



ADVENT *of the* MESSIAH

*A Devotional Journey Through the
Biblical Stories of Christmas*

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A Devotional Journey Through the
Biblical Stories of *Christmas*

By Marc Turnage

English Standard Version (ESV)

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About This Devotional

This special devotional, *Advent of the Messiah*, will take you on a spiritual journey through the biblical stories of Christmas. You'll be amazed at how God's Word comes alive through each section.

To provide you with an in-depth Advent devotional, we partnered with Marc Turnage, an authority on ancient Judaism and Christian origins, to create this valuable resource. In addition to being widely published, he has been teaching biblical backgrounds and guiding groups through the Holy Land for over twenty years.

Our prayer is that this uplifting devotional series will help you draw closer to Jesus this Christmas season. May you experience His presence as Immanuel—God with us—in a new and fresh way.

We are so grateful to Marc for his expert guidance through the biblical stories of Christmas. We hope this devotional will be a blessing to you and your family while inspiring you to go deeper into God's Word and, more specifically, the Christmas story.

The Birth of Jesus Foretold

And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” And the angel answered 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 relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her (Luke 1:34-38 ESV).

The people of Israel faced a number of crises in the period between the Old and New Testaments. These events, some of them traumatic, left deep marks upon the social, cultural, and religious landscape of ancient Judaism. Such that, the world of the New Testament was not the world of the Old Testament. The events of the second century B.C.—with the successful Jewish revolt against the Seleucids, in the festival of Hanukkah (the Feast of Dedication; John 10:22), and the subsequent eighty-year period of autonomous Jewish reign—dynamically shaped

Jewish hopes of redemption. These ideas changed with the reality brought about by the intrusion of the Roman Empire in the form of Pompey the Great in 63 B.C.

By the time of the Angel Gabriel’s appearance to Mary, the land of Israel found itself under Roman rule, which at times could be oppressive. The reality posed by Rome challenged the widely held belief among the Jews that our God is the only god, and we are His chosen people. The present reality produced a widespread yearning for God’s redemption, which many thought His Messiah would accomplish.

Gabriel announced a message to Mary that had been 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. And she was a virgin: *“How will this be, since I am a virgin?”*

Gabriel then proceeded to relay how this would be accomplished, concluding with the reminder, *“For nothing will be impossible with God.”* The Jews found themselves in a difficult period awaiting God’s redemption, and Mary found herself incapable of seeing how she could fulfill what Gabriel told her.

The message of Advent is God entering into human

Mary's Song of Praise

His mighty arm has done tremendous things! He has scattered the proud and haughty ones. He has brought down princes from their thrones and exalted the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away with empty hands. He has helped his servant Israel and remembered to be merciful. For he made this promise to our ancestors, to Abraham and his children forever (Luke 1:51-55 NLT).

Our versions of the Christmas story are typically depicted as serene, sweet, and majestic. Our Christmas art and music aid us in creating the warm and sentimental feelings of the season. Nevertheless, even if it's unintentional, we sometimes sanitize the events of Christmas. We talk about Jesus being born among the animals, and God stooping from His throne to become one of us—from a heavenly throne to a manger. But how often do we forget the real world and context Jesus was born into?

The story of Christmas was neither serene nor sweet, and it definitely was not majestic. It exploded into history like a bolt of lightning cutting through the night sky. It was disruptive. Nowhere is this more evident than in Mary's song of praise, the Magnificat.

This was no mere song of praise according to our modern definition. Mary's song echoes the hopes and yearnings of her people, the Jewish people, that God's redemption would upset and overturn the status quo. Those in power would no longer remain there, but the lowly would be exalted. The hungry would be filled, and the rich would be made poor. Mary uttered a radical song of praise.

In her mind, God's redemption was not merely inward and personal. Rather, God's redemption impacted all of His people and manifested itself in visible, tangible ways within the social and political order. Mary's words are anything but safe; they are subversive. Israel's long-awaited hope for redemption has now come, and it will disrupt the established world that had been.

