

Ishtar's Odyssey



A Family Story for Advent

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Before the Story

Stir us up, O Lord, to make ready for your only begotten Son. May we be able to serve you with purity of soul through the coming of him who lives and reigns.

Advent Prayer



Advent. *Adventus. Ecce advenit Dominator Dominus.* Behold, the Lord the Ruler is come. Reaching back two millennia to the birth of the Christ child, and forward to his reign on earth, the tradition of Advent is a three-fold celebration of the birth of Jesus, his eventual second coming to earth, and of his continued presence in our lives here and now. God in our past, God in our future, God in our present.

Advent.

It started with people going hungry to purify themselves and prepare themselves for holy living. A *fast*, we call it, and such a fast was ordered by the Council of Saragossa in A.D. 381. For three weeks before Epiphany (a feast in January celebrating the divine revelation of Jesus to the gentile Magi) the people were to fast and pray in preparation. The tradition spread to all of France in 581 by decree of the Council of Macon, and to Rome and beyond thereafter. Gregory the First refined the season to its present form in about 600 when he declared that it should start the fourth Sunday before Christmas.

Fasting is no longer a part of Advent in most homes and churches (though it wouldn't be a bad idea). For us, Advent means taking a few minutes each day, for the three or four weeks

before Christmas, to center our thoughts on Truth Incarnate lying in a feeding trough in Bethlehem. It's a time of worship, a time of reflection, a time of focus, and a time of family communion. In the midst of December's commotion and stress, it's a few moments to stop, catch your breath, and renew your strength from the only One who can provide true strength.

Ishtar's Odyssey is one tool you can use to implement a time of Advent in your family—whether yours is a traditional family structure or one of the many combinations of fathers and mothers, stepparents and grandparents, and guardians and children that make up today's families. You can use this story during Advent even if your family is just you.

Set aside a few minutes each day, beginning the fourth Sunday before Christmas (see the chart on page 176) to light the Advent candles, read the Ishtar story and devotional for that day, and pray together. You can also use an Advent calendar (see "Advent Customs," page 15), sing a favorite Christ-centered carol (Frosty's a nice guy, but has no place in Advent), and have a time of family sharing.

Our family set aside fifteen minutes each night before the youngest child went to bed. Our Advent wreath had a traditional place on a table next to the living room reading chair. The children took turns each night lighting the candles and reading the calendar, adding that day's window at the end. By the light of the Advent candles I read the last few lines of the previous day's Ishtar story, then the story and devotion for that day. Afterward Mom led in prayer as we all held hands. We closed by singing one verse of a carol. The youngest child then lit her own "bedside" candle from the Advent candles and made her way to bed by candlelight (being old enough to know how to use a candle safely). Even when work or visiting took us out of town, we carried the book and a candle with us and kept our Advent tradition. Sometimes we even shared our tradition with those we were visiting.

Simple, short, spiritual. A wonderful way to keep the shopping and traffic and rehearsals and concerts and parties and preparations of December in balance with the reality of God in our lives—past, present, and future.

Advent. *Adventus. Ecce advenit Dominator Dominus.* Behold, the Lord the Ruler is come. May God richly bless you and your family as you prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ!

About the Magi

During the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

Matthew 2:1–2

Who were these Magi? Where did they come from? Why did they come to worship a foreign king? Were there three or seven or twelve magi? When exactly did they arrive? These are questions to which we’ll never know the answers until we get to heaven.

Because of that, *Ishtar’s Odyssey* has very little fact, and a lot of fiction, when it comes to the magi themselves. We just don’t know. I’ve chosen to keep the western tradition of three magi, and I’ve chosen to make them from Persia, specifically the Parthian dynasty of Persia. In that sense, the story is fairly historically accurate—the foods, architecture, warriors, politics, social mores, and caravans of the era are depicted accurately with only a bit of literary license.

But details about the magi described in Scripture? We simply don’t have any.

The question is, does it really matter? From a spiritual sense, does it matter if there were three or twelve? Does it matter if they arrived the night of Jesus’ birth or a few months after?

I think what this story tells us is that God provided ways for *all* people to come to Jesus. His birth—and the *celebration* of his birth—is not for any one people or for any one church. He came to earth for all people, and accepts all people wherever they are in their own spiritual journey.

He can draw people to himself no matter where they live.

So it might be important to let your children know that the events and most of the people of *Ishtar's Odyssey* are fictitious. But it's equally important to let them know that the miracles God worked in lives, and still works in lives today, are very real.

Making Connections

At JothamsJourney.com you'll find maps, photos, and other documents to help your family connect to the story more directly.

