

# The Nativity of Christ

By V eselin K esich

Professor of New Testament, Emeritus  
St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary

For our Bible study, we take this passage, the gospel for the Nativity (**Matthew 2:1-12**), which is short but sufficient to serve as the basis for study during the Christmas season.

## Biblical Translations

Before we begin, we will immediately be confronted with the problem of translations. There are many translation of the Greek text of the Gospels. Which is the best? Actually there is none which is "best" and probably will never be. There are very good or excellent translations, but each is good for a particular reason.

For purposes of study, I would suggest that the participants in a Bible study group should use the Revised Standard Version, in the edition of *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha*. This edition contains articles, notes on the text and maps, all of which are necessary for intelligent systematic study. This version is particularly valuable for us because the English is clear and readable and the translation keeps close to its Greek original.

It is not enough to read our text or any other Biblical text in one translation. No single translation, no matter how good it is, can convey all the richness and meaning of the original Greek. Therefore in addition, everyone should read the text in the *New English Bible (NEB)* or the *Jerusalem Bible (JB)*. Both of these translations, like RSV, have been made by outstanding Biblical scholars and are based upon the best available Hebrew and Greek documents. Both NEB and JB are in a true sense new translation, unlike RSV, which is a revision of previous translations. The translations of these two versions applied in their work what is called "dynamic equivalence," in contrast to the "formal correspondence" used in RSV. There the translators do not keep as closely to the Greek

original but try to under-stand the text, to have firm grasp of its mean-ing and then put the text in modern terms. It is helpful after reading RSV to turn to one of these translations. JB has two particularly valuable introductory articles and copious informative notes which are indispensable for understanding the text.

Once we have chosen our edition, I would like to suggest four basic steps to approach this text. In following them, the leader of the Bible study group, as well as the participants, must be aware that they overlap. Each step cannot be isolated from the others.

**STEP 1: Read the passage in its immediate context. Check key words, images, persons....**

**Step 1:** The student (teacher or adult) must read the passage, as well as its immediate context. After reading it in two or three translations, questions should be asked which are related to the key words, images and persons that appear in our passage. Where is Bethlehem located? How far is it from Jerusalem? What do we know about Herod the King? Who are the chief priests and what was their role? Who are the scribes? What does the word "Magi" mean? Why are gold, frankincense and myrrh offered as gifts to Christ? Who are the main protagonists in the passage? Was Joseph mentioned? (Compare this text of the Nativity with that given by St. Luke, Ch. 2)

Members of the study group will be able to answer many of these questions if they look at two or three of the translations I just mentioned. They will find their answers in the text or the notes. For example, RSV speaks about "the chief priests and scribes of the people" (Matt. 2:4), and NEB gives the same verse as "the chief priests and lawyers of the Jewish people." Both are very legitimate and good translations,

and we are helped in our interpretations when we compare them.

JB explains in a note who the "scribes" are: "doctors of the Law; usually, but not always, from the ranks of the Pharisees. With the high priests and the elders they make up the Great Sanhedrin." Do we wish to know something about the Sanhedrin? Who are the Pharisees and the elders? etc.

From the notes in these translations, we learn about the Magi, astrologers from the East, and the meaning of the three gifts they brought. The Church Fathers saw in them symbols of the royalty (gold), divinity (incense), and passion (myrrh) of Christ. Why did they related these gifts to royalty, divinity and suffering?

---

---

**STEP 2: Designate the literary form used. Look for major themes, meanings, etc.**

---

---

**Step 2:** The main theme and the meaning of this Gospel is that the newborn child, the Messiah, frightens Herod the King and the "whole of Jerusalem." The opposition of the people to Jesus has already started.

In what literary form is this central idea expressed? We do not have a parable or a miracle story here, but a narrative which contains historical facts, such as the birth in Bethlehem, the danger that comes from Herod, who is known for his cruelty and who was succeeded by his son Archelaus (Matt. 2:22). In order to interpret the passage correctly, we must designate its literary form.

In the infancy Gospel we have facts related together with their meaning. The task of genuine interpretation is not to separate them from each other, but to distinguish between them and to show how they are related.

The main concern for the evangelists and the earliest Christian community was to show that every event in the life of Jesus had a divine content and that they belonged to God's plan of salvation. It was not their purpose merely to outline the facts of his biography. What we have in these Gospel narratives are the historical facts with their significance.

Even as a newborn child, the Messiah was rejected by his own people but adored by Gentiles. The story of the Magi is important for two additional reasons. They received some guidance from a star to reach Jerusalem, but they needed additional help to come to Bethlehem. In order to pay homage to the newly-born baby, they were directed by the prophecy (2:5ff). They were aided not only by a natural sign, interpreted in terms of their own tradition, but also by Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah. After finding and worshipping the Messiah, the Magi received a revelation in a dream not to return to Herod. Now they found in Jesus, the King Messiah and their hope.

---

---

**STEP 3: Look at the wider context of the passage: events or meanings that precede or follow.**

---

---

**Step 3:** For a better understanding of the Nativity Gospel, we should at this point turn to the genealogy of Christ, which precedes our passage, and to the narrative of the flight to and return from Egypt that follows it.

The titles that are given to Jesus in these opening chapters of St. Matthew's Gospel are Son of Abraham, Son of David, Messiah, Savior, and Son of God. So at the very beginning of the Gospel narrative we are given the most important Christological identification. Study of these titles as they appear through the Gospel leads us toward the suffering and the resurrection of Christ. The infancy Gospel anticipates the Gospel of the passion, and the birth in Bethlehem points to the birth from the dead. He who was born in Bethlehem is the same as He who overcame death and was raised from the dead.

---

---

**STEP 4: Compare the Biblical text with its expression in the liturgical life of the Church.**

---

---

**Step 4:** Our presentation for the Feast of the Nativity and our understanding of its Gospel reading should be completed with study of the service for this day.

The event in Bethlehem is relived in the Church. Its cosmic character and the mystery of salvation are particularly stressed in the hymns of the feast. The cave in which Jesus was born is described as heaven, and the tomb from which He was risen is the source of new life. Heaven and earth are united, for Christ is born.

Study and compare the theme of salvation in the infancy Gospel and in the service for the day of Nativity. Also take the theme of fulfillment in these two sources. Everything is realized and completed in Christ, but not yet in those who belong to him. "We are to grow up in every way into Him...into Christ," writes St. Paul to the Christians in Ephesus (4:15). One small but important way that may lead toward this growth is steady, serious Bible study, performed in a spirit of openness toward the word of God.

*This article was originally featured in the Fall 1981 issue of the **ORTHODOX EDUCATOR**, published by the Department of Religious Education of the Orthodox Church in America.*