



Explanation of the icon of the Nativity of the Savior. *Please read the endnotes when you encounter them. They are part of this instructive text. They were written to be read as part of the text.*

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All of our icons teach precious theological truths. There is a long-standing tradition of including particular items in icons, in order to teach dogmatic truths. The icons of the great feasts are particularly rich in these images.

At the center of the **Icon of the Nativity** is the Theotokos¹ in repose with our Lord Jesus Christ wrapped in swaddling clothes in the manger with the ox and the donkey. Our Lord Jesus Christ is shown looking like a young boy, not an infant, because he is God and man and even as an infant, He was not helpless. He is also lying in a crib that that looks similar to a casket and wrapped in swaddling clothes which also looks like a burial shroud – these elements and presage his eventual death on the cross and being wrapped in a burial shroud by Joseph and Nicodemus.² The Theotokos is shown in repose and lying on a red blanket. Red is the color of blood and of life. She is shown in repose because we know from Holy Tradition that her birth giving was without travail³. Our dogma states that the birth of Jesus Christ was miraculous, just as his conception was. The Mother of God remained a virgin during birth and after birth just as she was before birth. She did not escape the pain of motherhood however, because it was prophesied that when her Son was crucified a sword would pass through her heart.⁴

The ox and the donkey reference to the prophecy from Isaiah 1:3: “The ox knows his owner and the ass knows his master’s crib. But Israel does not know, and my people do not consider me.”

The star points to the manger, as the Gospel of Matthew describes it.⁵ This “star” was an angelic power, and some even say it was the Archangel Gabriel. It could not be anything other than an angel, because it displayed intelligence, and behavior totally unlike a star. This star appeared in the East and traveled from east to west and from north to south, which is unlike how a star travels in that area of the world. It also was visible by day. Everyone knows that stars disappear when the sun comes up. It also disappeared at will when the Magi came to Jerusalem.⁶ They were the only ones that could see the star and when it disappeared, they were troubled and they went to Herod and Herod consulted his wisemen, and they remembered the prophecy that said that the Savior would be born in Bethlehem⁷. Since Herod could not see the star, he had no way of finding the Christ child, so he resorted to subterfuge with the Magi and gave them leave to go worship the Christ child and asked them that they would return to report the child’s location so that he could also worship the child.⁸ Of course, Herod had no desire to worship the Christ child but instead planned to kill him, and later the Magi were told of Herod’s plans. they came back to their country another way⁹ and Herod was left to fume with anger. It was after this that Herod decided to kill all of the infants in the area from two years old and on their, in a futile effort to kill the Christ child.¹⁰

It is unknown exactly when the Magi appeared to worship the Christ child. Matthew says that they were in a house, and it is certain that Christ was born in a manger¹¹, that is, a cave in the hills that was used to shelter animals. It is probable that the Magi appeared shortly after Christ’s birth, because after his 40th day, Joseph was warned in a dream and they likely left for Egypt in order to escape Herod.¹² In any case, the family certainly left for Egypt during Jesus early infancy.

The Magi are shown in this icon in the center to the left. They were Persian astrologers, and they were looking for a sign in the sky according to their ancient teacher Balaam¹³. When this sign appeared, they journeyed to Jerusalem following the angel. Tradition names these three Magi as Caspar, Balthasar and Melchor. They brought three gifts according to the Evangelist Matthew: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Gold is appropriate to give to a king, because a king is rich. The King of the entire universe was lying like a peasant in a manger, but nonetheless He is a king, and in the next coming, He will be immediately apparent to everyone as a king¹⁴. Frankincense is used in incense, in Jewish rituals and also in the Christian religion; it is used to show reverence for God. We cense icons and show reverence for the image of God that is within the saints, and we even cense any Orthodox Christian because

we recognize the image of God that is within them. After all, we are created in the image of God, in order to obtain His likeness¹⁵, and the Scripture actually says concerning us that we are gods!¹⁶ This means that we are to become like God and become perfected. This perfection is only possible because the perfect God, Jesus Christ, became man and made it possible for the perfection of human nature. Myrrh was used in burial rituals. It is a desiccant, and helps to keep flesh from decaying. Of course, Christ's flesh would never corrupt, but nonetheless myrrh was anointed on His dead body by Joseph and Nicodemus. The gifts are prophecies. One states that He is a king, another that He is God, and another that He was born in order to die so that we could live.

