



DIOCESE OF THE MISSOURI VALLEY TRADITIONAL ANGLICAN CHURCH

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Beloved Fathers, deacons, brothers and sisters in Christ,

As we prepare to celebrate our Lord's Nativity according to the flesh, may Christ fill our hearts and minds with Himself. In the hope that you will find it edifying, here are some brief observations about how the Nativity is a prophetic inscape¹ of Our Lord's Passion.

Wood of the Cradle, Wood of the Cross



If we look at depictions of the Nativity, the general themes of Advent, emphasizing the threefold Coming of Christ and the fulfillment of God's Word, are here coming into focus. The shadows of Jesus' Passion are already present at the scene of His birth. All the eschatological themes of the Advent season converge and are carried forward into Christmas.² The birth of Christ and His saving death form the centerpiece for all of human history. In Nativity icons and other ancient and historic Church depictions, this is super concentrated. Jesus' Incarnation and the Last Things (heaven hell, death, and the Last Judgment) are so intertwined that we might not detect the shadows of Jesus' Passion in what we see unless we understand the symbols used here. In the example just above, the Christ-mass tree has, as its core, the cross; and the five red ornaments point to the five wounds of Christ. That the cross is the new "tree of life" which sprouts and produces fruit for the healing of the nations (Rev. 22:2) is also part of this symbolism. But the whole set of narratives in the Gospels of Sts. Luke and Matthew point us to these kinds of connections.

¹ The inscape is "the essential, distinctive, and revelatory quality of a thing," the essential inner meaning.

² For longer and more detailed discussions, see Caryll Houselander's *Wood of the Cradle, Wood of the Cross: The Little Way of the Infant Jesus* or *The Passion of the Infant Christ* and *The Nativity in Light of the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus: An Interview with Alastair Roberts* at <https://www.breakpoint.org/the-nativity-in-light-of-the-passion-and-resurrection-of-jesus/> as well as <https://www.orthodoxroad.com/nativity-icon-explained/>.

THE OX AND THE ASS

One of the most constant elements in depictions of the Nativity is the ox and the ass. They peer over the newborn Christ child in wonder, usually with their muzzles close to the Child, as if to warm Him with their breath. They are significant in multiple ways. The ass carries Jesus into Egypt, away from the murderous Herod, who, like Pharaoh, orders the slaughter of infants. (The flight into Egypt in Matthew's Gospel is the first of many Jesus/Moses parallels.) Later, the ass will carry Him into the holy city of Jerusalem to the acclaim of the crowd: "Hosanna! Blessed is He Who comes in the Name of the Lord." An ass greets the Lord at His birth, carries Him into Egypt, and carries Him to His death at Jerusalem, where He is hailed as "king of Israel" but crucified as a common criminal. The ass was, from the time of David and Solomon, a powerful symbol of the Promised Messiah, the Davidic king. Often in icons, the ox is red: a stark and basic symbol of Hebrew sacrifice. While the symbolism of the ass is quite rich, the ass is merely Jesus' vehicle, while the ox is a figure of Jesus Himself. The red ox or red heifer, in particular, goes back to Numbers 19 and is a common type of the sacrificial death of Jesus to rescue us from the contamination and power of death. As the Venerable Bede put it in his work *On the Tabernacle*, the "sacrament of the Lord's passion, which saves us by purifying us forever, is prefigured in these ashes" [of the burned red heifer].



"Birth of Jesus" Detail from the side facing the apse of the "Sarcophago di Stilicone" ("Stilicho's sarcophagus"), an Ancient Roman Christian sarcophagus dating from the 4th century. It is preserved beneath the pulpit of Sant'Ambrogio basilica in Milan, Italy.

In this very early Nativity scene, the ox and the ass are present even when other figures, such as Mary, are absent. This is because the ox and the ass are important types in the prophet Isaiah: "An ox knows its owner, and an ass, its master's manger; But Israel does not know, my people has not understood" (Isaiah 1:3). These two animals, as a sacrificial animal and animal associated with the coming of the Davidic Messiah, represent Jesus' Passion. Their "recognition" of the Christ also shows that the natural world, created through the Word, knows Jesus from His very birth. It is also worth noting that bringing these two animals together was forbidden in Deuteronomy 22:10: they were not to be yoked together.³

Based on this typology, the ox and the ass are the two earliest Nativity characters. Before the 4th century, Epiphany images were dominant, since the celebration of "Epiphany" (which included the themes of Jesus' birth, the coming of the Magi, and Jesus' Baptism in the Jordan River all together) was much more

³ Additional symbolism connected to this has been that the ox traditionally represents patience, the nation of Israel, and Old Testament sacrificial worship, while the ass represents humility, readiness to serve, and the Gentiles. See Webber, F.R. *Church Symbolism*. Kessinger Publishing, 2003. This means that where before Israel and the Gentiles were not to intermarry, now the restoration of all peoples to the worship of Yahweh would be accomplished and the fullness of the Gentiles would come into God's Household.

comprehensive and emphasized Jesus' birth as the physical revealing of God. When specific Nativity images begin to appear in early Christianity, the scenes are simple. Only a few figures are represented; but the bare minimum are the child, the ox, and the ass. The appearance of Mary and Joseph (always a conflicted figure) and the conflation of the adoration of angels and shepherds with the arrival of the magi occurs gradually over a couple of centuries.