Admittedly, our reflections of Christmas often focus more on ourselves—what God has done for me. In doing so, we sometimes fail to feel the collective sense of hope and upheaval that the message of Christmas originally articulated. It's there in Mary's song; in 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, he articulated the same values included in his mother's song of praise:

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. . . . But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep" (Luke 6:20-21, 24-25 ESV).

It's hard for us sometimes—wrapped in the lights, sounds, and smells of Christmas—to hear the disruptive tone of the first Christmas. But we need to. What God did in sending Jesus was for more than our personal spirituality. 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 Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor"* (Luke 4:18-19 ESV).

How might our understanding and celebrations of Christmas differ if we remembered and took to heart the ancient message of redemption uttered by Mary?

Prayer

Father, manifest Your redemption this Christmas in our world among the hurting, suffering, poor, and oppressed. And help us to be present where You are. Amen.

Notes

The Family of Jesus

This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. Joseph, to whom she was engaged, was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly. As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. “Joseph, son of David,” the angel said, “do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord’s message through his prophet: “Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means ‘God is with us.’” When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife. But he did not have sexual relations with her until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus (Matthew 1:18-25 NLT).

Think for a moment: what are the influences on your life? Who influenced you? How did where you grow up shape who you are? Everyone comes from somewhere. Your family, where you grew up, the time in history when you grew up make you who you are. Jesus was no different. His family, where he grew up, and when he grew up all shaped him.

With the birth of Jesus, God entered human time, space, and culture. Not just any time, space, or culture, but a specific time (the first century), in a particular space (the land of Israel), and within a definite culture (ancient Judaism). To encounter Jesus of Nazareth, we must understand him within his space, time, and culture: *“But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law”* (Galatians 4:4 NASB).”

The New Testament offers little information on Jesus’ family; outside of the nativity stories, the Gospels hardly mention them. Jesus’ family ties him to history, joins him to humanity, and connects him with the Jewish people—*“born of a woman, born under the Law.”* His family shaped who he became as a man.

The actions of Jesus’ parents after his birth (Luke 2:22-24), as well as their annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Passover (Luke 2:41), indicate that Jesus

grew up in an observant, pious Jewish family. Eight days after his birth, Jesus' parents had him circumcised according to the commandment of God (Luke 2:21; see Genesis 17:10-14).

According to the book of Leviticus (12:1-8), a mother was ritually impure for forty days after giving birth to a son. She had to make a sacrifice of a lamb or young doves to complete her purification. In the first century, it was not always practical for a mother to travel to Jerusalem and the Temple after the birth of every child. For that reason, women frequently postponed the purification sacrifice until they had given birth to several children, thus waiting for a time when the family would travel to Jerusalem on pilgrimage. Mary, however, performed the rite immediately at the conclusion of the forty days in strict observance of the commandments (Luke 2:22). The fact that Joseph and Mary offered young doves instead of a lamb (Luke 2:24) suggests that Jesus grew up in a poor family.

Moses instructed the Israelites (Exodus 34:20; Numbers 18:14-16) that a father had 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. 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 (Luke 2:22-23).

Joseph and Mary showed their obedience to God even in these small but important matters. How do you think that influenced Jesus as a boy to grow up in a family like this?

Have you ever wondered who was responsible for teaching Jesus? He had to learn just like us. His sayings in the Gospels indicate a high level of formal education. On the one hand, he spoke simply, so the common, less-learned person could understand his message, but on the other, running underneath his simple words and sayings lies a sophisticated Jewish education.

Within the land of Israel in the first century, religious instruction primarily occurred within the home, and it fell to the father to teach his children the Scriptures and traditions of Israel. Religious education was a big part of Jewish society and something that parents took seriously with their children. In addition to teaching his son Torah, a father was expected to teach his son a trade (see Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3). The Gospels suggest that Joseph, who was a carpenter (Matthew 13:55), taught his son his trade (Mark 6:3).