On the right side of the icon is a shepherd blowing his horn. The apostle Matthew tells us that the first to find out about the birth of Christ were shepherds taking care of their flocks in their fields. At the top of the icon are the Angels, who are with great joy announcing the birth of Christ in the heavens.

At the bottom left of the icon, Joseph appears and he is being tempted by the devil. The devil is trying to convince him that Mary became pregnant because of adultery, but Joseph was warned of this subterfuge in a dream, and he remained the protector of the birthgiver of his God and Savior. Some modern (not Orthodox) depictions of Joseph show him as a young man, but this was not so: he was actually an 85 year old widower (among his children were James, called in Scripture the "brother of the Lord", and also Jude, an elder brother of James, who because of his great humility called himself the "brother of James", and also Simeon and Salome, who was the mother of the apostle John and his brother James). Joseph was appointed to take care of Mary, with the appearance of marriage.

The bottom right of the icon shows midwives washing the infant Jesus Christ. It is completely appropriate to clean up the skin of a newborn baby, and this act shows emphatically that Jesus Christ is fully man, just as the gift of myrrh states that He is God.

¹ "Theotokos" means "birth giver of God". It is one of our most important dogmatic names. If Mary had given birth only to Christ, that is only a man, there's nothing impressive whatsoever about that. Mary gave birth to a man who is also God and we emphasize this by saying that she is the birth giver of God. The name "Jesus Christ" indicates that we believe the God man him to be both God and man, because the word "Jesus" means "Savior", and "Christ" means "anointed" - God is the one who anoints with the Holy Spirit, and men are anointed. Since Jesus Christ was perfect man and perfect God, as a man He was perfectly anointed with the Holy Spirit.

² John 19:39-40 "And there came also Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred-pound weight. (40) Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury."

³ There are dozens, if not hundreds of hymns that speak of the supernatural conception and birth and virginity of the Theotokos during the conception, birth and after birth. All we need to understand these hymns is attend the Vespers and matins services and listen and pray.

⁴ From the prophecy of Simeon, when the infant Lord Jesus Christ entered into the temple: "And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother, Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against; (35) (Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed." (Luke 2:34-35)

⁵ Matthew 2:1-10 Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, (2) Saying, where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. (3) When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. (4) And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. (5) And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, (6) And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel. (7) Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. (8) And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also. (9) When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in

the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. (10) When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

⁶ Matthew 2:1-2 Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, (2) Saying, where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.

⁷ Matthew 2:3-6 "When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. (4) And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. (5) And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, (6) And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel."

The prophecy is from Micah 5:2

⁸ "And he (Herod) sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also." (Matthew 2:8)

⁹ Matthew 2:12 And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.

¹⁰ Matthew 2:16-18 "Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently enquired of the wise men. (17) Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet, saying, (18) In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not.

¹¹ Luke 2:1-7 "And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. (2) (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) (3) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. (4) And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) (5) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. (6) And so, it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. (7) And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn."

¹² Matthew 2:13-15 "And when they (the Magi from Persia) were departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him. (14) When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt: (15) And was there until the death of Herod: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt have I called my son."

¹³ The prophesy of Balaam: "I shall see him, but not now: I shall behold him, but not nigh: there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel, and shall smite the corners of Moab, and destroy all the children of Sheth." (Numbers 24:17)

¹⁴ Note especially verse 16 which describes the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ in majesty as a king: "But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. (14) For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. (15) For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. (16) *For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first:* (17) Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so, shall we ever be with the Lord. (18) Wherefore comfort one another with these words." (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18)

¹⁵ Genesis 1:26-27 "And God said, let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. (27) So, God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them."

¹⁶ Psalm 81:6 (Sep) "I said: Ye are gods, and all of you the sons of the Most High."