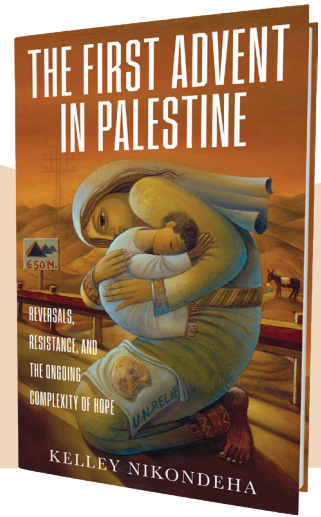




# THE FIRST ADVENT IN PALESTINE

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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### BEGINNINGS

1. Do you agree that the more we understand the political and economic landscape of the land of Palestine in the first advent, the more relevant the advent story will be to us now? Why or why not?
2. Despite the worldwide annual celebrations of Christmas, why is this likely the first time you have heard the historical, economic, and political context of the first advent?
3. As you begin reading, what does the subtitle of the book, *Reversals, Resistance, and the Ongoing Complexity of Hope*, mean to you? What do you expect to find as you read?

### CHAPTER 1 – UNSEEN SUFFERING

1. This chapter introduces us to the historical reality of the first advent. What part of the Jewish or Palestinian history of the time was most surprising or unfamiliar to you?
2. How does learning the history of the Maccabees, the Seleucid Empire, and the Jewish intertestamental period as told in the Apocrypha change your understanding of Advent?
3. What do you think of when you hear about the Palestinian people? What images and understandings do you have of the history and modern life of the people of Palestine? What does this have to do with Advent?
4. *“What I fail to see, I fail to lament. And if I cannot express grief about the brokenness around me, then I remain trapped, a harm to myself, to others.”* p. 21

What is the relationship between suffering, trauma, and the receiving of good news? Why must we, as the author claims, name the lament in order to be ready for the deliverance Advent promises?

5. What echoes of first-century Palestine are familiar to us today? What common connection is there between the world described in this first chapter and our world today?

## CHAPTER 2 – GOD’S PEACE CAMPAIGN

1. What are the foremost attributes of Caesar’s peace that are being reversed with God’s peace campaign at Advent? Can you think of ways that empires even now are being reversed by this good news?
2. What dimensions of the historical, social, and economic reality of the first advent strike you as most surprising or unexpected? Does this affect how you view our own commemoration of Christmas each year?
3. Zechariah’s Scriptures, our Old Testament, regularly talked about social and economic justice as an essential part of communal life in Israel. Why was the social hierarchy of his day so stark, and where do we see similar dynamics in our own communities, religious and otherwise?
4. *“Zechariah taught me that if I didn’t see my neighbors and their pain, if I refused to join them in solidarity, if I neglected a shared lament, then Advent’s first announcement would fall on deaf ears.”* p. 37

What characteristics do you see in Zechariah and Elizabeth that allow them to be hinges in their community and therefore ready and able to be used by God?

5. Zechariah’s prayers were shaped by those around him. Where is the pain and lament in your community at Advent and throughout the year?

## CHAPTER 3 – FORMED BY GALILEE

1. Do you find it enlivening, curious, or concerning to learn about the historical background and regional divisions of Judea and Galilee at the time of Advent?
2. How does the author’s speculation about Mary’s upbringing and possible abuse and trauma sit with you? Are you comfortable with a “historical” Mary who was part of a restive region at the time of the first advent?
3. *“Whether ancient Nazareth or modern Nabi Saleh, these places formed young residents into rebels against imperial injustice. How could it be otherwise?”* p. 51

If it was the Romans and their proxies in the first century, what forces are behind the “imperial injustice” that Ahd Tamimi faces in modern-day Palestine?

4. Have you ever found yourself echoing the common refrain that modern Middle East political and geographical tension is “hopeless”? What does the first advent story have to say about that?
5. After reading about Mattathias, Zechariah, and Mary’s stories, what do you think God’s version of peace depends on?

