



NATIVITY OF OUR LORD

The child-Christ and His mother are shown in a cave, surrounded by impossibly sharp, inhospitable, rocks which reflect the cruel world into which Jesus was born. The Gospels record that Joseph and Mary could not find a room at any inn when they came to take part in the census at Bethlehem, and so Jesus was laid in a manger, an animal's feeding trough. Common to the time, animals were not sheltered in wooden barns, but in caves and recesses in the hills, and so this "stable" is shown in the Icon.

High in the skies is a star which sends down a single shaft towards the baby Jesus. This star is

being followed by the Magi, the wise Persians from the East, who are bearing gifts to the Christ. But they are shown in the distance, still on their journey. They are not there.

Thronged in the skies are a host of angels bringing the glad tidings of the birth of the world's Saviour. On the right, the shepherds – people not regarded by anyone else – are the first to be given the Good News of Jesus' birth. But they are also shown outside of the cave, still by their flocks. They too are not at Christ's side yet.

Besides His mother, the only company Jesus Christ has in the first few hours of His earthly life are a lowly ox and donkey. This is the humility of God's incarnation on earth.

The humbleness of Christ's origins should not surprise us, as the manner of His birth was prophesied many hundreds of years prior to the event. The presence of the Ox and the Donkey in the Nativity icon fulfills one of many prophecies in the Old Testament book of Isaiah:

"The ox knows his owner, and the donkey his master's crib" (Isaiah 1:3) . Here the animals are also shown providing warmth to Jesus by their breath.

Also found somewhere in most icons of the Nativity is a "Jesse Tree." Named after an Old Testament patriarch, the tree's presence is to remind us of another fulfilled prophecy from Isaiah:

"A shoot shall sprout from the stump (tree) of Jesse and from his roots a bud shall blossom. The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him" (Isaiah 11:1-2). In the flesh, Jesus can trace his ancestry through both His mother and adoptive father Joseph, all the way back to Jesse. This lineage is also sometimes shown in [Icons of the Jesse Tree](#).

Another important source for the story of Jesus' birth is the [Protoevangelium of James](#), a 2nd century text which describes the life of the Virgin Mary. This naturally includes a description of Christ's Nativity, and the account is more detailed than those found in the Gospels. According to the *Evangelium*, Joseph brought along two women – a midwife and a woman called Salome – to help with the birth of Jesus. Salome is identified with a woman who later became a disciple of Christ, was the mother of the Apostles James and John, and was one of the women who discovered the empty tomb after Christ's resurrection. But where is Joseph? Unlike the well-known Nativity scenes in the West, in Orthodox Icons Joseph is usually found in the bottom of the icon, away from his betrothed and her Son. Sometimes seen listening to an old man, Joseph looks troubled. He is beset with new doubts regarding this birth, and these doubts are delivered to him by Satan in the form of an old man, as recorded in the *Protoevangelium*. The devil suggests that if the infant were truly divine He would not have been born in the human way. These arguments, which ultimately did not cause Joseph to stumble, have constantly returned to trouble the Church, and are the basis of many heresies regarding Who Christ was and is. In the person of Joseph, the icon discloses not only his personal drama, but the drama of all mankind, the difficulty of accepting that which is beyond reason, the Incarnation of God.

As well as declaring the glorious and joyous news of the Birth of Christ, the icon also acknowledges, as do the hymns of the Church, the great mystery of this event.