

Glory to God

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The context for the birth narrative of Jesus is often overlooked and misunderstood which has led many to miss some of the facets of the Christmas story entirely. As the people of Israel experienced the exile into Babylon in the 6th Century BC, as a result of their rebellion against God and building their life on the worship of idols, the cry arose from the prophets of a need for a rescuer who would restore the nation of Israel to their God as His chosen people once more. This expectation lingered as the people of Israel found themselves back in the Promised Land after the Babylonian exile, yet still ruled and crushed by foreign powers— first, the Persians, then the Greeks, and last and worst of all, the Romans. How could anyone declare God to be king and his people to be free when Caesar was on the throne and his cruel and ruthless minions were running things in Israel? The people cried out for a deliverer, one who could defeat their enemies and bring back the security of the blessing of God in the land. This long-hoped-for figure was debated and discussed, and many came to understand the Scripture to be speaking of a coming Anointed One, or Messiah.

This story is encapsulated in a micro-view in the person in Luke's gospel account named Simeon. Simeon is a faithful and obedience follower of Yahweh, longing for the day when Yahweh would come again, defeat Israel's enemies, and bring restoration of His kingdom to Israel. He longed for the "consolation" of Israel, this great and glorious day, and he was convinced that the day happen in his lifetime. In this same context, we find Jewish shepherds tending their flocks in the fields outside Bethlehem, also hoping for the arrival of Yahweh's anointed one who would finally rid their nation of the darkness that had so many centuries beset them.

Into this context, we have an incredible announcement: "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord." As the angels announce the message to the shepherds, the entire heavenly space erupts with praise, "Glory to God in the highest heaven!" And eight days later, Simeon would have this glory revealed to him as well and he cannot help but break into praise: "My eyes have seen your salvation which you prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel." Suddenly, this familiar Jewish ceremony is infused with an amazing purpose – this child is Israel's Messiah, and the blessings promised to Abraham of the entire world will be accomplished through him! The song *Glory to God* was written to place the hearer right into the very heart of this story and then to respond likewise: with an eruption of praise to the glory of God!