

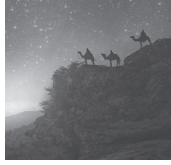


AMY-JILL
LEVINE

LIGHT *of* *the* WORLD

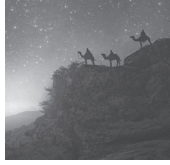
A BEGINNER'S GUIDE to ADVENT





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Chapter 1

THE MEANING OF MEMORY

During the rule of King Herod of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah. His wife Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron. They were both righteous before God, blameless in their observance of all the Lord's commandments and regulations. They had no children because Elizabeth was unable to become pregnant and they both were very old. One day Zechariah was serving as a priest before God because his priestly division was on duty. Following the customs of priestly service, he was chosen by lottery to go into the Lord's sanctuary and burn incense. All the people who gathered to worship were praying outside during this hour of incense offering. An angel from the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw the angel, he was startled and overcome with fear.

The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayers have been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will give birth to your son and you must name him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many people will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the Lord's eyes. He must not drink wine

and liquor. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth. He will bring many Israelites back to the Lord their God. He will go forth before the Lord, equipped with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will turn the hearts of fathers back to their children, and he will turn the disobedient to righteous patterns of thinking. He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

Zechariah said to the angel, “How can I be sure of this? My wife and I are very old.”

The angel replied, “I am Gabriel. I stand in God’s presence. I was sent to speak to you and to bring this good news to you. Know this: What I have spoken will come true at the proper time. But because you didn’t believe, you will remain silent, unable to speak until the day when these things happen.”

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they wondered why he was in the sanctuary for such a long time. When he came out, he was unable to speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he gestured to them and couldn’t speak. When he completed the days of his priestly service, he returned home. Afterward, his wife Elizabeth became pregnant. She kept to herself for five months, saying, “This is the Lord’s doing. He has shown his favor to me by removing my disgrace among other people.” . . .

When the time came for Elizabeth to have her child, she gave birth to a boy. Her neighbors and relatives celebrated with her because they had heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy. On the eighth day, it came time to circumcise the child. They wanted to name him Zechariah because that was his father’s name. But his mother replied, “No, his name will be John.”

The Meaning of Memory

*They said to her, "None of your relatives have that name."
Then they began gesturing to his father to see what he
wanted to call him.*

*After asking for a tablet, he surprised everyone by writing,
"His name is John." At that moment, Zechariah was able to
speak again, and he began praising God.*

*All their neighbors were filled with awe, and everyone
throughout the Judean highlands talked about what had
happened. All who heard about this considered it carefully.
They said, "What then will this child be?" Indeed, the Lord's
power was with him.*

*John's father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and
prophesied,*

*"Bless the Lord God of Israel
because he has come to help and has delivered his
people.
He has raised up a mighty savior for us in his servant
David's house,
just as he said through the mouths of his holy
prophets long ago.
He has brought salvation from our enemies
and from the power of all those who hate us.
He has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and remembered his holy covenant,
the solemn pledge he made to our ancestor
Abraham.
He has granted that we would be rescued
from the power of our enemies
so that we could serve him without fear,
in holiness and righteousness in God's eyes,
for as long as we live.*

Light of the World

*You, child, will be called a prophet of the Most High,
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way.
You will tell his people how to be saved
through the forgiveness of their sins.
Because of our God's deep compassion,
the dawn from heaven will break upon us,
to give light to those who are sitting in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide us on the path of peace."*

Luke 1:5-25, 57-79

Where and when we were born, the place and the time, are part of our identity; the details are recorded in our passports, and they will be mentioned in our obituaries. Yet we are an increasingly mobile society, one focused on the present and the future. Many of my students cannot name the president in office the year they were born, they have no clue about the Vietnam War, and mentions of the “summer of ’67” evoke the response, “67 what?” And in the focus on youth, growth, and the future, many churches take for granted their congregation’s older members. To ignore them is to ignore our history and heritage.

Knowing the where and when of Jesus is essential for understanding him. The Temple in Jerusalem, Bethlehem in Judea, Nazareth in Galilee, and Egypt where the family finds shelter—are more than just locations, and the reigns of Herod the King and Augustus Caesar more than dates. When the Evangelists mention a date and a place, they are telling us to pay attention, for time and space hold a surfeit of meaning. And when Luke chooses to begin this magnificent story not with Mary and Joseph but with Elizabeth and Zechariah, we pay attention as well, since this couple represents the older generation, our connection to the past, our communal memory.

This is no dry history lesson of names and dates, and Luke is nothing like the ivy-covered professor who can only state facts. Luke is a storyteller, and what a story this is. This elderly, and so-far infertile, couple will join Abraham and Sarah, and many others, in learning that they will have a child. Luke's recounting of the angel's conversation with the soon-to-be-dumbstruck Zechariah brilliantly weds the conventional to the comic. In recounting the story of John's birth and naming, Luke again combines miracle and memory. More than just Elizabeth, Zechariah, and their friends and relatives will rejoice at this birth, for the story should make all but the most somber of readers laugh with joy.

