

**IN THE  
FULLNESS  
OF TIME**

**biblical**  
EXPEDITIONS

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# In the Fullness of Time...

Paul wrote to the Galatians, “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent His son, born of a woman, born under the law...” (4:4). Paul recognized that Jesus came at a specific time and within a specific culture. He was born to Jewish parents on the eastern edge of the Roman Empire, in the land of Israel. This reality defined Jesus’ life, his person, his hopes, and his faith. His followers within the New Testament viewed his coming at that specific time as the fulfillment of God’s promises to Israel and its fathers (Acts 3:13, 25; 13:17; Rom. 11:28). The story of the Incarnation comes from this reality—God entered human time, in the first century; in a specific space, the land of Israel upon the eastern edge of the Roman Empire; to fulfill His promises of redemption to Israel’s fathers. The story of Jesus’ birth embraces this reality and the hopes of the Jewish people, who lived in the land of Israel in the first century, under Roman rule.

By the first century AD, all Jews agreed upon three things: (1) there is only one god, the God of Israel; (2) Israel is His chosen people, and this relationship is codified by the giving of the Torah, which articulates God’s will and covenant with Israel (see Exodus 19:5-6); and (3) only when Israel is free can she truly worship God in the manner He desires. We see this in the words of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist:

***“...as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. Thus, he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days” (Luke 1:70-75).***

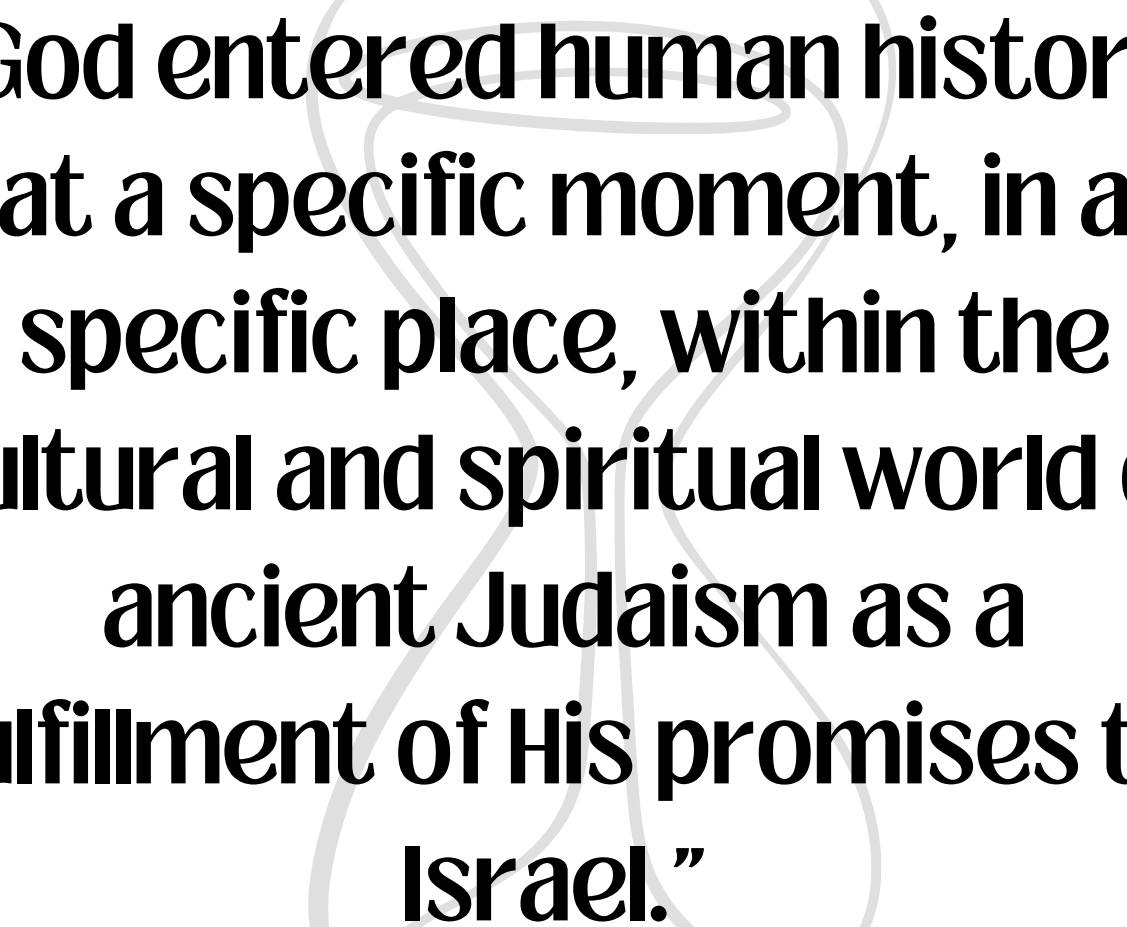
The arrival of Rome in the land of Israel in the first century BC (63 BC) fundamentally challenged these three convictions. Rome reduced the independent Hasmonean, Jewish state to the status of a client kingdom. It exploited the human and natural resources, as well as Israel's wealth, for their own purposes. It eventually removed the Hasmoneans and established Herod (the Great) as the client king of Judaea. After Herod's death, Rome oversaw the division of Herod's kingdom among his sons, and then, at the request of the Jews, saw fit to remove his son Archelaus from power and annex his lands placing them under the direct rule of Roman governors, prefects, like Pontius Pilate.

How could the one true, all-powerful God, Ruler of the universe, allow His chosen people to live under the wicked rule of the idolatrous Romans?

The question, then, within Judaism became **how** redemption would be achieved. Redemption was the focus and **how** it would be achieved. An anointed figure served as God's agent, like Moses in leading the children of Israel out of Egypt, but God's redemption is what mattered.

Jesus came into this world—a world wrestling with the God of Israel allowing His chosen people to be ruled by idolatrous Romans, filled with redemptive hopes for Him to fulfill His promises to Israel's fathers, and wondering at the role human action plays in hastening this redemption.

We often think about Christmas from our vantage point. What Christmas means to me, to us. When we begin there, looking at the Christmas story through the lens of ourselves, or even our world, we miss the power of Jesus' nativity. It's not just the story of God coming to humanity. God entered human history, at a specific moment, in a specific place, within the cultural and spiritual world of ancient Judaism as a fulfillment of His promises to Israel. Paul proclaimed this to the Galatians. The followers of Jesus in the New Testament believed this. We cannot separate his birth from this reality. What Christmas means to me, to us, is found when we encounter what Christmas meant. "In the fullness of time...God sent His son." By understanding what it meant, we can better appreciate what it means for us.