The additional feature is that in the Nativity, Jesus is set on the outskirts of the city between two animals; and in the Passion, He is set on the outskirts of the city between two thieves.

GIFTS OF THE MAGI

Though they do not show up until sometime later, when the Holy Family is in a house and Jesus is sitting on His Mother's lap, the coming of the Magi is often connected with the celebration of the Nativity. In the West, their coming is distinctly celebrated on Epiphany. In the East, Epiphany is reserved for Jesus' Baptism, and the Magi are shown at Christmass. In any event, the gifts of the Magi are very important symbols. While gold and frankincense represent Jesus' kingship and priesthood, respectively, myrrh, used for embalming, is a symbol of His death. The testimony of the Gentile Magi is also paralleled by the testimony of the Gentile centurion at Jesus' death, "Surely this man WAS the Son of God!"

SWADDLING CLOTHES & THE CAVE

Look at the child in the relief. His tight swaddling clothes are evocative of burial wrappings. In the Byzantine tradition, there is an intentional connection between the swaddling clothes of the infant in a Nativity icon and the burial clothes of the Epitaphios (*epi-* upon; *taphos-* grave or tomb) icon which is venerated during Great Friday Vespers. Also on Great Friday, the "soma" (body or corpus) icon on the crucifix is taken down from the cross and shrouded in identical wrappings before it is processed and laid to rest in the sanctuary. The linen wrappings at His birth foreshadow the linen wrappings at His burial. The following modern icon illustrates this:



Note, as well, that the "manger" is a cave, a hollow in a rock formation that mirrors Jesus' tomb in the Gospels. In both cases, the cave is borrowed. At the Nativity, it is the leftover space never even intended for human use as shelter. At the burial, it is an unused tomb, donated by Joseph of Arimathea.

Also, in many icons, Jesus' cradle is a stone box. Who would lay a child in a coffin? What morbid motive would make an artist paint a baby as a mummy and give him a tomb as his nursery? It is not being morbid but

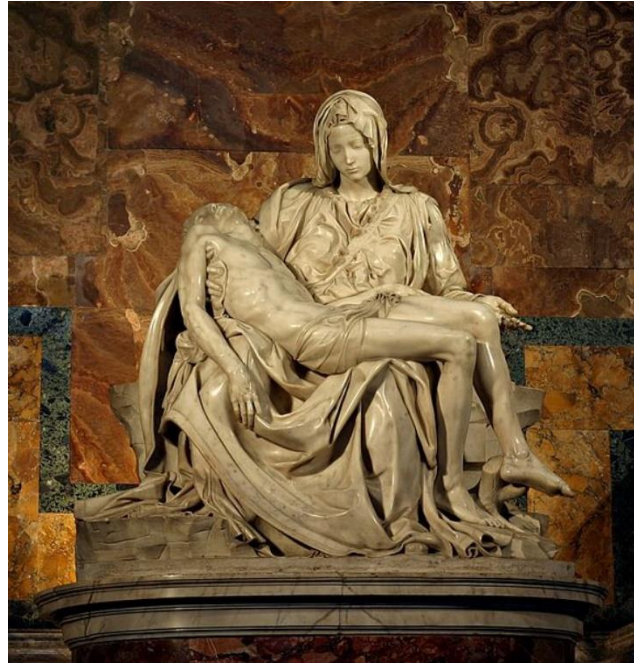
full of the joy of inaugurated eschatology.⁴ We only understand the significance of the Incarnation if we hold it together with Jesus' saving death and resurrection; we may not separate the two. This also reminds us that the liturgical year commemorates events in the life of Jesus, but it never splits apart the Mystery of Faith. The other symbolism which we also see is that of the cradle as manger. Jesus is laid in a feeding trough. He, Who gives His people all the benefits of His Passion in the Eucharist, is placed in a receptacle for food. He, Who is the Bread of heaven and Bread of angels, is here presented as the food for the faithful, as the early *Liturgy of St. James* says. (We find this in the hymn *Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence*, taken from that liturgy, now dated to the first century, before the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.) The tradition supported by Josephus that special lambs, raised in the area of Bethlehem and set aside for the use in the Temple, were likewise wrapped in cloth bands and kept safe in stone cradles before inspection by the priests only fleshes this out further. The breed of sheep most common in the Middle East, and especially those set aside for use in the Temple- the [Awassi](#)- give birth, not coincidentally, in December rather than the springtime. Those lambs had to meet the strict legal-religious regulations of the Jewish faith. They had to be no more than one year old, male and without spot or blemish. Therefore, they had to be born in controlled conditions and inspected for birth defects before being raised in protected conditions. The Law also said that animals to be sacrificed had to be born within five miles of Jerusalem. Bethlehem is just five miles from Jerusalem.⁵