In the Days of King Herod

Following a four-verse prologue in which Luke, in elegant Greek, lists his purposes for writing, the narrative proper begins: "During the rule of King Herod of Judea" (Luke 1:5). This is not an auspicious start. Readers familiar with Matthew's Gospel know of a King Herod who ordered the massacre of the children in Bethlehem in the attempt to kill the baby Jesus, a rival king. While it is not clear whether this slaughter actually took place, it is not unthinkable given Herod's other outrages: he killed his own sons, whom he suspected of plotting against him; he killed his wife Mariamne, the Hasmonean princess, as well as her brother and her mother. According to the first-century Jewish historian Josephus, Herod realized that the people he ruled hated him, whether for his taxes, for his replacing the High Priest in the Temple, for sponsoring pagan cities, or for killing his family members—the list goes on. Therefore, as he was dying, he ordered that "the whole nation should be put into mourning, and indeed made desolate of their dearest kindred, when he gave order that one out of every family should be slain" (*Antiquities* 17.181). The orders were not carried out, but the memory remained.

People in Luke's original audience also would have heard of Herod. He was the one who began the reconstruction of the Jerusalem Temple, he built the port of Caesarea Maritima, and he constructed numerous fortresses including one on Masada. His building projects still stand as testimony to his reign; to see the buildings without knowing the history behind them is insufficient. Any story set in the reign of King Herod is a story of political intrigue and of threats to life. This is the context, Luke tells us, of the conception and birth of John the Baptizer, who will die by the order of Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great.

Luke tells us more, for the opening verses anticipate another king, and another birth. Herod is a major political player, but he has his overlords. After siding with Marc Antony and Cleopatra, he shifted his loyalty to Caesar Augustus and so managed to keep in Rome's good graces. It will be this same Caesar who, according to Luke, ordered the census that brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem. Jesus' birth is set "in those days [when] Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in tax lists" (Luke 2:1). His birth has universal import.

Zechariah and Elizabeth

Herod is not the only person Luke introduces in chapter 1 verse 5. The verse in full reads, "During the rule of King Herod of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah. His wife Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron."

In antiquity family makes a difference. That's why both Matthew and Luke provide genealogies placing Jesus in the line of Abraham, Judah, and King David. At the same time, the biblical tradition insists that an illustrious background is not prerequisite for fulfilling divine will or for making our own mark on history. Luke signals this point by another contrast: we learn of Elizabeth's priestly connections, but as

we'll see, Mary's background, save for her connection to Elizabeth, goes unremarked. What is important in the Bible is not our pedigree or our ancestry, but our action.

Herod holds the throne, but Zechariah and Elizabeth are the focus of our attention. An immediate contrast appears: king versus priest, foreign interloper versus loyal children of Israel. To reinforce this focus on Zechariah and Elizabeth, and even signal a rejection of Herod's Roman connections, Luke changes style. The first four verses are ornate, formal, classical Roman rhetoric. But with verse 5, Luke shifts to the language of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of what will become the Old Testament.

The shift in the Greek is palpable, like going from modern English to Shakespearean language. With this shift, Luke takes us to the past, the world of early Jewish history. Luke thus insists: to understand Jesus requires understanding Jewish history and Jewish texts. More, Luke is telling gentile converts: this history of Israel is now part of your history as well. It is part of your story. Read, remember, and rejoice.

The name *Zechariah* comes from the Hebrew root *z-k-r*, which means "remember"; the "yah" at the end is the marker for YHWH, so the name means "God remembers." Memory is a trait of the biblical God. Already following the Flood, God promises Noah and so all humanity, "I will remember the covenant between me and you and every living being among all the creatures. Floodwaters will never again destroy all creatures" (Genesis 9:15).

The Jewish tradition even records Psalms and other prayers in which we remind God to remember us. For example, Psalm 119:49 reads, "Remember your promise to your servant, / for which you made me wait." When we feel the absence of the divine, when we think there is no reason to hope, we call out to God to remember, because we remember. We can do so because we know that the covenant

is permanent. It is this sense of a loving, permanent covenant that underlies the rawness and honesty of Jesus' cry from the cross in Matthew (27:46) and Mark (15:34), "My God, my God, why have you left me?" The cry is the first line of Psalm 22, and we remember that it ends with redemption: "Every part of the earth / will remember and come back to the LORD; / every family among all the nations will worship you" (Psalm 22:27).

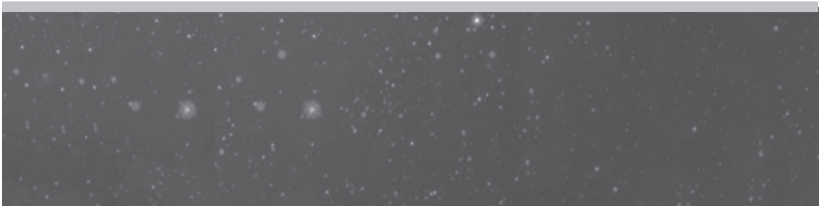
God also commands us to remember. Numbers 15:39 mandates, "This will be your fringe. You will see it and remember all the LORD's commands and do them. Then you won't go exploring the lusts of your own heart or your eyes." These are the fringes Jesus wears, and that the woman with the hemorrhage reaches out to touch (see Luke 8:44). Deuteronomy uses the refrain, "Remember that you were a slave in Egypt" (5:15 and elsewhere); that experience grounds Israel's ethics.