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# The Nature of Redemption

*"As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hands of all who hate us, to do mercy with our fathers remembering His holy covenant, the promise which He swore to Abraham our father, to give to us that we being delivered from the hands of our enemies might serve Him without fear in holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our lives" (Luke 1:70-75).*

The Jewish people living in the land of Israel during the first century found themselves under the authority of the polytheistic Roman Empire. How could the One, true God allow His chosen people to be enslaved to an idolatrous, brutal, and immoral kingdom? Judaism responded to this question in different ways. Some claimed submission to Rome was a sin; therefore, Jews should take up the sword and fight. Others viewed the rule of the wicked kingdom as preordained by God; therefore, they should isolate and await His preordained time of redemption. Some blamed Israel's sin as responsible for this situation. They called upon the people to repent; then, God would bring redemption. This group coined the phrase, the kingdom of Heaven, to express their belief that repentance and obedience would bring redemption. This reality forms the backdrop to the world of the New Testament.



The Jewish people yearned for redemption; they hoped for redemption. Jesus ben Sira, writing in the early second century BC, voiced this yearning:

*“Have mercy upon us, O God of all, and put all the nations in fear of you. Lift up your hand against foreign nations and let them see your might. As you have used us to show your holiness to them, so use them to show your glory to us. Then they will know, as we have known, that there is no God but you, O Lord. Give new signs and work other wonders; make your hand and right arm glorious. Rouse your anger and pour out your wrath; destroy the adversary and wipe out the enemy. Hasten the day, and remember the appointed time, and let people recount your mighty deeds. Let survivors be consumed in the fiery wrath, and may those who harm your people meet destruction. Crush the heads of hostile rulers who say, “There is no one but ourselves.” Gather all the tribes of Jacob, and give them their inheritance, as at the beginning. Have mercy, O Lord, on the people called by your name, on Israel, whom you have named your firstborn, Have pity on the city of your sanctuary, Jerusalem, the place of your dwelling. Fill Zion with your majesty, and your temple with your glory. Bear witness to those whom you created in the beginning, and fulfill the prophecies spoken in your name. Reward those who wait for you and let your prophets be found trustworthy. Hear, O Lord, the prayer of your servants, according to your goodwill toward your people, and all who are on the earth will know that you are the Lord, the God of the ages” (Ben Sira 36:1-22).*

A Jewish poet during this period expressed the hopes of Zion’s redemption, “I remember you for a blessing, O Zion...generations of pious will adorn you; they who long for the day of your salvation...Purge wrongdoing from your midst, lying and iniquity be cut off from you...How they have hoped for your victory! How your perfect ones have mourned for you...May you lay hold of righteousness everlasting...Embrace the vision spoken of you, O Zion, the dreams of prophets sought for you!” (11Q5 22:1-15).

Ben Sira and the Jewish poet, like Zechariah, John the Baptist’s father, longed for Jerusalem’s redemption. This redemption embodied political freedom so that the people could truly worship God as He desired for them. Freedom enabled them to serve Him.



They envisioned Israel's redemption as fulfilling God's promises to His people and the visions spoken of by the prophets. Freed from her enemies, Israel can now worship God in fear and righteousness.

Like God's first redemption of Israel from Egypt. Moses and Aaron told Pharaoh to let the people go, so that they could go and worship their God. They were freed from Egyptian bondage, but for what purpose? In Leviticus, God says, "For the children of Israel are as servants to me" (25:55). God freed Israel to serve Him. Jewish hopes of redemption in the first century expressed that same longing: that we may be free, so we can serve God.

The New Testament, the teachings of Jesus and Paul announce that God's redemptive promises have come to Israel, and to the world. Jesus, like his contemporaries, articulated this hope in the phrase, the kingdom of Heaven (God), which means submitting to God's rule and reign.

We often celebrate our freedom; in fact, we describe redemption in those terms. That's not incorrect, but we can never lose sight that God brings freedom, so that we may serve Him. He frees us to serve Him. The Bible never saw redemption as my personal freedom; rather, God freed us, so that we can submit to His rule and reign and serve Him. It's in our submission to Him that we glorify and honor Him in our world. We are not free to do as we please. We either serve God, or something else. He never shares His throne. Neither exercising my rights, nor taking up the sword effects God's redemption. Rather, submitted obedience to Him unleashes His redemptive power into the world. This is what happens when we serve Him.

**"We either serve God, or something else."**





# The Annunciation

*"And Mary said to the angel, 'How shall this be, since I have no husband?' And the angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore, the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible.' And Mary said, 'Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word'" (Luke 1:34-38).*

Mary lived in a land under foreign Roman rule, among a people who yearned for God's redemption and liberation. The Jewish people, God's chosen people, found themselves ruled by Roman polytheists. If the God of Israel alone was god, how could this be? If Israel was His chosen people, how could He allow idolaters to rule her and the land of Israel? The Jewish people longed for God's redemption. But, against the might of the Roman Empire, how would that happen? Then, the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary.

Gabriel announced a message to Mary anticipated and hoped for by many. So, on the one hand, she was prepared to hear it and receive it. There was only one problem. She was to be the vessel of God's redemption giving birth to His son. Yet, she was a virgin: "How shall this be, since I have no husband?"

Gabriel then proceeded to relay how this would be accomplished concluding with the reminder, "For with God nothing will be impossible." The Jews found themselves in a difficult and dark period looking for God's redemption—how will this be? Mary, a virgin, asked the same question—how will this be? The answer to both questions, *with God nothing is impossible.*

***"And Mary said to the angel, 'How shall this be, since I have no husband?' And the angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore, the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible.' And Mary said, 'Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word'" (Luke 1:34-38).***

Mary's story and Israel's, in a way, are intertwined. The elder Simeon recognized the connection between Mary and her people: "for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples...and the glory of your people Israel...This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too" (Luke 2:30-35). How will this be? A virgin and a people enslaved by an empire—with God nothing is impossible. He provides a way. He entered the story.

God brings redemption. Ancient Judaism saw God as ultimately responsible for Israel's salvation: "For with God nothing is impossible." Even when he used human actors to bring it about, God ultimately brought redemption. Judah the Maccabee wrote a letter to the Jews in Egypt calling upon them to celebrate the festival of dedication of the Jerusalem Temple, after he reconquered it from the Seleucids. He heralded God's salvation of His people: "It is God who has saved all his people, and has returned the inheritance to all, and the kingship and the priesthood and the consecration, as he promised through the law. We have hope in God that he will soon have mercy on us and will gather us from everywhere under heaven into his holy place, for he has rescued us from great evils and has purified the place" (2 Macc. 2:16-18). With God nothing is impossible.

In the darkest times, God delivers His people. When things seemed impossible and hopeless, He sent messages of hope. God is for us. The annunciation of the birth of Jesus to Mary proclaims, He is with us.

Mary responded to Gabriel: "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." She didn't understand how, but she trusted God. She submitted to His will



How do we respond in impossible and hopeless situations? When we don't know how, do we give way to despair? *With God nothing is impossible.*

Do we submit to Him, even when we don't know how it will happen?

Will we serve God even when the situation seems impossible? Mary did.