## CHAPTER 4 – MOTHERS OF ADVENT

1. As Elizabeth and Mary conversed, Zechariah listened. Considering the patriarchal society they lived in, as well as the one we live in, how would this conversation have been different if Zechariah had not been muted?
2. *“Elizabeth and Mary followed in the tradition of Israel’s matriarchs, engaged in the political realities of their time. In ancient Roman Palestine, religious, political, and economic life blended together. When women acted in public space, their action was as political as it was religious and economic.”* p. 61

What does your blending or separation of religious, political, and economic life look like? What will history record in our time about these elements of common life?

3. *“Mary agreed to be seen as an unwed mother.”* p.70

What have you agreed to with God? Has this ever made you outside the status quo or made you feel uncomfortable?

4. Lisa Loden, the author recounts, *“has stood between the old traditions and a new way. And, in kinship, she has had to stand among her own community and name the uneasy truth. Wherever she goes, she seeks solidarity among other peacemakers and embodies an Advent faith.”* p. 75

What “gaps” in your immediate communities do you see that might be a place to lead or stand among other peacemakers?

5. How does it change your perception of Christmas to consider Advent as a revolutionary time focused on the breaking of unjust power dynamics and the sociopolitical and economic status quo?
6. What does “humiliation transformed by resurrection” mean to you? Have you allowed yourself to be transformed by resurrection? What might this look like in your life?

## CHAPTER 5 – A HOSPITABLE BIRTH IN A HARD ECONOMY

1. Have you ever read the opening of Luke’s gospel as an economically focused beginning? What does this mean for the rest of Luke’s narrative?
2. Upon a historical second glance, we find there is no recorded census at the time Luke claims, and Joseph and Mary were most likely welcomed into the family house despite our long-held interpretation and understanding. Do these realities unsettle your Advent reading or even your confidence in Scripture? Why or why not?
3. Luke highlights women’s voices and stories. We learned in chapter 3 that Mary’s situation of being pregnant out of wedlock would not have been uncommon in first-century Palestine. Joseph’s path and decision to stay with Mary *were* the uncommon move. How he treats Mary in front of his family is important. As you put yourself in this story, how do you feel as Mary, as Joseph, as Joseph’s family?
4. In holiday manger scenes, we see Mary, Joseph, Jesus, and the animals. The author imagines the reality of family at the compound making room and welcoming Jesus, and of Mary not giving birth alone. How does this view of the manger scene change your perspective?

5. *“Luke’s text asks us, Do we see who is crushed by the current economic realities? Do we understand that even our acts of charity are too thin against the demands of Advent?”* p. 88

Who is on the underside of empire, crushed by the current economic realities in your season of Advent this year?

6. When is hospitality an act of resistance, as seen in this chapter, and when does it reinforce the status quo? Do you have examples from your own life?

## CHAPTER 6: VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE

1. The author paints a picture of Bethlehem and the sociopolitical tensions that is quite unlike the visions we are given in holiday scenes. Is this raw reality of Bethlehem and the harsh world of the first advent unsettling or uncomfortable? Why or why not?
2. The Nassar family story illuminates daily life for many people living in the precariousness of empire in modern-day Palestine and around the world. Whose stories are told and whose are not in places of conflict and tension?
3. *“The first advent, according to Luke’s telling, is the story of God pushing boundaries of respectability in pursuit of another kind of peace. . . . The Spirit moved further and further from the centers of power and propriety toward those most victimized by the empire.”* p. 93

Who are the shepherds—the overlooked and disregarded—in your community and daily life?

4. How are hospitality, neighborliness, and times of duress intertwined, both in the first advent and today?
5. Why could Luke so confidently proclaim “peace on earth, goodwill to all” when he had presumably witnessed such destruction and despair in the years since Jesus walked the earth? How can this encourage us to proclaim peace in the midst of our own violent world?