We often assume that Joseph's position as a carpenter somehow identifies him as a simple, manual workman.

The Birth of Jesus

At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. (This was the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) All returned to their own ancestral towns to register for this census. And because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David's ancient home. He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee. He took with him Mary, to whom he was engaged, who was now expecting a child. And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. She gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them (Luke 2:1-7 NLT).

When we read the story of Christmas within its historical and cultural aspects, it reframes and challenges some of our traditions surrounding the Christmas story. But while it strips some things away, it offers a simple splendor to the event that stands at the axial moment of human history. So, how might windows into the first century world of Israel give us some basic insight into the story?

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 the town of Bethlehem indicates that Bethlehem was his ancestral home and possibly where he owned property.

In the hill country of the land of Israel, where Bethlehem is situated, ancient homes often would consist of a main floor of the house, with a possible upper room 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 toward 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 A.D. 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.

The Song of the Angels

Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, 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, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!” (Luke 2:8-14 NKJV)

We frequently sing, “Angels we have heard on high, sweetly singing o’er the plains” at Christmas. The season would not be complete without “*Gloria in excelsis Deo!*”—Glory to God in the highest. Yet how often do we reflect upon the meaning of the words the angels declared?

The praise of the angels to the shepherds recorded in Luke’s Gospel (2:13-14) underscored the reality

of God’s nearness in the birth of Jesus, as well as embodying Jewish redemptive hopes of the first century. It also gives voice to the hope for redemption shared by Jews and Christians through the centuries. With the advent of Jesus, God draws near to His people—His goodwill is for everyone. His reign dawns through those who obey His will. He demonstrates that He is Immanuel—God with us.

The angels told the shepherds that their message of good news “*will be to all people*” (Luke 2:10 NKJV). God’s goodwill is not simply for the elect; it extends to everyone, for “*He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous*” (Matthew 5:45 NASB). His merciful will reaches out to all mankind to bring peace, completeness, and wholeness. And, in the birth of Jesus, God has drawn near to demonstrate within the bounds of history what His will is, to give voice and example to His will (see Hebrews 1:1-2).

God’s will is for all humankind. In the birth of Jesus, His glory, peace, and favor have drawn near to everyone. This is the good news the angels proclaimed: God is for us!

The message of the angels was an announcement of God’s nearness. God is for us, and He has drawn

The Prophecy of Simeon

At that time there was a man in Jerusalem named Simeon. He was righteous and devout and was eagerly waiting for the Messiah to come and rescue Israel. The Holy Spirit was upon him and had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Messiah. That day the Spirit led him to the Temple. So when Mary and Joseph came to present the baby Jesus to the Lord as the law required, Simeon was there. He took the child in his arms and praised God, saying, "Sovereign Lord, now let your servant die in peace, as you have promised. I have seen your salvation, which you have prepared for all people. He is a light to reveal God to the nations, and he is the glory of your people Israel!" Jesus' parents were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them, and he said to Mary, the baby's mother, "This child is destined to cause many in Israel to fall, and many others to rise. He has been sent as a sign from God, but many will oppose him. As a result, the deepest thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your very soul" (Luke 2:25-35 NLT).

The yearning for redemption permeated the hopes of many within the land of Israel in the first century. Simeon and the prophetess Anna (Luke 2:36-38) belonged to those circles that adopted a somber position of mourning over the present situation (see Matthew 5:4; Luke 6:21) and yet looked forward to the redemption of Jerusalem (Luke 2:38).

The Jewish people found themselves occupied by Rome, and many also saw a religious decline, as well; they longed for God to fulfill His promises to His people.

The Gospel stories of the births of John the Baptist and Jesus frame the arrival of these two figures within the Jewish hopes of redemption. The births of God's Messiah and his forerunner proclaim that God has not abandoned His people. He has answered their cry for deliverance.

The path both figures, John and Jesus, will lay out within their ministries is the call to repentance. In Matthew, we hear John declare, "*Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near*" (Matthew 3:2 NLT), and we later find Jesus preaching the exact same message in the very next chapter.