Redemption comes through obedience. Mary trusted God and submitted to His will. Her choice led to the redemption of the world.

This Advent do we trust God regardless of the appearance of our external circumstances?

Will we obediently submit to His will for Him to bring hope and deliverance in our lives and those around us?



# The Magnificat

***"He has shown strength with His arm, He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent empty away. He has helped His servant Israel, in remembrance of His mercy, as He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity forever" (Luke 1:51-55).***

The militant Protestant revolutionary preacher Thomas Müntzer (c. 1480-1525), who was executed as the leader of the Peasant Revolt, based his message upon Luke 1:52: "He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree." Müntzer recognized the socially and politically disruptive words of the Magnificat. We, however, sanitize Christmas. We depict the birth of Jesus as serene, sweet, and majestic. Our Christmas art and music elicit the sentimental feelings of the season. We mention the animals; God stooping from His heavenly throne to a manger. But we sanitize Christmas.

The Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) and the Benedictus (Luke 1:68-79) voice the Jewish redemptive hopes and aspirations of the first century. They were not serene and sweet. They yearned for God's removal of Rome, freeing His people, so they could worship Him. They also anticipated the reversal of the social order. These were subversive ideas; they upset those who resided in palaces and felt comfortable with the status quo. God would exalt the lowly and bring down the mighty. The hungry would be filled; the rich would be made poor.

God's redemption was not merely inward and personal. God's redemption impacted all His people and manifested itself in visible, tangible ways within the social and political order. The words of the Magnificat are anything but safe; they are radical. Israel's long hoped for redemption has come, and it will disrupt the established world.

The War Scroll, found among the Dead Sea Scroll library, expresses the same sentiment as the Magnificat and Benedictus. It blesses God for His redemption and declares in that redemption the reversal of the social order:

*“Blessed is] Your name, O God of lovingkindness, the One who kept the covenant for our forefathers. Throughout all our generations You have made Your mercies wondrous for the rem[nant of the people] during the dominion of Belial. With all the mysteries of his hatred they have not lead us astray from Your covenant. His spirits of destruction You have driven [away from us, and when the me]n of his dominion [condemned themselves,] You have preserved the lives of Your redeemed. And You raised up the fallen by Your strength, but those who are great in height You will cut dow[n to humble them. ] [And] there is no rescuer for all their mighty men, and no place of refuge for their swift ones. To their honored men You will return shame, and all [their] vain existence [shall be as not]hing. But we, Your holy people, shall praise Your name for Your works of truth. Because of Your mighty deeds we shall exalt [Your] sp[endor in all] epochs and appointed times of eternity, at the beginning of day and, at night and the exit of evening and morning. For Your [glorio]us p[urpose] is great and Your wondrous mysteries are in [Your] high heavens, to [raise u]p those for Yourself from the dust and to humble those from the gods” (1QM 14:8-15).*

We tend to view Christmas through ourselves—what God has done for me. In doing so, we fail to feel the collective sense of hope and upheaval that the message of Christmas originally articulated. It’s there in the Magnificat, the song of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, in the angelic proclamation, and even in Simeon’s utterance about the newborn Jesus in the Temple. God is fulfilling His promises to Israel’s fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, with the birth of Jesus. The hopes of His people, and the world, are being realized in the baby in Bethlehem. But this redemption will upset the social and political order of the day.





As Mary's son grew up and founded his movement, he articulated the same values found in his mother's song of praise:

***"Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you that hunger now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you that weep now, for you will laugh...But woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you that are full now, for you shall hunger. Woe to you that laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep" (Luke 6:21-25).***

Jesus described his movement as made up of those who his mother envisioned being exalted and filled because of her son's coming.

It's hard for us, when we are wrapped in the lights, sounds, and smells of Christmas, to hear the disruptive and subversive tone of the first Christmas. But we need to. What God did in sending Jesus was more than for my personal benefit. It manifests itself in visible and tangible ways within the social order.

Jesus articulated the message of Christmas when he read from the book of Isaiah in the synagogue of his hometown Nazareth:

***"The of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:18-19).***

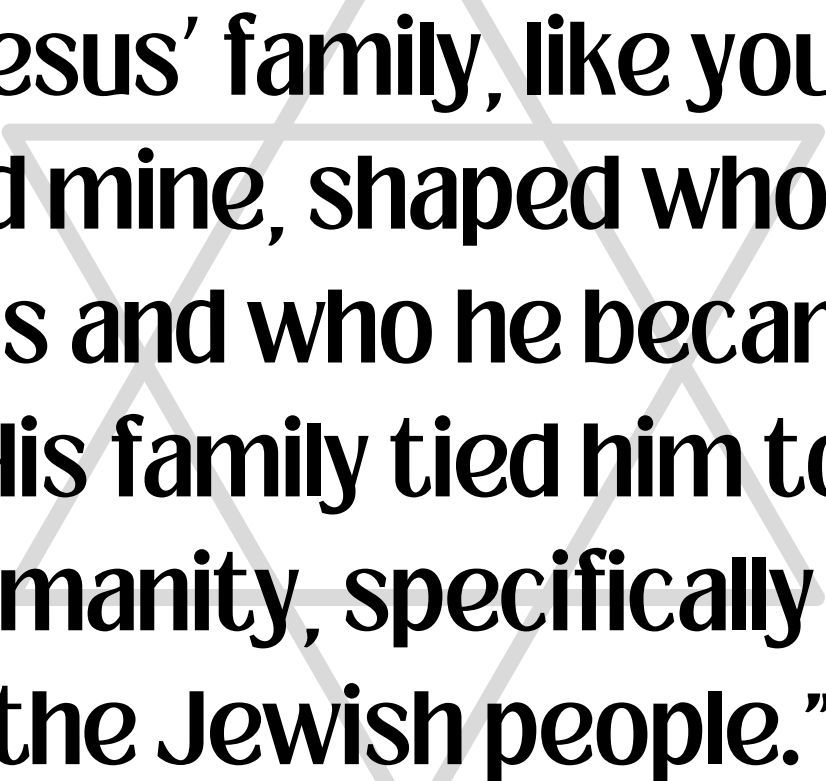


# Born of a Woman, Born under the Law: The Family of Jesus

***“Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, ‘God is with us. When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.” (Matthew 1:18-25).***

We often overlook the impact Jesus’ family had upon him. Him being God in flesh overshadows the other, equally important reality of the Incarnation—his humanity. Jesus’ family, like yours and mine, shaped who he was and who he became. His family tied him to humanity, specifically to the Jewish people.

Jesus, his parents, and his brothers (Mark 6:3), bore popular Jewish names. Joseph and Jesus were some of the most common Jewish male names in the first century.[1] Jesus, which is the common Greek form of the name Joshua in the first century, was pronounced “Yeshua,” but in the Galilee, the pronunciation of the name would have been “Yeshu.”[2] Joseph, like his son, belonged to the house of David (Matt. 1:20; Luke 2:4), a designation shared by others within the first century.[3] Jesus’ mother’s name, Mary, the Hebrew Miriam, was the most popular woman’s name in the period.