But there's another way you might try to make the story come alive for your children.

Ishtar's Odyssey is largely a journey of food. Cuisine. Eating.

Ishtar has been raised in a palace far removed from the common culture, and rich in the finest foods. He's used to having his choice of exotic dishes available on command, and thinks nothing of asking for that which takes a great deal of effort—and money—to prepare.

Until his trek begins.

When Ishtar suddenly finds himself on a smelly, dirty caravan crossing an endless desert, there are no more fine foods or sweet desserts. There is only millet—a bland grain cooked into a thin porridge.

I thought it might be fun—and meaningful—for your children to experience *Ishtar's Odyssey* the way Ishtar largely does: through food. The chart below suggests foods you might use to help enhance the story during some days' readings. Depending on the ages and courage of your children as well as the time and money you want to commit, you might prepare the actual dish, searching the internet for a recipe you like, or you might prepare a similar but more kid-friendly food to simulate the food described in the story.

Use these ideas as meals, accompaniment to meals, a snack before the reading, or a food tasting as part of your Advent devotional time. You could even stop in the middle of the story when a food is described and give it a taste. To be most authentic, spread a blanket or tablecloth on the floor, surround it with pillows and couch cushions, and recline around your meal—utensils optional—with a fingerbowl of warm water for each person.

While experimenting with something new is great for kids, the goal is for this to be a positive and memorable experience for them. The point is to show the important role food

played in Ishtar’s life, and how he learned from it. If forcing your child to gag down *haleem* will cause him or her to hate Advent, using the more familiar, kid-friendly options might be the better choice.

However you do it, we’d love to hear about your experiences and experiments in the comments section at JothamsJourney.com!

PERSIAN FOOD		
DAY	AUTHENTIC	SIMILAR
Week 1, Sunday The first day of the story. Ishtar describes a banquet. Fix a dinner with as many of these as your stamina and stomach can tolerate. Great way to start Advent!	Polo (rice; many recipes)	Rice pilaf; boxed flavored rice
	Nan-e barbari (flatbread)	Naan Indian bread; pita bread
	Fresh fruit	
	Mokhalafat (accompaniments)	Sliced tomato and cucumber, pickles, olives, chopped herbs, hard-boiled eggs
	Kooftah berenji	Meatballs (especially mixed with rice)
	Mahi sefeed	Pan-fried whitefish; fish sticks or fillets
	Torshi bademjan	Stuffed eggplant; stuffed dill pickles; any pickled vegetable
	Nogha	Nougat; favorite chewy candy bar
	Chai	Spiced or herbal tea
Week One - Monday	Nan-e barbari	Naan Indian bread; pita bread
	Haleem (with lamb)	Thick lentil, pea, or bean soup; hash
	Dates, pomegranates, peaches, apricots	Any dried fruit
	Kebab	Any type of meat on a skewer with fruits or vegetables
	Falafel	Falafel; hummus
	Goat milk	Any milk
	Chai	Spiced or herbal tea

Week One - Wednesday	Zulbia	Doughboys, funnel cakes, or cinnamon elephant ears (with honey for dipping)
Week One - Thursday	Nan-e barbari	Naan Indian bread; pita bread
	Pomegranate jam	Any favorite jam
	Reshteh khoshkar	Any cookies with spices and/or nuts, such as snickerdoodles or snowballs
	Chai	Spiced or herbal tea
Week One - Saturday Week Two - Sunday	Millet porridge	Any seed or grain, such as quinoa, made into a porridge; hot instant wheat cereal
Week Two - Monday	Meat & Cheese	Beef jerky and string cheese; summer sausage and cheese curds
Week Two - Tuesday	Millet porridge	Any seed or grain, such as quinoa, made into a porridge; hot instant wheat cereal
	Roasted locusts	Gummy bugs; unsalted popcorn
	Pomegranate & pomegranate juice	Favorite fruit & juice
Week Two - Wednesday	9 triangles of Nan-e barbari	9 triangles of Naan Indian bread, pita bread, or toast
	3 small pieces grilled meat	
Week Two - Thursday	Baklava	Any pastry made with philo dough; toaster pastry; cupcake
	Gaz	Nougat; favorite chewy candy bar
Week Two - Saturday	Baklava	Any pastry made with philo dough; toaster pastry; cupcake

