



How is He contained in a womb, whom nothing can contain? And how can He who is in the bosom of the Father be held in the arms of His Mother? This is according to His good pleasure, as He knows and wishes. For being without flesh, of His own will has He been made flesh; and He Who Is, for our sakes has become that which He was not. Without departing from His own nature He has shared in our substance. Desiring to fill the world on high with citizens, Christ has undergone a twofold birth.

Dear friends of our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ +

His incarnation in Bethlehem more than two thousand years ago fills us with awe and wonder, joy and bliss. The most wise Lord Jesus Christ comes to be born, receiving hospitality from His own creatures. Let us also receive Him, that this divine Child in the cave may make us His guests In the paradise of delights!

The Word of God in days long gone by appeared as an angel of the Lord, or the divine fire of the burning bush, but now, from Christ's birth in Bethlehem onwards, He has become one of us; and not just as a fully-grown man descended from Heaven, but in humility God is born of a woman, and comes to us as a tiny, speechless, infant. This is what is shown in this Nativity Icon, and around this central historical event other stories surrounding the birth of Jesus Christ are depicted.

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 as is often depicted in our art and Christmas decorations, but rather in caves and natural sanctuaries. The symbolism points us towards the burial of Christ in a grave hewn into the rock. Already his birth in Bethlehem aims towards this final destination of Christ's incarnation and saving mission here on earth.

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 a lowly ox and donkey as depicted referring us to the harsh reality proclaimed by Isaiah (1,3). This is the humility of God's incarnation on earth: "the world did not recognize him". (Joh 1:10) Also found in the foreground of the Nativity is a "Jesse Tree." Named after an Old Testament patriarch – father of king David - , 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 account is more detailed than those found in the Gospels. According to this narrative 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. Here he is 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 James' 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.