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The New Testament offers little information on Jesus’ family; the Gospels hardly mention them, outside of the nativity stories. Small details, however, imbedded within the Gospels birth narratives indicate Jesus grew up in an observant, pious Jewish family. The actions of Jesus’ parents after his birth, his circumcision (Luke 2:21; see Gen. 17:10-14), their actions in the Temple (Luke 2:22-24), as well as their annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Passover (Luke 2:41), demonstrate this.

A mother was ritually impure for forty days after giving birth to a son (Leviticus 12:1-8). She must bring a sacrifice of a lamb or young doves to complete her purification. It was impractical in the first century for a mother to travel to Jerusalem and the Temple after the birth of every child, so women frequently postponed the purification sacrifice until giving birth to several children, when the family would travel to Jerusalem on pilgrimage (see t. Keritot 2:21; m. Keritot 1:7; 2.4). Mary, however, performed the rite immediately at the conclusion of the forty days in strict observance of the commandments (Luke 2:22). Joseph and Mary’s offering of young doves instead of a lamb (Luke 2:24) indicates Jesus’ family was poor, yet a devout Jewish family, who strictly adhered to God’s instructions.

The Law of Moses (Ex. 34:20; Num. 18:14-16) required a father to pay a redemption fee upon the birth of his firstborn son, from the thirtieth day after the boy's birth. A father could pay the redemption fee to a priest anywhere within the land of Israel; it did not have to take place in Jerusalem or the temple (t. Halah. 2:7-9). Some extremely devout parents understood the command as referring to paying the redemption fee in the temple in Jerusalem. Joseph read the biblical command in this manner and chose to perform the act at the Jerusalem Temple as a show of his devotion.

Religious instruction took place primarily within the home and was important within Jewish society (see Deut. 6:7-9; 11:20; Philo, Embassy to Gaius 210; Josephus, Against Apion 1:60; 2:204; m. Yoma 8:4; 4 Maccabees 18:10-19; Sifre Deuteronomy on Deut. 11:19). It fell to the father to teach his children the Scriptures and traditions of Israel. Joseph played a foundational role in Jesus' faith and practice.

The home also functioned as the primary place of prayer (along with the Temple in Jerusalem) in the land of Israel in the first century. The first century Jewish historian Josephus describes how most Jews recited Deuteronomy 6:4-9, the Shema, once if not twice daily in their homes. Jesus identified the command to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength" (Deut. 6:5) as the "great commandment" (Matt. 22:34-40). A contemporary of Jesus' described the reciting of the Shema as accepting "the kingdom of Heaven" upon oneself, acknowledging God's kingship and His right to rule, as well as submitting to His rule and commands.

We can assume Joseph taught Jesus to recite this injunction every day of his life. It was his habit. When Jesus prayed on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, on the night he was arrested, he expressed, "Father...not my will, but Yours be done" (Luke 22:39-46). Had Jesus not developed the daily habit of submitting to God's will, in that moment when so much hung upon his submission to his Father's will, would he have been able to go through with it? He fell back upon his habit, the habit shaped and demonstrated by his father, Joseph, to submit his will to God's rule and reign. And we are all the recipients of his obedience

A father was also expected to teach his son a trade in addition to Torah (t. Kiddushin 1:11; see Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3). Matthew described Joseph was a carpenter (tekton: Matt. 13:55), while Mark identified Jesus as a carpenter, like his father (tekton: Mark 6:3).

Carpenters were artisans, and regarded as particularly learned, within first century society. If a difficult problem arose, people in the village would ask, "Is there a carpenter among us, or the son of a carpenter, who can solve the problem for us?"[4] A discovery at Khirbet Qana (Cana of Galilee: John 2:1-12) indicates a certain degree of literary training and ability among Galilean artisans, like Jesus and Joseph.[5] Jewish Sages were not professional academics in the first century. Many were artisans; some were fishermen, day laborers, potters, and carpenters.

Matthew described Joseph as "a righteous man" (dikaios: 1:19). The Greek term used by Matthew reflects the Hebrew word tzaddik, which not only identified Joseph as a pious person, but a learned Sage (see t. Zevahim 2:17; Kallah Rabbati 6:4; and y. Shekalim 2, 46d-47a; m. Avot 1:2).

Ancient Jewish sources frequently identified a particular group of individuals within first century by the term tzaddik, a group of pietists known as the Hasidim.[6] This group was known for its exceptional piety, working of miracles, healing the sick, bringing rain, and rescuing people from various troubles. They were active in Galilee, and primarily emphasized a person's relationship to another, particularly the needy (for them charity was the principal means to worship God), prayer (which they were known to pray for long periods of time), and embracing poverty as an ideology.[7] They stood on the fringes of Pharisaic Judaism, and their emphasis on the needs of the human individual above ritual purity placed them in tension and conflict with the Pharisees at times. They also valued women and their honor (see Matt. 1:19; b. Ta'anit 23a-b; 24b-25a; b. Shabbat 127b; Avot de Rabbi Nathan version A, 8). The Jewish historian Josephus identified Honi the Circle Drawer (m. Ta'anit 3:8), one of the early pietists, as a "righteous man" (Antiquities 14:22; y. Ta'anit 3, 67a).

Matthew's identification of Joseph as a "righteous man" identified him as a learned pietist. Joseph would have been responsible for the religious instruction of his son, Jesus, so when the teachers of Jerusalem marveled at the understanding and answers posed by the young Jesus (Luke 2:46-49), they were amazed at the instruction he had received from his father, Joseph.

Jesus' family shaped him. They formed his faith. Their obedient faithfulness influenced the obedience of their son. Who are we influencing?

What are those around us learning from our habits and our faithfulness, or lack thereof?

Overlooking Jesus' family, ignores the reality of the Incarnation. If we understand the world of Jesus' family, then they too can provide models of faithful obedience to us.

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[1] Marc Turnage, *Windows Into the Bible. Cultural and Historical Insights from the Bible for Modern Readers* (Logion Press: Springfield, MO 2016), 211-213.

[2] D. Flusser, *Jesus* (3rd ed.; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2001), 24.

[3] Turnage, *Windows Into the Bible*, 220-221.

[4] J. Levy, *Wörterbuch über die Talmudim und Midraschim* (vol. 3; Berlin, 1924), 338.

[5] E. Eshel, D. R. Edwards, "Language and Writing in Early Roman Galilee: Social location of a potter's abecedarium from Khirbet Qana," in *Religion and Society in Roman Palestine: Old Questions, New Approaches* (D. R. Edwards, ed.; New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 49-55.