## CHAPTER 7: GENERATIONS

1. Matthew highlighted Herod in order to draw a stark contrast to God’s peace plan beginning at the first advent. Name one key distinction between peace brought by empire and the one introduced by God. Has anything changed regarding “peace” since the first advent in Palestine?
2. *“The life of a peacemaker embraces the hard truth that peace will remain incomplete in our own lifetime, even as others carry the campaign forward.”* p. 116

Peace and place: Peace inextricably linked with place is a running theme of the Advent narrative. How is your image of first-century Palestine, and Bethlehem in particular, changing as you read this historical background and context for Matthew and Luke?

3. The author paints a portrait of Joseph the Jewish patriarch that most people have never heard—one of complicity with evil and betrayal of his kin. How does this reading of Joseph’s story in Genesis sit with you?

4. *“Advent is continually embodied, incessantly incarnated. Advent reaches across the generations, always pushing us to embody God’s peace in today’s troubled times.”* p. 128

How is God’s peace plan playing out in your place and time, your daily life? How can you embody the peace of Advent in your own historical context, this Christmas and beyond?

## CHAPTER 8: UNEXPECTED HOPE

1. Given the political and socioeconomic environment of the ancient Near East, why was the inclusion of the magi so key to Matthew’s advent story? What element of the coming of the magi illuminated in this chapter is most new and unique to you?
2. Sliman Mansour said, *“The life you live here forces you to deal with these problems and little by little you find yourself a political artist,”* Mansour said about his evolution into a political artist [in the occupied territory of Palestine]. p. 143

Mansour expresses life lived organically into a purpose for communal well-being. Are there areas of your life that are growing into a purpose for communal well-being, perhaps without you even noticing?

3. Are there symbols of resistance—watermelons and olive trees—for oppressed people in your own daily life and community? What are they, who are the people, and what is being resisted? How does this connect to God’s advent peace plan in your own community?
4. *“The first advent delivered a sign of tangible hope for people near and far.”* p. 145

What tangible hope for peace, justice, and community flourishing do you see around you today?

5. Does the historical and political on-the-ground reality of the first advent in Palestine bring the Christmas story to greater impact, or are you left disconcerted about the story you’re familiar with? Why?

## CHAPTER 9: EVEN AFTER GOD ARRIVED

1. Did you ever think of Jesus and the Holy Family as refugees? What feelings does this fact bring up in you?
2. *“Advent is the subversion of imperial power.”* p. 152  
Do you agree with the author’s conclusion? Why or why not?
3. *“Only when we find ourselves summoned by God alongside ordinary priests, barren or abused women, shepherds, tradesmen, and foreigners participating in God’s subversive peace campaign, can we incarnate another kind of peace.”* p. 152

Are there people who fit these categories with whom you are, or can one day be, working for peace in your land, your community, your country?

4. In what ways have you been exposed in the past to nonviolence, and what are your reflections on nonviolent means toward peace?
5. Nafez Assaily recognized that to bring peace in Palestine, the children needed to be taught differently about how to achieve peace. Do you see messages about peace in your community, newsfeeds, media, or sociopolitical sphere? Are they considered alternative or otherwise unpopular, or are these messages embraced?

## CHAPTER 10: HOMELAND, BUT NOT A HOME

1. The “historical” Jesus is the interpretation of the life of Jesus from the perspective of history, as the author does here. Does hearing the imagined or speculated background to Jesus’s earthly life, and that Joseph may not have been around for a lot of it, enhance the gospel narrative for you or diminish it? How does the historical Jesus impact your understanding of the gospels?
2. Do deeper and more personal stories of the modern Palestinian experience of the occupation—such as how people hold on to keys that once opened doors to now-occupied homes—challenge, reinforce, or otherwise change your understanding of the ongoing geopolitical tension in Palestine and the modern Middle East?
3. *Meekness* is a difficult, but important, word for us to understand. How does the author view meekness in relation to the first advent and in light of the highlighted Palestinian communities in this book?
4. *Reversals, Resistance, and the Ongoing Complexity of Hope*: How do you interpret and understand the subtitle of this book after having read about the history and current stories of these communities in Palestine?
5. “. . . God’s peace—which is the practice of hope in hard times.” p. 180

*Hope. Peace. Advent*: What do these words mean to you now? How have these words taken on new meaning after this reading?