

Advent

As I write, it's a few weeks until Christmas. And amid all the traditional ways that Americans celebrate, there's certainly someone in a pulpit somewhere or on the radio or the tele saying, "Let's remember the *real* meaning of Christmas." Well, maybe it would be instructive to think about the first Advent of the Messiah of Israel *from the Bible's perspective*. It's not what you think.

We need first to go to Revelation Chapter 12. And what's there is shocking. The Nation of Israel gives birth to a child, and immediately an enormous, hideous dragon seeks to kill him. Yes, it refers in part to Herod seeking to kill the child Jesus (Matthew Chapter 2), but there's vastly more to this narrative. Satan had sought for centuries to prevent that child from being born and then, once born, to kill Him to prevent Him from establishing His Kingdom. This is cosmic warfare. The conflict between Jesus the Messiah and Satan's hosts on earth mirrored the warfare in heaven. **"And there was war in heaven"** (Rev 12:5a). That fierce dragon was hurled to earth, to make war against . . . *us*. **"Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring – those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus"** (12:17). That first Advent of Christ triggered a war that's been going on for 2,000 years and is right now heating up, between the followers of Christ and the wicked powers of Satan and his dreadful hosts. We, the Church, invade Satan's territory with the Gospel in the power of Christ to snatch people out of Satan's iron-like grip so they too can be saved and join the conflict. For his part, Satan seeks to diminish our effectiveness or get us to abandon the war altogether. Forget the gift-giving and singing of carols. The birth of Jesus was like a Pearl Harbor.

"Thou shalt give him the name Jesus," we read in the Gospels' birth narratives. Jesus is modern-day English for the Hebrew name, Joshua. His real name is Joshua. Why Joshua? In Scripture, a person's name reflects something about that person. So the Hebrew name Joshua is because, as with the Old Testament person who led Israel into the land after Moses' death, He is a military leader and conqueror. Except that the O.T. Joshua only conquered that strip of land along the eastern Mediterranean that we call the Land of Israel. This Joshua of the Gospels was born to conquer the whole world, to liberate *the world* from the control of Satan and his wicked hosts. The birth of Jesus isn't for peace and goodwill, it's for warfare. God's plan of redemption is for the world of Gentile nations, yes, the pagan, godless nations, to be redeemed just as were the people of Israel and even the whole physical creation (Romans 8:18-21).

We have in our churches nowadays a severely constricted and totally unbiblical understanding of redemption. We suppose that "redemption" means simply that individuals can have their sins forgiven and be in heaven when they die. But redemption is so much more than that! God's plan of redemption is vast, cosmic, affecting all creation, all of history, indeed, all of reality, all existence. And it all depends on the advent of Jesus, the Jewish Messiah. Our celebration of Christmas trivializes the great and wondrous things that the living and eternal God did and is doing in His creation.

The birth narratives include Mary's song, in which she prophesied, **"He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but sent the rich away empty"** (Luke 1:51-53). We read these verses at Christmas with wonder (and maybe with some skepticism). But does anyone suppose that Jesus will succeed in displacing powerful rulers, proud intellectuals, and wealthy aristocrats without violent conflict??? The Gospels' birth narratives are a declaration of war upon the world that Satan rules.

The plot of the Bible is explicit: **"And I will put enmity between your [the serpent's] offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel"** (Genesis 3:15). It's warfare! It's explicit in the Psalms. **"Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One . . ."** (Ps 2:1-2). Read the entire Psalm. It's a war cry! It's the framework for the Book of Revelation with its terrible judgments and outpoured wrath. Psalm 110 continues this thread, **"He will crush kings on the day of his wrath. He will judge the nations, heaping up the dead and crushing the rulers of the whole earth"** (vv. 5-6). The birth narratives in the New Testament trigger the bringing of all this horrible conflict to a climax. The Christmas holiday that Christians celebrate is really the birth of a warrior coming to execute divine wrath.