[6] On the Hasidim, cf. m. Berachot 5:1ff; m. Ta'anit 3:8; m. Avot 3:9; t. Baba Qama 2:6; b. Niddah 38a-b; b. Nedarim 10a; b. Menahot 40b-41a; y. Terumot 8, 4.46b; Tractate Derekh Eretz Zuta, and Tanna d'be Eliyahu; and Shmuel Safrai, "The Teaching of the Pietists in Mishnaic Literature," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 16 (1965): 15-33; idem, "Jesus and the Hasidim," *Jerusalem Perspective Online*. No pages. Cited 27 September, 2010. Online:

<http://www.jerusalemerspective.org/default.aspx?tabid=27&ArticleID=1669>; idem, "Mishnat Hasidim in Tannaitic Literature," in *Ve-Hinei Ein Yosef, A Collection in Memory of Yosef Amorai* (Tel Aviv, 1973), 136-152 [Hebrew]; idem "The Pious and the Men of Deeds," *Zion* 50 (1985): 133-154 [Hebrew]; idem, "Jesus as a Hasid," in *Proceedings of the Tenth World Congress of Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem, 1990), 1-7 [Hebrew]; idem, "The Term Derekh Erez," *Tarbiz* 60 (1991): 147-162 [Hebrew]; Chana Safrai and Ze'ev Safrai, "Holy Men and Rabbis in Talmudic Antiquity," in *Saints and Role Models in Judaism and Christianity* (eds. M. Poorthuis and J. Schwartz; Leiden: Brill, 2004), 45-58; see also Geza Vermes, "Hanina ben Dosa," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 23 (1972): 28-50; idem, "Hanina ben Dosa," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 24 (1974): 51-64.

[7] See M. Turnage, "The Three Pillars of Jesus' Faith," *Enrichment* 16/4 (Fall 2011): 100-101.





# The Census of Quirinius

***"And it happened in those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census took place for the first time when Quirinius was governor of Syria" (Luke 2:1-2).***

The census of Quirinius held bitter feelings for the Jewish people. At this time, Rome officially annexed the territory of the land in which Jerusalem sat, and the people came under direct Roman rule. Some Jews responded to Roman rule by refusing to participate in the census choosing rather to take up the sword and spill Roman blood; this was the path of redemption. Unlike those who took up the sword in rebellion, Jesus' parents participated in the census.

How could God's redemption come from these two Jewish parents who did not forcefully oppose Roman rule?

The census of Quirinius not only served as a date that launched certain rebel Jewish groups, it also was a sabbatical year. The Torah of Moses stipulated that every seven years Israelites must not cultivate the land (Lev. 25:1-7), Israelite slaves were to be manumitted, and debts between Israelites were to be cancelled so that there will be no poor in the land (Deut. 15:1-18). Jews in the first century believed that God's redemption would take place in a sabbatical year, or the Jubilee year (a Jubilee consisted of seven sabbatical cycles or 49 years as it was reckoned in the first century).

Luke's highlighting of the census of Quirinius, then, contrasted the coming of Jesus and the dawning of God's redemption with the rise of militant Jewish movements that arose to fight Rome and force the Romans from the land of Israel. Jesus' movement was different. He would not counsel military action; rather, he called people to repentance and caring for the poor. Luke communicated that the sabbatical year of God's redemption had come; the time was now. Some looked to the militant Jewish rebel movements to effect God's redemption. Luke declared that God's redemption, His drawing near to His people, came from the baby born to these two Jewish parents who obeyed the census. This child, the one Luke will tell about—his life, his message, his death, and vindicating resurrection—he offers God's clearest revelation of Himself. Follow him.

Turmoil often makes us yearn for God's assistance. It can also lead us to seek our own means to make it happen. God is never deaf to our cries of help, yet He often uses means we cannot see because of the turmoil of our circumstances. Jesus entered a world of turmoil. Rome had taken over. The people of Israel cried for God's redemption; the question became, how would He achieve it. Some sought armed resistance as the path, yet God's redemption entered the world through a baby born to a pious family. A baby who would grow up and tell people that God's reign came through obedience, repentance brought redemption near, who ultimately died as a result of Roman oppression, whom God raised from the dead as evidence that His redemption has come near.



**”God is never deaf to our cries of help, yet He often uses means we cannot see because of the turmoil of our circumstances.”**

The Christmas season often heightens our feelings of turmoil. Financial troubles. Being alone. And, if not for us personally, many people feel sadness and turmoil during this season. The message of Christmas is that God steps into our turmoil. He is near. He does not abandon us. Yet, we don't always see Him, or understand His purpose. Into the turmoil of the first century, God sent His son, who called upon people to submit in obedience to God and His commandments. And he calls us to do the same today.





# The Birth of Jesus

***"And it happened in those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census took place for the first time when Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because they did not have space in their accommodations"***  
***(Luke 2:1-7)***

We wrap the Christmas story so thoroughly in our traditions and lose its simple and common majesty. So, what does the Bible say the birth of Jesus was like?

Joseph brought Mary from Nazareth where she lived to Bethlehem due to the Roman census. A Roman census required people to register in the place where they owned land; thus, a person registered for taxation purposes in the place where he lived or in the principal town of his taxation district. Joseph's compliance with the census and registering in Bethlehem indicates that Bethlehem was Joseph's "own city" (Luke 2:3), and not merely his ancestral home. Fulfilling the mandate of the census in Bethlehem (Luke 2:1-4) indicated Joseph owned property there, and likely lived there (see Matt. 2:11). At the very least, Joseph had family in Bethlehem, which indicates that he and Mary did not need to stay in an "inn."

Luke does not explicitly mention where Joseph and Mary stayed in Bethlehem. Matthew indicates that they resided there (2:11). The Greek text of Luke is ambiguous: “And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because they did not have space in their accommodations (or “upper room”; Greek *katalumati*)” (Luke 2:7).

The Greek word *kataluma* is a generic word meaning “lodging, place to stay, accommodations” or possibly “guest room, upper room.” It does not mean “inn.” Early Christian interpretation never understood an “inn” in the story of Jesus’ birth, but rather, as a place where Joseph and Mary dwelled, some even referring to a house (see Matt. 2:11). Incidentally, many modern translations of Luke 2:7 reflect the original meaning of the Greek word (e.g., TNIV).

Luke’s description of Joseph and Mary (2:5-7) carefully portrays the process of marriage in first century Jewish homes. The marital process consisted of two phases: the betrothal and “home-taking.” In the initial phase, the betrothal, the groom gave the bride money or something of value to indicate that she was now betrothed to him (m. Ketubot 4:9). After this ceremony, the bride remained in the home of her father (m. Pesahim 3:7; m. Ketubot 5:2). Galileans strictly prohibited pre-marital intimacy between a betrothed couple (t. Ketubot 1:4; b. Ketubot 12a; see Luke 1:27). When the bride and groom felt ready for marriage, the marriage celebration was held, which culminated in the “home-taking” of the bride into the groom’s home. When Joseph took Mary to Bethlehem, she was his betrothed (Luke 2:5). By the time of Jesus’ birth, they were living together (Matt. 1:24-25) as husband and wife, meaning that a wedding took place in Bethlehem (Luke 2:7). The transition of Mary from Joseph’s betrothed to living with him indicates that Bethlehem was the site of the wedding, when Joseph brought Mary from the home of her father (Nazareth) into his home (Bethlehem). Luke, thus, describes two events occurring simultaneously: 1) Joseph’s compliance with the census in Bethlehem where he owned property, and 2) his gathering of his betrothed Mary (Luke 2:5) into his home.