In Judaism, *yizkor* (from the same root) is the service, held four times a year, in which we Jews recall our family members, friends, and other members of our community, especially the martyrs, from the six million killed in the Shoah to more recent shootings in synagogues in Pittsburgh and Poway. The service is not simply one of commemoration; we also pledge to honor that memory by giving to charity and doing works of righteousness. In that way, the name of the deceased can be a blessing.

Ephesians 2:12 takes up the refrain: "At that time you were without Christ. You were aliens rather than citizens of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of God's promise. In this world you had no hope and no God." We cannot know fully who we are, unless we know our origins. With new experiences, we will then reassess those origins. That is the message Luke gives: in light of these new stories, we find new meaning in the past.



When we feel the absence of the divine, when we think there is no reason to hope, we call out to God to remember, because we remember. We can do so because we know that the covenant is permanent.



Elizabeth's name likely derives from the Hebrew *Eli*, meaning "my God," the beginning of Jesus' cry from the cross ("My God, my God"). The second part comes from *sheva*, which is an oath. Thus, her name indicates that God keeps promises. That means that God remembers. An earlier Elisheba is the wife of Aaron, the first Israelite priest (Exodus 6:23).

Zechariah and Elizabeth are from priestly families, descended from Aaron. Priesthood in Judaism is not a vocation but a matter of paternal descent. If your father is a priest, you are a priest. If your father is a Levite, a type of subordinate priest descended from Aaron's ancestor Levi, the third son of Jacob and Leah, then you are a Levite. To this day, Jews know who the priests and Levites are. One clue, although it is not always reliable, is one's name. The names *Cohen*, *Kane*, and *Kaplan* often indicate priestly descent, since the Hebrew word for "priest" is *cohen*. *Levine*, *Levy*, *Levison*, and so on may indicate levitical (from *Levi*) descent. Although the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed, certain practices in Judaism related to priests and Levites remain. For example, in many synagogues, priests and Levites have the honor of being called, respectively, first and second to say the blessing before and after the Torah reading on Shabbat (Sabbath/Saturday) morning.

With Elizabeth, Luke introduces another theme: the importance of women in the Gospel. The CEB translation, "descendant of Aaron," misses the nuance of the Greek, which literally says she is from the "daughters of Aaron." *Daughter* echoes through Luke's Gospel: Anna the "daughter of Phanuel," the prophet who greets the baby Jesus in the Temple, the ruler's "daughter" whom Jesus raises from the dead, the "daughter" whose hemorrhages Jesus dries up, the "daughter of Abraham" who receives her healing in the synagogue, and the "daughters of Jerusalem" who weep for Jesus. Along with the

A new look at the history of the birth of Christ

In *Light of the World: A Beginner's Guide to Advent*, author, professor, and biblical scholar Amy-Jill Levine explores the biblical texts surrounding the story of the birth of Jesus. Join her as she traces the Christmas narrative through the stories of Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary, the journey to Bethlehem, and the visit from the Magi.

There's no one I'd rather have guide me through Advent and the first chapters of Matthew and Luke than Amy-Jill Levine. With her characteristic insight, graciousness, humor, and deep respect for these biblical writings she makes the wonder-filled stories of John's and Jesus' births come alive. The Gospels' tidings of comfort and joy become sources of rich spiritual contemplation for anyone who reads this book.

—**Matthew L. Skinner**, Professor of New Testament, Luther Seminary

Amy-Jill Levine's signature formula includes good measures of insight, wit, and steady prodding, all in the interest of helping her readers to understand Jesus in his historical context, within his own religious tradition, Judaism. This Advent study is a gift to Christian congregations, as well as to Jewish-Christian dialogue groups, guiding them into deeper understanding of the Advent season.

—**Shelly Matthews**, Professor of New Testament, Brite Divinity School

Advent marks the beginning of the church's year, so there is a sense in which we all need a beginner's guide to the readings offered for that season. Anyone encountering for the first time the stories about Jesus in the early chapters of Matthew and Luke will be shown how to locate them in their ancient religious and cultural settings while, at the same time, being stimulated to relate them to his or her own personal experience, as texts that are formative of traditions and communities. Those who have lived through many an Advent will find the familiar stories taking on new life and meaning, thanks to this fascinating and delightful treatment by a Jewish woman scholar who is thoroughly immersed in her own tradition and theirs.

—**Patricia M. McDonald**, SHCJ, Academic Programme Director, The Pontifical Beda College, Rome

Also Available: DVD, Leader Guide



Amy-Jill Levine is University Professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies and Mary Jane Werthan Professor of Jewish Studies at Vanderbilt Divinity School and College of Arts and Sciences. An internationally renowned scholar and teacher, she is the author of numerous books including *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* and *Entering the Passion of Jesus: A Beginner's Guide to Holy Week*.

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