In the Nativity, Jesus is held in His Mother's arms and laid on a cradle of wood. At the Passion, Jesus, taken from the cross of wood, is again laid in His Mother's arms. This is the famous picture of the *pieta*.



⁴ Inaugurated eschatology is the teaching that the Last Things are already present among us in some sense. That the Last Judgment is mystically taking place, for example, every time we are judged by God to be His Own Beloved, faithful sheep, those who receive Him worthily at the Communion rail. The Judgement now is the breaking into our time of the Last Judgment. The Last Things are inaugurated, they begin now. Likewise, "realized eschatology" is the teaching that what happens at the End has already broken into our time in some mystical but real way.

⁵ "That the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem was a settled conviction. Equally so was the belief that He was to be revealed from Migdal Eder, 'the tower of the flock.' This Migdal Eder was not the watchtower for the ordinary flocks which pastured on the barren sheep ground beyond Bethlehem, but lay close to the town, on the road to Jerusalem. A passage in the Mishnah (*Shekelim* 7.4) leads to the conclusion that the flocks which pastured there were destined for Temple sacrifices and, accordingly, that the shepherds who watched over them were not ordinary shepherds." (Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*). Cf. Genesis 45:7 and Genesis 35:5-21, where the name of the city originates for Bethlehem and where the language of verse 21 should be noted: "And Israel journeyed and spread his tent beyond the tower of Edar" [Heb. *Migdal Edal*: "Tower of the Flock"]. There are prophetic footprints all over the place.



This is made most famous in the version later version by Michelangelo. Note the great grief in some earlier depictions is replaced by an almost serene expression of devotion.

ANGELS

Who else shows up at the birth of Jesus? The angels appear. They announce His birth to the shepherds, and they are present at the tomb to send the women with the message of the resurrection for the other disciples. In the chiasmic structure of the Gospels, the two appearances match and interpret one another.

TITLE AS “KING OF THE JEWS”

At His birth, Jesus was announced as the “King of the Jews” by the Magi (Matt 2:2). It was a title which was not repeated until the end of His public ministry, when it would be used as grounds for the charge against Him (Matthew 27:11), and would finally be placed on the cross over His head: “The king of the Jews” (Matt. 27:37).

MOCK WORSHIP

After His birth, Jesus was offered mock worship by Herod, who told the Magi to bring him information about where to find the child “that I too might come and worship him” (Matt 2:8). At His Passion, Christ is again offered mock worship: “Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the common hall and gathered unto Him the whole band [of soldiers]. And they stripped Him, and put on Him a scarlet robe. And when they had made a crown of thorns, they put it upon His head and a reed in His right hand: and they bowed the knee before Him, and mocked Him, saying, Hail, King of the Jews! And they spit upon Him, and took the reed, and struck Him on the head.” (Matt 27:27-30).

Conclusion:

When Christians look at a Nativity scene, we see God willingly embracing death. We see the shadows of the Passion laid out from the very beginning. God had established it to be so, and it is God alone Who determined when He would die. This is a major point in John’s Passion narrative. Jesus would not be arrested or killed before the time He chose. What He did, He did willingly for all people.

One custom which is connected to the remembrance of the connection between Jesus’ Nativity and Passion is the hiding a hanging nail inside the Christmas tree, usually with a red ribbon (like the cord of Rahab). Here is a modern explanation and example: *“This is The Christmas Nail. It is to be hung on a sturdy branch, a branch*

near the trunk, a branch that will hold such a spike without being noticed by well-wishers dropping by to admire one's tinsel tree. The nail is known only to the home that hangs it, understood only by the heart that knows its significance. It is hung with the thought that the Christmas tree but foreshadows the Christ-tree which only He could decorate for us, ornamented with nails as this.”



As you meditate on the sacred Mystery of Our Lord's Incarnation, may you be richly blessed and drawn always further into His love.

Yours in Christ our God,

+ *Patrick*