The married couple typically began their married life in the home of the groom's parents where they stayed in a room added to the groom's father's house (often times an upper room built on the roof). These attics could serve as guest rooms after the married couple built their own homes.

The most critical moment during pregnancy in antiquity was the moment of childbirth. Mary would have required assistance to give birth. The small marital chamber could not accommodate the relatives and midwives needed to assist with Jesus' birth.

In the hill country of the land of Israel, where Bethlehem is situated, ancient homes would consist of a main floor of the house, with a possible "upper-room/marital chamber" on a second story. The main floor typically had a large room where the family dwelt, ate, and slept. These large rooms incorporated an area for animals towards the back of the room, which was separated from the family living area by a row of mangers. The area for animals could be a cave, especially in the hill country, with the family living area built onto the front of the cave.

The earliest depictions of Jesus' birth within Christian art show him being born in a cave. A Christian tradition from the second century AD describes Jesus' birth as taking place in a cave. The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, the traditional site of Jesus' birth for over 1600 years, stands overtop of a cave.



When we read the birth of Jesus in light of the cultural world of the first century, his story looks something like this: Joseph brought Mary his betrothed from Nazareth to Bethlehem where they were married. While they were living there, most likely in a small marital chamber built onto Joseph's father's home, "their accommodations" could not handle those needed to help Mary with the birth of Jesus. Mary, then, gave birth to Jesus in the front, living room of the house and laid him in a manger, which served the animals within the house.

We often look for the coming of God in supernatural ways and miss His coming in the common and ordinary events in our lives. The birth of Jesus was certainly a marvelous event, angels sang and magi appeared, but God used the common and ordinary event of the marriage of a devoutly religious Jewish couple and a child's birth, in a very common way, to remind humanity that He is Immanuel; He is God with us.



**“We often look for the  
coming of God in  
supernatural ways and miss  
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and ordinary events in our  
lives.”**





# Glory to God In the Highest

***“In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, peace on earth, goodwill to men!’ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them” (Luke 2:8-21).***

“Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth, goodwill to mankind!” Angelic hymns within ancient Judaism often derived from the angelic utterance in Isaiah 6:3, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.”

The Aramaic translation of Isaiah 6:3 interpreted the song of the angels: “Holy—in the highest heaven, the house of his presence, Holy—upon the earth, the work of his might, Holy—for endless ages is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of the brightness of his glory.” This expansion of the angelic message in Isaiah 6:3 is strikingly similar to the threefold blessing of the angels found in Luke 2:14: “Glory to God in the highest [Holy—in the highest heaven, the house of his presence], on earth peace [Holy—upon the earth, the work of his might], goodwill toward men [Holy—for endless ages is the Lord of hosts].”

Several ancient Jewish prayers express a similar sentiment as the angelic proclamation, connecting God's reign, His glory, and peace He makes for Israel. The first is the Kaddish:

*"Their Father who is in heaven; magnified and sanctified be His great name. May establish His kingdom (literally: May He cause His kingdom to reign) in the world which He has created according to His will. He who makes peace in his highest, may He make peace for all Israel."*

The Kedushah, which is contained in the daily Jewish prayer, the 'Amidah, states:

*"We will sanctify your name in this world as it is sanctified in the highest heavens, as it is written by your prophet: "And they call out to one another saying: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.'" Those facing them praise God saying: "Blessed be the Presence of the Lord in His place" (Ezekiel 3:12). And in your holy word it is written, "The Lord reigns forever, your God, O Zion, throughout all generations. Hallelujah" (Psalm 146:10). Throughout all generations we will declare your greatness, and to all eternity we will proclaim your holiness. Your praise, O our God, shall never depart from our mouth, for you are a great and holy God and King. Blessed are you, O Lord, the holy God. You are holy, and your name is holy, and holy ones praise you daily. Blessed are you, O Lord, the holy God." God's name is magnified and sanctified when His peace comes to earth; His holiness manifests itself on earth in the doing of His will and His rule being realized.*

**"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."**

The Kedushah de-Sidra expressly connects God's reign, redemption, and glory:

*"And a redeemer shall come to Zion and to them that turn from transgression in Jacob, saith the Lord. And as for me, this is my covenant with them, saith the Lord: my spirit that is upon thee, and my words which I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed, nor out of the mouth of thy seed's seed, saith the Lord, from henceforth and forever" (Isaiah 59:20-21). "But thou art holy, O thou that dwellest amid the praises of Israel" (Psalm 22:4). "And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isaiah 6:3). And they receive sanction the one from the other, and say, Holy in the highest heavens, the place of his divine abode; holy upon earth, the work of his might; holy forever and to all eternity is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of the radiance of his glory. "Then a wind lifted me up, and I heard behind me the voice of a great rushing (saying), blessed be the glory of the Lord from his place" (Ezekiel 3:12). Then a wind lifted me up, and I heard behind me the voice of a great rushing, of those who uttered praises, and said, Blessed be the glory of the Lord from the region of his divine abode. "The Lord shall reign forever and ever" (Exodus 15:18). The kingdom of the Lord endures forever and to all eternity (Kedushah de-Sidra).*

God's glory appears in His reign, His kingdom. He makes peace for Israel, His people, which also coincides with the defeat of her enemies and those who hate her (see Luke 1:69-74). The themes of these Jewish prayers parallel those found in the angelic proclamation.

Jesus ben Sira prayed for God's salvation of Israel in which His deliverance of Israel punished the wicked nations and showed forth His glory: "Lift up your hand against foreign nations and let them see Your might. As you have used us to show Your holiness to them, so use them to show Your glory to us. Then they will know, as we have known, that there is no God but you, O Lord. Give new signs and work other wonders" (Ben Sira 36:3-6; emphasis added). God's salvation of Israel displays His glory, which proclaims His reign, His kingship, His kingdom. So too, it brings peace so His people can properly worship Him according to His will.

*And to all the righteous, he will grant peace. And over the elect will be preservation and peace, and upon them will come mercy. And they shall belong to God, and goodwill he will give to them, and all will be blessed. He will support and help all of us. Light he will shine upon us, and he will grant peace for us. (1 Enoch 1:8; emphasis added).*

The baby born in Bethlehem embodied these hopes and aspirations. God's peace had come. His glory appeared in the world He created. His reign was being established. His promised redemption had come near. The angelic proclamation pierced the darkness and hopelessness felt by the Jewish people. The God of heaven, Ruler of the universe, had drawn near; He was fulfilling His promises to Israel.

