fails (the participants plus hundreds of other enslaved and free blacks were killed in retaliation), Turner's actions pave the way for future insurrections and for African-American participation in the Civil War. Turner's rebellion, in Parker's story, is at least partially responsible for birthing a nation that includes the full participation of black men.

The greatest weakness of Parker's film is that it continues the idea (central in Griffith's film) that heroes are men who act to protect or defend women. It may be asking too much for a first-time director on a limited budget to overturn this Hollywood convention, especially with Parker echoing a film that is often cited as the first to use this narrative device. And there is something thrilling in seeing black male heroes exercising their agency *Braveheart*-style.

But Parker might have complicated this convention by paying more attention to Turner's religious motivations. He does not ignore Turner's religiosity, which would be nearly impossible since it's central to the historical figure, but he does domesticate it. For Parker, Turner is more of a biblical interpreter than a fiery visionary. He explains to his fellow male slaves that the Bible contains at least as many teachings that would condemn slavery as would condone it, and he thinks of the white man's use of the Bible as a weapon of oppression. For Turner, the Bible's power depends on his ability to use it to indict slave masters.

But the historical Turner's faith was fueled by his visionary episodes at least as much as by his study of the Bible. The Spirit spoke to him and gave him fantastical and violent visions. He became convinced not just of his own heroic exceptionalism but that all enslaved people would become one body capable of rising up against injustice. For Turner it was not a new nation that was being born, but a new church, which heralded the coming of the kingdom of God.

We may recoil from Turner's strident language or from the violence that Turner believed was a necessary part of his rebellion. But if we listen to the voices of the oppressed, we may be able to hear God's voice in Turner's prophecies. The story should unsettle us and press us to ask harder questions about where and how we hear the prompting of the Spirit. A film that pursued that topic would have been better and even more controversial.

*A version of this article appears in the November 23 print edition under the title "The visions of Nat Turner."*