Week Three - Sunday	Grapes	
	Khorakeh Goosht	Beef pot roast with vegetables or beef stew
	Almonds	Any nuts
	Peaches	
Week Three - Monday	Musht (“St. Peter’s Fish”)	Roasted or pan-fried tilapia; fish sticks or fillets
	Laks (Lox)	Smoked salmon or any smoked fish; tuna
Week Three - Wednesday	Meat & Cheese	Beef jerky and string cheese; summer sausage and cheese curds
Week Three - Friday	Coconut	
	Dates	Raisins
Week Three - Saturday	Baklava	Any pastry made with philo dough; toaster pastry; cupcake
Christmas Day	Baklava	Any favorite Christmas cookie
	Zulbia	Any favorite Christmas pastry
	Gaz	Indian Julebi; traditional family favorite sweet

Advent Customs

Advent itself is simply any time set apart for spiritual preparation. But most people associate the word *Advent* with various traditions and customs that have grown up around Christmas in many of the world's cultures. Early in history these customs took the forms of fasts and feasts. Today they most often take the forms of candles, wreaths, and calendars.

Most churches and families use Advent candles to celebrate the season. Five are used in all, one for each week of Advent and the fifth for Christmas Day. The first, second, and fourth candles are violet, symbolizing penitence. The third is pink, symbolizing joy, and the Christmas Day candle is white, symbolizing the purity of Christ.

Advent candles are usually part of an Advent wreath. While some traditions hang the wreath, it is most commonly used flat, on a table. The circle of the wreath represents the hope of eternal life we have through Christ. The circle itself is made of evergreen branches, symbolizing the abundant life Jesus promised us in the here-and-now. The first four candles are positioned along the outside ring of the wreath and the fifth is placed in the center.

Some traditions use a slanted board instead of a wreath to hold the candles. The board is about four inches by twelve, and raised six inches on one end. Four holes are drilled along the length of the board for the first four candles, and the fifth candle is placed at the top.

Another candle tradition uses one candle for each day of Advent. Any color of candle can be used, but the Sunday candles are usually of a special design and color. The candles can either be placed along a mantel, or in holes drilled in a log. Each night during devotions one more candle is lit. By Christmas Day, the candles give bright testimony to and reminder of the evenings of devotion you've spent together as a family.

Advent calendars are popular with children and teach them the Christmas story in an

active way. Also called an “Advent house,” the calendar is shaped like a house, with a window for each day of Advent. Behind each window is a small portion of the Christmas story (usually from the book of Luke). Each night the family reads the story from these windows, ending by opening the window for that day.



A Note to Parents: Jesus was not born in an amusement park or religious retreat. He was born into a world of sin, darkness, and death. Indeed, his own birth caused the death of many male children as Herod sought to kill the new King. So it is not the intent of *Ishtar’s Odyssey* to present a heaven-like world where everyone lives in purity and harmony. While the story is fun and adventurous, and has the most happy of endings, it does take place in the real world: there is greed, there is cruelty, there is sin. The point is not to cover up the dark side of life, but rather to show how the love of God and his son Jesus Christ are the *light* of our lives.

Most children over the age of seven have been exposed to far worse violence in movies, TV, and cartoons than you’ll find in this story. However, if your children are younger, or are particularly sensitive, I suggest you preview each day’s reading so that you might skip or summarize the few more tragic parts. You may also want to talk with your children about the events in the story, to help them understand that sometimes bad things happen to people, but that you and God are there to love them and protect them.

In any event, it is my sincere hope and prayer that you and God together can use this story to teach your children just how much God loves them and how close he is to us, even in times of tragedy.

Especially in times of tragedy.

May God richly bless your Advent time together!



Pronunciation Guide: Foreign names can sometimes be difficult to pronounce. If you grew up in a Western culture, your mouth may not even be *capable* of pronouncing these names correctly. But for those who would like to conform to at least a pretense of a guide (admittedly inaccurate), these are some of the names you'll encounter in *Ishtar's Odyssey*:

Ishtar = ISH-tar
Salamar = SAL-uh-mar
Kazeem = kuh-ZEEM
Varta = VAHR-tuh
Jodhpur = JAWD-purr
Bozan -boe-ZAWN
Rasad = ruh-SAWD
Faraj = far-AWJ
Jotham = JAW-thum
Decha = DECK-uh
Konarak = KAHN-uh-rack
Amaranth = AM-uh-ranth
Zelzele = zell-ZEAL
Seleucia = sell-OO-see-uh
Tericheae = TARE-i-kigh





A Rich Diet

Light the first violet candle.

Ishtar sat on his golden throne, dressed in royal robes with a crown of jewels on his head. He looked across the throne room, filled from wall to wall with his subjects shouting his name in admiration. “Ishtar! Ishtar!” They sang his praises not out of force or duty, but because they loved him. King Ishtar, King of Kings, ruler of all Persia, only ten years old but already the protector, provider, and savior of all his people. Never had there been a king so . . .