How? A baby born to two Jewish parents. When? Now. His will extends to all mankind.

The common coming of this child declares that God is with His people.

We serve that same God. No matter the darkness or hopelessness; He can penetrate our circumstances and unleash His redemptive power. And that's why we too should join the angelic host proclaiming: "Glory to God in the highest. Peace on earth. Goodwill towards mankind!"





# The Killing of the Innocents in Bethlehem

*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"*

*Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."*

*When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was.*

*When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.*

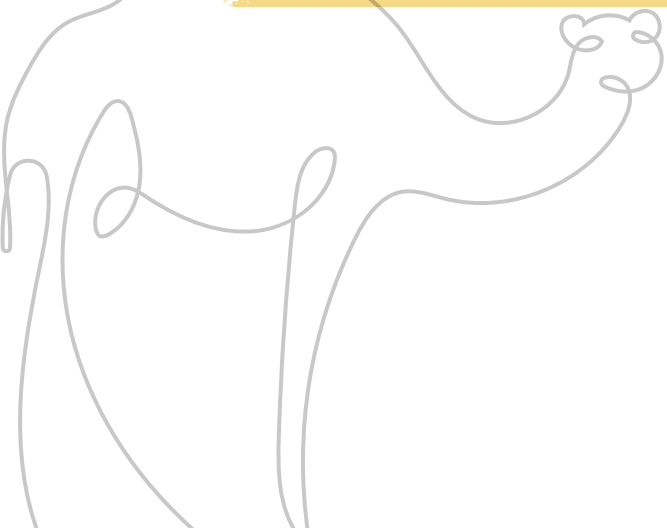
*And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.*

***Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him."***

***Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."***

**When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."**

**When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. (Matthew 2:1-22).**







Matthew's story of the birth of Jesus includes the figure of Herod the Great. Matthew tells how, after the magi came to Jerusalem seeking the child born "king of the Jews" (Matt. 2:2), Herod ordered the murder of all male children in Bethlehem under two years of age and under (Matt. 2:16). Herod's actions as described by Matthew fit what we know of Herod's personality from other ancient witnesses, and his own history.

Before Herod became "king of Judaea" (Luke 1:5), he aspired to the royal throne. He, however, had to flee Jerusalem and the land of Israel due to a siege brought on Jerusalem by Mattathias Antigonus, the last of the Hasmoneans—the family who symbolized Jewish liberty—who was backed by the Parthians, Rome's mortal enemy (Josephus, War 1:248-385; Antiquities 14:330-341, 384-385, 403-404). Even when Herod returned to the land of Israel confirmed as "king of Judaea" by the Roman Senate, he faced internal strife and external threat throughout his reign, in part due to his location on the eastern edge of Rome's Empire, facing Parthia. Thus, when magi from the east (think Parthia) appeared asking for the "king of the Jews," Herod's history reminded him of a Parthian threat tied to Jewish hopes of liberty.

The story of Herod's killing of the boys two and under in Bethlehem only appears in the Gospel of Matthew (2:1-18). Yet, Matthew's portrayal of Herod's character fits the paranoia of Herod expressed throughout his reign, particularly at the end of his life, as well as his use of brutal force in order to preserve his throne. Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, relates two stories that happened prior to the birth of Jesus relevant to the Gospel account of his killing the children in Bethlehem.

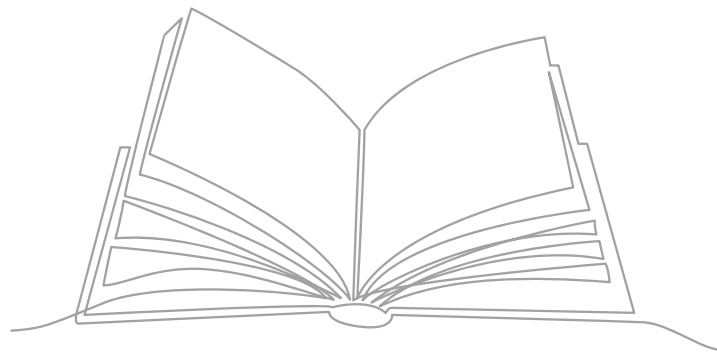
Herod's sister Salome sought to get rid of her husband, Costobar, who had been appointed governor of Idumea by Herod. Salome denounced Costobar to Herod claiming that her husband provided refuge for the sons of Baba, who were distantly related to the Hasmonean family. Herod sought to kill the sons of Baba to remove Hasmoneans with claims on the throne. Upon learning of their hiding place, Herod took Costobar, the sons of Baba, and those helping them and executed them "so that none was left alive of the family of Hyrcanus (Hasmonean), and the kingdom was wholly in Herod's power, there being no one of high rank to stand in the way of his unlawful acts" (Antiquities 15:259-266).

On another occasion, certain Pharisees prophesied to the wife of Pheroras, the brother of Herod, that

*...by God's decree Herod's throne would be taken from him, both from himself and his descendants, and the royal power would fall to her and Pheroras and to any children that they might have...And the king put to death those of the Pharisees who were most to blame and the eunuch Bagoas and a certain Karos...He also killed all those of his household who approved of what the Pharisee said. Now Bagoas had been carried away by their assurance that he would be called the father and benefactor of him who would some day be set over the people with the title of king, for all the power would belong to him and he would give Bagoas the ability to marry and beget children of his own (Antiquities 17:41-45).*

Pheroras being the brother of Herod, an Idumean, could not provide the royal lineage for this future king, so it must have been his wife. She possibly descended from the Davidic royal line. The reaction of Bagoas the eunuch makes it clear that the expected child was to be a messianic king giving eunuchs the ability to marry and beget children (see Isaiah 56:3). To this messianic threat, Herod responded with swift brutality killing those who made the prophecy as well as any sympathetic to it.

# The Bible reflects the historical realities of its world, but its message extends to us today.



Matthew presents an identical picture. When Herod heard of a potential messianic claimant to his throne, he used swift brutal force to make sure that the child born in Bethlehem would not grow into a threat. But God protected Jesus sending Joseph and his family to Egypt until after the death of Herod (Matt. 2:13-15, 19-23).

The Bible reflects the historical realities of its world, but its message extends to us today. God protected Jesus and his family despite Herod's designs for the baby's destruction. The story of the Bible is about God acting in human history; that's the message of the birth of Jesus. And, if God acted to protect His son, even in the face of the powers of the day, He will watch over and protect us.

Herod sought to use violence to protect his power and throne. Jesus willfully submitted to the will of God, and by his submission, he gained an eternal throne. In our day people still seek to use manipulative ways to obtain and retain power, but that's not the way of the kingdom of God. His kingdom comes through our obedience. His reign dawns when we submit.