Repentance brings redemption near. In this way, Simeon was correct; Jesus was set for the fall and rise

The Killing of the Innocents

After the wise men were gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up! Flee to Egypt with the child and his mother,” the angel said. “Stay there until I tell you to return, because Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.” That night Joseph left for Egypt with the child and Mary, his mother, and they stayed there until Herod’s death. This fulfilled what the Lord had spoken through the prophet: “I called my Son out of Egypt.” Herod was furious when he realized that the wise men had outwitted him. He sent soldiers to kill all the boys in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under, based on the wise men’s report of the star’s first appearance. Herod’s brutal action fulfilled what God had spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: “A cry was heard in Ramah—weeping and great mourning. Rachel weeps for her children, refusing to be comforted, for they are dead.” When Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt. “Get up!” the angel said. “Take the child and his mother back to the land of Israel, because those who were trying to kill the child are dead.” So Joseph got up and returned to the land of Israel with Jesus and his mother (Matthew 2:13-22 NLT).

Matthew’s story of the birth of Jesus includes the figure of Herod the Great. Matthew tells how, after the wise men came to Jerusalem seeking the child born “*king of the Jews*” (Matthew 2:2), Herod ordered the murder of all male children in Bethlehem that were two years of age and under (Matthew 2:16). Herod’s actions as described by Matthew fit what we know of Herod’s personality from other ancient witnesses.

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 at the end of his life and his use of brutal force in order to preserve his throne. Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, relates a story that happened prior to the birth of Jesus that is relevant to the Gospel account of Herod’s killing the children in Bethlehem.

There were Pharisees who prophesied to the wife of Pheroras, the brother of Herod, that he and his wife would soon inherit Herod’s throne and kingdom. When Herod found out about the prophecy, he immediately acted and put those Pharisees to death. Then he killed everyone in his own household who had approved of the prophecy from the Pharisees (*Antiquities* 17.41-45). In response to the potential

Conclusion

The biblical story of the Advent of the Messiah is not at all what most of us would expect. Two thousand years removed from the first Christmas, we can too easily overlook and miss many of the integral details and circumstances that shaped the events of the Incarnation—Jesus entering time, space, and culture.

Through the angelic appearance to Mary, the miraculous conception of Jesus, the heavenly messengers appearing to the shepherds, the star guiding the wise men to Bethlehem, and the dream warning Joseph to flee with his family to Egypt, we see God miraculously and supernaturally involved in the Christmas story.

On the other hand, we also see God working in very common and ordinary ways to accomplish His plans. We find Him using an unassuming Jewish couple to bring about the birth of His son into the world. The birth of Jesus was not unlike many other births of Jewish babies born into the first century world of Israel. God also used real people to fulfill His purposes—He used Joseph and Mary, the shepherds, Simeon, Anna, and the wise men to each play their unique roles in the story.

This is the reality of the Incarnation and the Christmas story. And at every point, the message rings out: God is with us, and He is for us! He appears to us in supernatural ways, but He is also intimately involved in the natural and ordinary aspects of our lives. And human history bears His fingerprints.

When we view the birth of Jesus within its historical and cultural context, we find a God who is near. Whose promise of redemption finds us, all of us, in the most common and ordinary moments of our lives. Who meets us in our everyday places proclaiming that He is Immanuel—He is with us.

Meet the Author



Marc Turnage is President/
CEO of Biblical Expeditions.

He is an authority on ancient
Judaism and Christian origins.

Marc has taught graduate and
undergraduate students at several
universities in the United States

and abroad. He has published widely for both
academic and popular audiences. His most recent
book, *Windows Into the Bible*, was named by *Outreach
Magazine* as one of its top 100 Christian living
resources. Marc is a widely sought-after speaker and
a gifted teacher. He has been guiding groups to the
lands of the Bible—Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Turkey,
Greece, and Italy—for over twenty years. He resides
in Springfield, Missouri, with his family.



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