“Ishtar!”

At the sharp sound of his name Ishtar flinched, which caused his head to go under and water to go up his nose. He kicked and splashed until finally his feet found the bottom of the pool. He stood coughing and sputtering, wiping the water from his eyes. That’s when he saw his bodyguard, Kazeem, standing over him on the side of the pool.

“Many apologies,” Kazeem said. “I did not mean to startle you, but I called your name three times before you heard me. Were you daydreaming of power and wealth?”

“Uh, no, of course not,” Ishtar sputtered. “I . . . I was preparing my mind for my history lesson.”

Kazeem just smiled, an odd smile that Ishtar suspected meant Kazeem suspected that Ishtar was not telling the entire truth. Kazeem was big for a Persian. So tall was the man that the long, curved sword hanging from his belt didn’t come near to reaching the floor. His arms, resting on his hips, seemed to be the size of an elephant’s legs.

“In any case,” Kazeem said, “you are correct that it is time for your history lesson.”

Ishtar didn’t argue, mostly because it would have done no good. While Kazeem was technically Ishtar’s servant, it wasn’t the same as the slaves and masters he saw from other

countries. Kazeem was more of a paid worker, who could choose to quit at any time, and there were laws against mistreating servants. Besides, Kazeem had been at his side since the day he was born, and Ishtar thought of him as a friend.

Ishtar sloshed his way out of the long, rectangular pool that filled the center of his home. He lived with his father and servants on the uppermost floor of the Palace of Amaranth, where lived Sheik Konarak and all his advisors. Ishtar's father, Salamar, was the *mogan-andarzbud*, the highest-ranking advisor, and chief of all the magi.

Surrounding the pool were sleeping chambers, study rooms, and a large banquet hall where Salamar, with Ishtar at his side, would often entertain exotic guests. Amaranth was a seaport on the Arabian coast, a city that saw many merchants and traders pass through her gates. In fact it was the "magical" and nutritious seeds of the amaranth plant—brought here by Greek traders long before—that had given the city its name. Lounging on pillows through hundreds of banquets, Ishtar had learned many facts like this, and the ways of many different cultures from both east and west.

"Quickly now," Kazeem scolded. "You must not keep Hormoz waiting."

Hormoz. An expert in history, and one of Ishtar's several tutors. While he was allowed a swim in the pool in the heat of the afternoon, the rest of his day was spent with one tutor or another. Mathematics, science, language—it never seemed to end.

"I think if I learn much more my head may overflow and all my knowledge spill onto the floor."

"You are ten years old," Kazeem said as he escorted Ishtar to the other side of the pool. "If you live to be my age, you will discover there are always new things to be learned, and they all remain neatly stored within your head."

Kazeem stood just outside the study room as Hormoz began the lesson. It always took Hormoz a minute or two before he turned over the time marker—an invention of glass that allowed sand to fall from one chamber to another, thus marking time. Ishtar had often thought that if he could just open up the time marker and enlarge the hole through which the sand flowed, his lessons would be much shorter.

"And so we begin with a recital of the royal ancestors." Hormoz started every lesson exactly this way, and Ishtar sighed.

An hour later Ishtar was leaving his history tutor and heading for his tutor of mathematics when Salamar met him near the pool. "Father!" he exclaimed, and hugged Salamar's legs.

"*Zor bekhayr*, Ishtar," Salamar said, returning the hug. Then he took his son by the shoulders and stood him up straight. "And what did you learn in history lessons today?"

Ishtar shrugged. "Nothing."

Salamar frowned. "Then I must have Hormoz severely punished for failing to teach you."

"Oh no, no Father," Ishtar said quickly. "It is just that I already knew everything he taught today!"

Salamar's face melted into a grin and Ishtar realized his father had just been joking. Which he should have known, now that he thought about it. Out loud he said, "It's just so boring, going over the same things every day."

"It is by repeating a thing that you learn it well," Salamar said. "But for now, you will not be taking your lessons in mathematics or science. Your aunt has invited you over to play with your cousins."

Ishtar's face lit up. Only the children in the line of succession were permitted to live in the palace, and Sheik Konarak had no children of his own. The total number of children living in the palace was . . . one. The only time Ishtar got to play with others was when he visited relatives. Obviously, as part of the royal household, he could not simply go outside and play with the children in the streets.

"May my cousins come to the palace instead?" Ishtar asked. Although he was often lonely, he hated leaving the palace, even to go see his cousins. As beautiful as the city was, it was still dirty, and full of strange people. "You have nothing to fear," his father had once told him. "Then why do I need a bodyguard?" Ishtar had asked. Salamar had no answer.