# Waiting for Redemption

***“Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. And inspired by the Spirit he came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, ‘Lord, now let Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to Your people Israel.’ And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him; and Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, ‘Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed’” (Luke 2:25-35).***

Simeon waited all his life yearning to see God’s redemption. He hoped for it; he prayed for it. He didn’t live to see the consolation of Israel, but he did see the way God would bring it about. He saw the Lord’s anointed.

We live in a world of instant gratification, fast food, instant messaging, video-on-demand. Perhaps nothing displays this more than the commercialism of the Christmas season. The story of Christmas is about patience, not immediacy. It’s about God fulfilling His long-awaited promise to Israel’s fathers, answering the hope of redemption. It’s about the patience to wait.



Simeon waited (Luke 2:25-35). He hoped. He trusted. He waited for the salvation of Israel (2:25). And, as an old man, he knew that when he held the baby Jesus that he would not be there to see the completion of the child's mission (2:29-32), yet he trusted that God would fulfill His promises through this child. He only caught a glimpse of what He waited for, and he was content because He knew that God was faithful and would do what He promised.

We often make our faith about us. We do this with Christmas, what Christmas means to me, what God has done for me. Simeon never saw the end of God's promised redemption. Yet, when he held the baby Jesus, he understood that God's redemption did not place him, Simeon, at the center; it was not about what God would do personally for him. Rather, God's redemption would come to all. The collective redemption meant more than his own personal comfort.

We often treat our faith as instant gratification. Instant. Immediate. And when it doesn't happen as we want, we become frustrated with God. We make excuses because it hasn't happened. Our faith proves rather feeble and immature when compared to Simeon's, who had the patience to wait and never lose sight of the God who promised.

Are we content to play a part in God's overall plan? Christmas poses this question to us. The figures of the Christmas story—Zechariah and Elizabeth, the shepherds, the wise men, Mary and Joseph, Simeon and Anna—all played roles in God's redemptive plan. None of them saw the fulfillment of His redemptive promises, and neither have we. Yet, are we willing to play our part in His plan? Or do we place ourselves at the center of the Christmas story? Simeon waited. He trusted. And, he rejoiced to see part of God's promise fulfilled knowing that the God who promised would ultimately bring His promises to fulfillment.

**Are we content to play a  
part in God's overall plan?**



# The Year of the Lord's Favor

*When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:16-19).*

Luke frequently mentioned the "proclamation of good news" in his Gospel and Acts (Luke 1:19; 2:10; 3:18; 4:18; 4:43; 7:22; 8:1; 9:6; 16:16; 20:1; Acts 5:43; 8:4, 12, 25, 35, 40; 10:36; 11:20; 13:32; 14:7, 15, 21; 15:35; 16:10; 17:18). Luke used the more Hebraic verbal expression "to proclaim good news" as opposed to the noun "gospel." His language derives from passages in the book of Isaiah (40:9; 41:27; 52:7; and 61:1), which ancient Judaism understood as pertaining to God's promised redemption for His people.



When the angel Gabriel tells Zechariah, John's father, that he came to announce good news to Zechariah (Luke 1:19), he doesn't merely mean the birth of a son (although that was certainly tremendous news for the aged couple); rather, Gabriel's language hints at Zechariah's son's role in God's redemptive actions for His people (1:15-17). And Zechariah would have understood that.



The angel proclaimed to the shepherds, “Do not fear, for behold I proclaim good news to you of great joy which will be for all the people” (2:10). Their message to the shepherds—“Glory to God in the highest, on earth, peace; goodwill towards mankind”—articulated the essence of the good news they proclaimed: God is fulfilling His promises to His people, the hope of redemption has come! The time of God’s favor has come to His people.

Simeon, who met Joseph, Mary, and the baby Jesus in the Jerusalem Temple, recognized, with the birth of Jesus, God’s promised redemption had begun. Jesus entered the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth as an adult, on the Sabbath. He read from the scroll of Isaiah the passage from Isaiah 61:1-2, which he creatively read together with Isaiah 58:6-8, and proclaimed the good news to the poor, the favorable year of the Lord. The proclamation of the good news announces this—the favorable year of the Lord had arrived. Those who read Luke’s Gospel, those who heard the words of Jesus, understood the meaning and expectations of this proclamation.

That day in Nazareth, Jesus’ message lay in how he read the passages from Isaiah. His audience lived under Roman oppression and yearned for the good news of God’s redemption. Redemption for them and judgment on their enemies. Isaiah 61:2 equates the favorable year of the Lord with the day of God’s vengeance, exactly what Jesus’ audience wanted. But Jesus stopped reading mid-verse. Today is the time of God’s favor, not His judgment. He also joined Isaiah 58:6-8 into his reading of Isaiah 61:1-2. Isaiah 58 speaks of the favorable “day of the Lord,” in which God tells those wanting His redemption that it will come when they “share your bread with the hungry and take the wretched poor into your home. When you see the naked, to clothe him.” God will respond redemptively when His people act this way towards others.

Jesus offered a similar message to those in Nazareth that day by his creative reading of Isaiah 61 with Isaiah 58. His message: if you want redemption, then don't seek vengeance against your enemies; rather, care for those in need. Show mercy to those even outside the covenant community, like God did to the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian (Luke 4:25-27). This is the good news to the poor, the favorable year of the Lord.

The Christmas story does not end with the birth of Jesus. It carries on to Jesus' ministry, but it doesn't end there. It doesn't even end with the empty tomb or his ascension to heaven. We still wait for the culmination of God's promise; we hope for His ultimate redemption. We are called to live lives of obedience that demonstrate the good news of God's redemption to our world as we await that day.





# In the Fullness of Time...

God entered human time, at a specific time, in a particular space, within a specific culture, at Christmas. To only pay lip-service to this reality means that we miss the real story of the Incarnation. The beginning of Jesus' life sets the stage for the rest of his life, his words, actions, death, and resurrection. So, if we overlook the time, place, and culture of his birth, we will probably do that with the rest of his life.

When seen within its world, the Advent story has a different look and feel from how we tend to envision it. It certainly is foreign to the modern spirit of Christmas. Yet, when we view it within its historical and cultural context, we find a world in chaos. The people of God yearned for salvation. They longed for God's redemption. How would this happen? Different Jewish groups had different opinions, but it just had to happen. God sent His son into this chaotic, upside-down world. A world where evil reigned in power, and God's people found themselves enslaved to that power. Advent communicates a hope realized, but not concluded. It calls upon people to submit to God's will, to obey, to care for those in need. To raise our eyes beyond our own circumstances and look to God's redemption of His people. It reminds us of God's faithfulness to His promises, so wait. Be patient. It conveys how God comes to us in the most common and ordinary parts of our lives, even in the birth of a child. It also points to the babe born in Bethlehem as proof of God's reign dawning upon the world. And, as we follow that babe into his adult life, we understand his call to obediently submit to God's rule and reign in our lives, if we are to follow the child of Bethlehem.

That, is what Christmas means for us.

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