Satan has not only deceived and enslaved the Gentile people of the world, he exerts his control and dominion thru the leaders of those nations, their intellectuals and their rulers, their religious leaders and their wealthy people. The foolish people of these nations blindly follow their leaders in godlessness and barbarism, indulging their sin natures with great glee. Not only alienated from God, they are condemned. God's hideous wrath will one day [soon] be poured out on such people. But not on all of them!

In love, God seeks certain ones from among the Gentile nations to know Him and to be with Him. If the elect from among the Gentile nations would know of Israel's transcendent Creator God, they would respond with faith and be blessed. God called Abraham and his descendents to be His agent of blessing not only for the nation of Israel, which God would call into existence, but for the Gentile nations as well. God covenanted with Abraham that thru him God's great, cosmic plan of redemption would occur. Genesis 3:15 was in process of being fulfilled. **"Thru thee shall all the peoples of earth be blessed"** (Genesis 12:3). The Nation of Israel was tasked with carrying out this service, but they failed. So God promised a Servant, one who would be obedient to the task, who also would be deity, to come from the Nation of Israel to draw the elect out of those pagan Gentile nations, out of the grip of Satan and to Himself. The birth narratives tell that He came as promised. But they mean something deeper.

In Scripture, Jesus is the embodiment of the Nation of Israel. All Israel is in corporate unity with their King. Jesus doesn't merely come from Israel, and He doesn't merely represent Israel, He *is*, in His person, the obedient and perfect Israel. The Gospels narrate how He, in His life, recapitulated the story of Israel. As with the Nation of Israel, He came into existence miraculously, He came up out of Egypt, and He is called the Son. He came thru water (His baptism, corresponding to Israel's passing thru the Red Sea). As it was with Israel, He barely escaped annihilation shortly after birth. He is called God's Servant, as was Israel. He honored God as Israel – alone among the nations on earth – was supposed to do. He communed physically with God (at the Transfiguration) as Israel was called to do at Mt. Sinai. And He died, as Israel did (exile is a figure of death). Other examples could be mentioned, but these suffice. [His resurrection similarly is proof that Israel will one day be restored to their rightful place and role. Israel's promised restoration will be like a resurrection from the dead.] So, the birth narratives in the New Testament are really a recapitulation of the stories of the birth of Israel in Genesis from Chapter 12 into the first 14 chapters of Exodus. And why? To fulfill the Abrahamic covenant. So that the knowledge of God goes to the Gentile elect, to fulfill God's great plan of redemption.

In Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, **"You are the salt of the earth. . . You are the light of the world"** (5:13-14). That doesn't mean that Christians are to be salty or that they're to display Scripture's righteousness to their neighbors. It doesn't mean the Church is to keep our American culture, nor our government, virtuous or godly. What "salt" refers to in Scripture is covenant, specifically (in context) the Abrahamic covenant. In Isaiah Chapter 42, both covenant and "light" come together (see especially v. 6). It is the obedient Servant of God who will fulfill this role. But in Isaiah's later chapters, that Servant's role is fused or in union with that of his followers, who also are called "servants." This is why Jesus says, *"You are salt . . . and light."* With that command, Jesus is announcing His mission – *and ours* – is to fulfill the Abrahamic covenant of being light to the Gentiles of the world. We believers in Christ are to continue Christ's mission. That's our purpose, the reason for our being here. Jesus came into this world not to be celebrated as a baby in nativity scenes, but to rescue myriads of people in the countries of this world from condemnation and wrath, from sin and selfishness, and from serving Satan to serving the great, loving Creator God.

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The first Advent of Israel's Messiah reprises the birth and role of the Nation of Israel to rescue people from the Gentile nations of earth and is proleptic of a glorious future of born again people joyfully serving their loving God in Messiah's empowering presence. Messiah Jesus will come again, though, as a warrior King, like David, to reclaim God's physical creation from bondage to decay, to heal the Gentile nations of earth, and to restore Israel to its rightful place. He will vanquish God's enemies and establish an everlasting Kingdom of *shalom*.

The best way to celebrate that first Advent, if we're in Christ, is to examine ourselves, asking whether we're being obedient to our assigned role in God's great cosmic plan of redemption – servants fulfilling that covenant that God made with Abraham, making our life count for God – or not.