But now Salamar said, "The invitation was for you to come to their home, and thus you shall."

Ishtar sighed and took his lesson parchments to his sleeping chamber.

Kazeem informed the tutors of mathematics and science that they wouldn't be needed today, then called for the bearers and led Ishtar down four flights of stairs to the courtyard. The palace was built of a reddish stone, and every door and window was topped with an ornate arch. Green trees and bushes filled the courtyard, which was decorated with colorful mosaics. A fountain in the center of the courtyard gave off a cool mist in the afternoon heat.

Ishtar climbed into his *tahtirevan*, a tall box with a seat inside and poles jutting out the front and back. Four bearers immediately lifted the poles. The metal gate—taller than four men standing on each other’s shoulders—was raised, and the bearers carried Ishtar in his *tahtirevan* out into the streets, with Kazeem walking behind.

Ishtar watched the city go by through his open windows. The streets were wide and paved with stone, but very stinky from all the animals that traveled it. Along the sides were sellers of anything a Persian or visitor could possibly want—roasted meats, sharp cheeses, sweet delicacies, clothes of every color and material. As they moved along the main avenue he saw games and weapons and jewelry for sale. For a price, you could even get your future told, though Ishtar’s father had warned him many times that such fortunetellers were frauds.

Being a seaport directly on the trade routes, Amaranth was full of all kinds of people: Greeks, Asians, Africans, even Romans, though the Persian Empire and the Roman Empire were always on the verge of war.

The shadows hadn’t moved very far by the time Ishtar reached the home of his cousins. They spent the afternoon playing King’s Ransom—one of many games Salamar had brought home with him from his travels. The sun was getting low in the sky when Kazeem said it was time to return to the palace. Many of the sellers’ stalls were closing, and children played in the mostly empty streets. As they passed one group of boys about Ishtar’s age he heard them talking.

“There goes that fancy boy Ishtar,” one boy said.

“He even has a girl’s name!” another added.

Then they chanted his name in a mocking way—“Ishtar, Ishtar, Ishtar.”

Back at the palace, Ishtar was silent as he put on a clean coat for dinner.

“You are quiet tonight.”

Ishtar jumped at the sound of his father’s voice behind him.

“Usually I can hear you babbling to Kazeem from the other side of the palace.”

“I . . . I was thinking about something,” Ishtar said.

“And what great thoughts so occupy the mind of my son that he has no room for talk?”

Ishtar looked away. Part of him was embarrassed to answer the question, but part of him really wanted to. Finally the second part won.

“Is . . . is my name a girl’s name?”

Salamar sighed deeply, then sat on his son’s bed. “Names can behave strangely,” he said after a long pause. “In one country they can be one thing, in another country they can be just the opposite.”

“But is *Ishtar* a girl’s name?”

Salamar gave his answer much thought while Ishtar pulled the belt around his green silk jacket. “In some countries, the name Ishtar is given to a goddess of love,” Salamar said finally. “In other countries, it’s the name of a god of war. But long before you were born your mother and I decided our first son would be named *Ishtar*.”

At the mention of his mother, a rare occurrence, Ishtar just looked at his father.

“It was your grandfather’s name,” Salamar said. “We gave you that name in honor of your grandfather.”

Now it was Ishtar’s turn to think a long thought. “Then I shall wear the name with pride,” he said finally.

Salamar stood to leave. “Good. It is not wise to worry what others might think of you, except as it may affect your relationship with them. Come now. We have guests for dinner. Merchants from several lands.” *So what else is new?* Ishtar thought.

The feast that night was quite ordinary: lamb, duck, whitefish, eggplant, olives, boiled eggs, several kinds of flatbread, and lots of sauces. Everyone lounged on pillows on the floor around the food, and each had a small bowl of water beside their plate, for washing their fingers between courses. There were no actors performing Greek plays as there often were, but five musicians did play quietly in the corner. Ishtar helped himself to some more *koof-teh*, scooping a meatball up with his bread. As the men ate the fine foods and drank their tea, they talked. Boring talk, Ishtar thought. And it went on forever because, as happened at so many of these dinners, the guests didn’t know it was impolite to stay late into the night.

Ishtar’s favorite dishes were the desserts. At least three at every meal—including *nogha*, made from the sweet sap of a rare plant, mixed with ground nuts, and spread between two crisp wafers. It was chewy and nutty.

“Ishtar, no more *nogha*,” his father whispered after Ishtar’s third helping.

Three of the guests were Jewish merchants from Palestine. Every time someone would